

Using Peer education to encourage safe online behaviour

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Abstract

Many existing approaches to promoting Internet awareness make use of the risk laden environment which can incite parents and carers to adopt an approach with excessive filtering and restrictive access. Whilst not wishing to minimise in any way the potential for harm, this paper presents research carried out at the University of Plymouth which considers education and empowerment as complementary strands to a toolkit of resources and strategies in promoting Internet awareness. The more inclusive approach has focussed on the empowerment of young people to promote Internet awareness among their peers.

Initial work with young people between the ages of 14 and 16 has allowed a good understanding of their attitudes towards online life as well as demonstrating the potential for the peer-led approach. Messages with a narrow focus on predation have captured the imagination of both parents and pupils alike, but this work has found potentially detrimental effects on e-safety education with adults and children disengaging as a result. Other areas, such as technologically mediated bullying along with problems surrounding basic Internet Security, are more likely to have a detrimental effect on young people's lives, yet these do not receive as much of a focus in the shadow of the predation message.

Young people involved in the research project have demonstrated a clear awareness of the risks of certain types of online behaviour, however their choice of actions are shown to be in conflict with that awareness. To address this gap in understanding and action, peer ambassadors within each of the participating schools have developed their own approaches to address and challenge those actions and behaviours. This paper presents the key elements of the peer ambassadors research programme, outlining not only the variety of approaches adopted within each of the schools, but also the differences in perception amongst the young people involved.

Introduction

The post-Byron (2007) era of safeguarding children online provides for an array of resources targeting teachers, parents and children. These resources are built upon the knowledge that children and young people surround themselves with a large amount of modern technology, the use of which often excludes the adults tasked with protecting them (Staksrud, Livingstone and Haddon, 2007). Combine the feeling of exclusion with the Internet safety messages based on a risk-laden environment, and there surfaces an assumption that children are engaging in unsafe activities (Sharples et al, 2008). This fear leads adults to take the steps they feel comfortable with and they resort to activities such as excessive filtering and restrictive access (Tynes 2007; Fleming et al, 2006, Willard, 2009).

Focussing on risks to young people requires a value judgement to be made, one which Furedi (2002) describes as allowing for manipulation of the fears of parents.

“Virtual reality provides infinite space for the exercise of the anxious imagination, an unknown world where our fear of invisible strangers can run riot” (Furedi 2002).

Media coverage of key cases such as Baby P, Madeline McCann provide fuel to heighten these risk perceptions (Mythen, 2004) leading to situations which prevent young people learning about the safe and creative use of the Internet (Sharples et al, 2008). Schools too find it difficult to develop a policy of allowing young people access, due to pressure from parental and societal fears of abuse, preferring instead to filter and block.

A key theme emerging from the e-safety literature is to engage with young people, making use of peer education approaches. Byron (2007) recommends it in her review, Becta (2009) encourage peer involvement in their Acceptable Use Policy document, CEOP make use of an International Youth Advisory Panel (CEOP, 2008), the South West Grid for Learning have a youth panel. These initiatives involve young people in the high levels of policy making and the provision of key resources, and often involve those young people who are articulate and engaged. There is, therefore, a body of work to be done in the influencing of behaviour at the grass roots level. This requires engaging more with those young people whose behaviours may situate them in risky environments.

In this context, the University of Plymouth, supported by Becta, has sought to investigate the attitudes of adolescents towards online safety and security, and to develop a peer-led approach to safer online behaviour. This paper presents a summary of the findings of that investigation, starting with an outline of the project before presenting focus group results.

Method

An underlying assumption to the project was that peers would provide a key influence on the behaviour of young people. Therefore the exploration centred on making use of peer supported approaches within a school context. Other areas of key influence, such as leisure and play, are acknowledged here as being important but outside of the scope of the research.

The research was divided into two key phases:

1. To engage in a program of school visits, holding discussion groups and awareness raising workshops in order to evaluate levels of knowledge regarding online safety.
2. To invite student representatives to become E-Safety Ambassadors, engaging with the research team at the University of Plymouth to develop their own approach to delivering the safety message.

Eight out of the fifteen schools invited chose to participate. Three of these were gender specific schools and one had a religious character. Five of the schools were based in the Plymouth area, one in the county town in Cornwall and the other two were in the South Devon area. Seven of these schools were served by the South West Grid for Learning, the eight one being an independent school and as such did not link into the local authority infrastructure.

Discussion Groups

Prior to holding discussion groups with the pupils, interviews were held with key members of staff within each of the schools. The initial semi-structured interviews explored the school approach to peer education and online safety, along with an overview of how they envisaged selecting young people to become e-safety ambassadors, and how they anticipated making use of the e-safety ambassadors within the school.

The discussion groups were designed to fit into the school timetable, a fifty minute slot combining activities and delivering of information. A total of nine focus groups were held, engaging with two hundred and two young people. With the exception of one school, these discussion groups took part as part of the normal ICT lesson with the participants primarily being those who had chosen ICT as a GCSE subject. The exception session was held outside of the school day during a specific lesson as part of the schools existing peer-mentor programme.

The activities included in the discussion groups allowed for all the participants to have a say facilitated by the researcher. There were a series of questions and answer sessions designed to explore the participant's perceptions of online safety. Discussions about the topics were held after the data was collected so as not to skew the data. Also included in the sessions were profile searching activities and evaluation of four key internet safety websites. Part of the presentation included a carefully selected collection of photographs and quotes from the participants harvested from publicly available social networking websites.

E-Safety Ambassadors

Inviting student representatives to become key contacts, E-Safety Ambassadors, was a predetermined approach to the research. These ambassadors were primarily from year ten, and were considered by the teachers as suitable representatives in terms of approachability. In discussions with the teachers prior to the discussion groups it had been agreed that the approachable nature of the ambassadors was of more importance than their technical expertise.

The Ambassadors were initially invited to a training day at the University. During this day there were lectures and breakout sessions exploring the key issues along with ideas for activities. This gave the opportunity for the ambassadors to meet others engaged with the project, allowed them to sign up to the project website with the anticipation that they might use it to share information.

During the course of the project, support visits were carried out by the researcher to each of the schools. This allowed the ambassadors to talk through with the researcher what their aims and objectives were within their school context, and to have the opportunity to ask for more information or clarification. At each of these visits, appropriate materials collected by the research team were disseminated. Links were placed on the website for supporting materials, which included news reports as well as key links as disseminated on the Becta SafetyNet discussion list.

Prior to the final Ambassadors day in March 2009, an online survey to collect evaluations was made available. The final Ambassador's day provided the opportunity to collect feedback from the ambassadors, their awareness of online risks was tested along with the opportunity to leave feedback about the project. Each of the schools presented an overview of what they had been able

to achieve within their school and the impact they felt they had achieved. The presentations were followed by a question and answer session.

Evaluations

There have been concerns expressed at how to properly assess the impact that peer education approaches have (Parking and McKeganey, 2000; Mellanby et al, 2000). In an attempt to address some of these concerns, the measures were used to capture knowledge of e-safety, attitudes and behaviour were collected through demographic information, the level of confidence and breadth of topic information.

Ascertaining how a sustainable model of peer education might be incorporated into the schools required there to be a number of assumptions:

- Peer influence on behaviour was going to be stronger than that of adult influence
- Peer education was an umbrella term used to cover a multitude of approaches
- Influences on behaviours would be taking place through informal social learning, social inoculation and the establishment of social norms.

The opinions of two key groups of individuals were collected, that of the teachers and the pupils. In addition the impact and dissemination of the activities carried out by the ambassadors were also collected. Dissemination was considered in terms of scope, whether their activities were used school wide or were promoted further afield. In addition, a count of the number of public profiles remaining was considered a measure of the impact on behaviour.

Findings

The first phase of the project was to evaluate young people's attitudes to online safety and security. This required assessing the attitudes of the participants in terms of the number and range of risks identified, and also included how they perceived the likelihood of occurrence to themselves of those risks. Consideration was also given to how the respondents might react to the risks, in terms of the protection mechanisms they employ for themselves as well as their choices of for helping others.

The second phase of the project was to ascertain how effective peer-ambassadors would be for changing attitudes and online behaviours. The effectiveness was considered by examining the effects of the project on both teachers and students, highlighting some of the concerns that arose when considering this strategy and looking at the impact of the activities that the peer-ambassadors chose.

Prior to the focus groups, a total of eighty-eight public profiles were discovered with the majority of them on one social networking site, Bebo. One school proved to be an exception, having a class with 100% private profiles, but it transpired that they had recently participated in a local authority education exercise to raise the awareness of Internet Safety in the school.

Twenty-eight of the public profiles advertised email addresses with the words "add me" along with thirty-eight dates of birth. The montages and quotes were able to create a reaction and in one

group, participants were allowed to immediately change their profile privacy settings which they took advantage of.

During the discussions, it was evident that a wide range of risks was identified by the participants, demonstrating a clear knowledge of the types of risks. There was evidence of specialised knowledge in some schools, for example as illustrated in figure 1 below, S1 were more aware of social networking risks than S8.

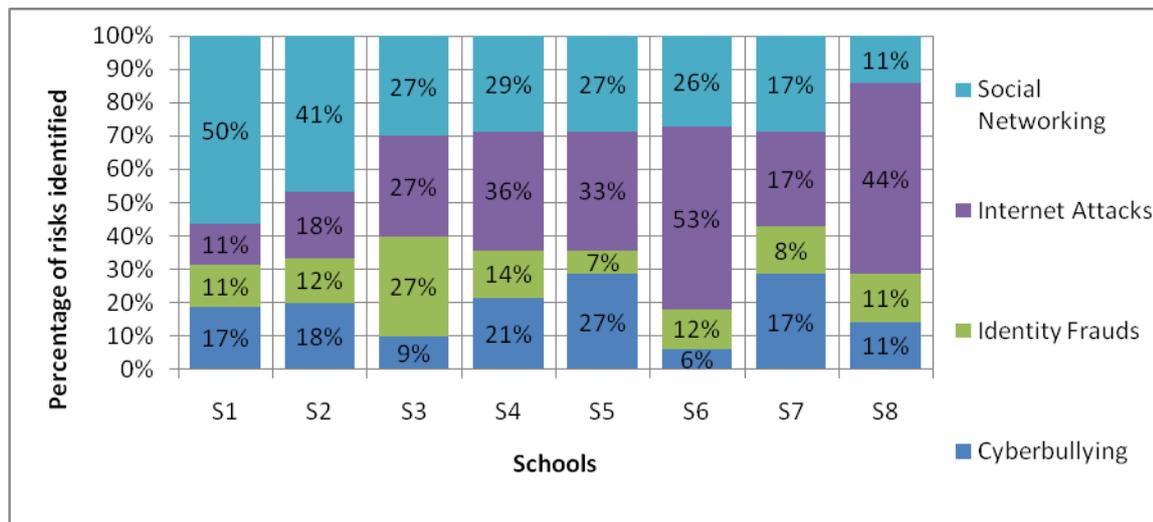


Figure 1: Range of risks identified

When asked to rank the likelihood of risks happening to themselves, many of the participants identified that Internet Attacks were the most likely threat to affect them with Social networking problems and Cyberbullying following. Threats arising from predatory behaviour were mentioned in the context of Social networking problems. Each discussion group identified contact from either “perverts” or “paedos” as being of concern, yet these did not score very highly when asked to rank the likelihood of occurrence to them. Concerns about giving out personal information and the problems surrounding keeping profiles private were deemed to be more likely. The ranking is illustrated in figure 2 below.

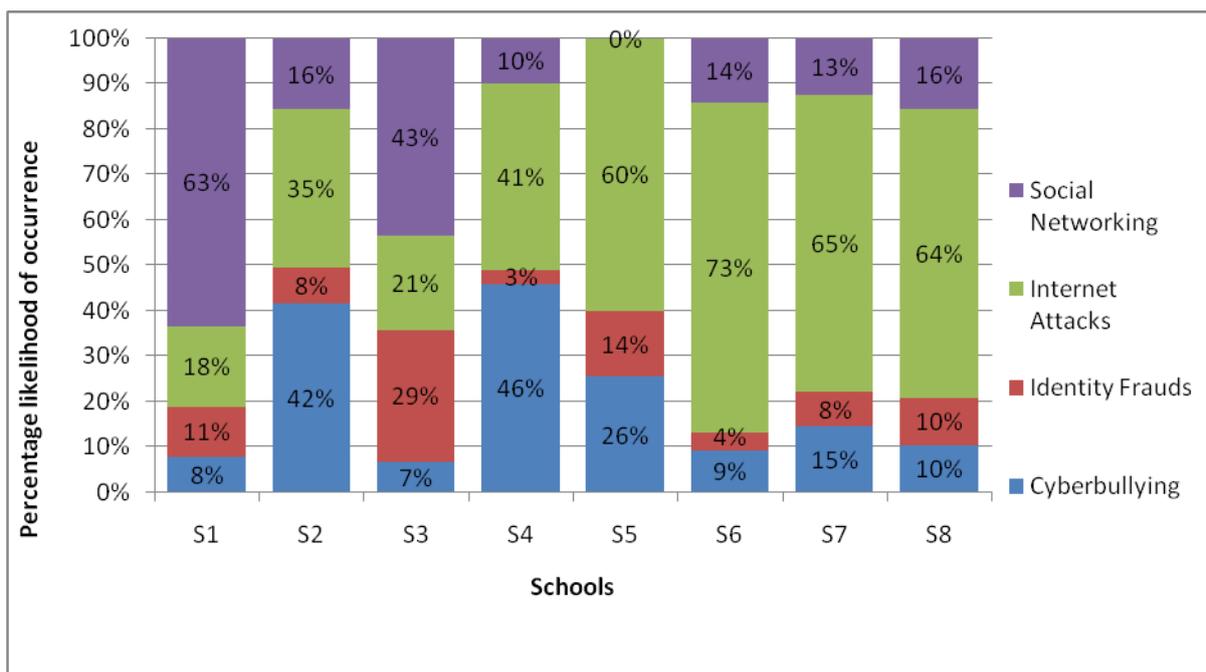


Figure 2: Percentage of likelihood of occurrence

During the initial Ambassadors day in October, the session generating ideas for what the ambassadors wished to achieve demonstrated their enthusiasm for tailoring the e-safety message for themselves. None of the suggestions were to use any specific resources.

Four out of the six schools who presented at the Ambassadors day in March had created websites to disseminate their work, and two schools made their own videos to share. One school created a display stand to engage parents and students on a parents review day, a day when all parents were visiting the school with their child to hear about their progress. From this initiative a parental survey was held and this was combined with a survey of the whole of the year 7 based on the CEOP ThinkUKnow framework. In this survey 70% of the respondents had found it internet safety lessons useful. Another school allowed their ambassadors to participate in the Safer Internet Day conference for social care professionals.

The impact within the schools themselves was seen in the responses to the survey where ambassadors from five of the schools talked about the assemblies they had been involved with. In three of the schools the Ambassador presentations formed part of the assemblies during the Internet Safety week in February 2009.

At the end of the project, the number of public profiles was reviewed to ascertain if they had remained, or whether they had changed from public to private. At this point one was excluded from these figures because they did not complete the project. These are illustrated in figure 3.

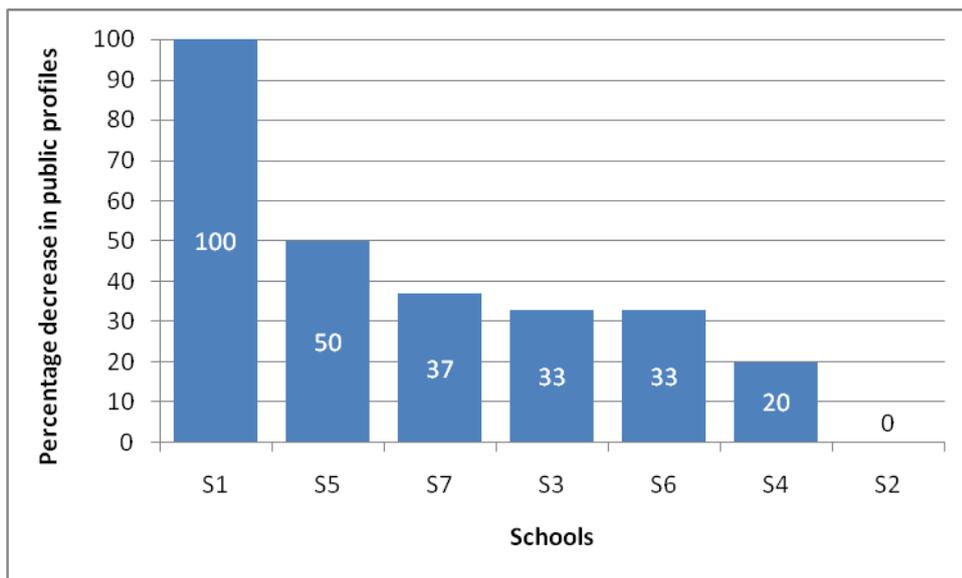


Figure 3: Percentage decrease for public profiles

S1 demonstrated the greatest impact on this measure, with all the profiles that had been public at the start of the project being changed to private. S2 show as no decrease here because they did not have any public profiles at the start of the project and finished the project in the same way. The other schools show decreases in public profiles that are less dramatic, but still a reduction.

Conclusions

The results revealed that young people were aware of the key issues surrounding online safety and security. During the discussion groups they were able to describe clearly the types of threats that existed along with a realistic idea of the likelihood of occurrence of those threats in their own lives. Throughout the discussions it was evident that young people were able to acknowledge the threats and risks that could be found in the online environment, but as would be expected, it did not stop them from participating fully in using those technologies. The class lists were used as a way of cross-referencing the actions of the participants with their articulation of the risks and it became clear that they did not deem the risks to be relevant to them. Only when faced with the evidence did they accept that their actions might need to change, and indeed later in the project it was found that they did.

Another interesting comparison to make was that of the school that had recently had Internet Safety sessions delivered by the local children's services did not identify any more risks than those schools that had not had the sessions, but their behaviour demonstrated a difference.

The awareness raising activities need to have a balanced approach, so that they give enough information so that individuals are informed and to be able to make informed decisions. We know that the messages should be relevant to the people they are delivered to so that there is more chance of influencing the safe behaviours that are needed. This makes room for activities and actions that will directly influence individuals' behaviour and as yet, the awareness activities in terms of keeping children safe online have not yet achieved that goal.

It is clear from the findings presented above that there are many different ways of getting the e-safety message across. Each of the schools had a slightly different approach. Peer ambassadors may be effective agents for influencing behaviours, but they are not the only mechanism and form part of a toolkit for a cohesive, whole school approach.

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