

Forge Digital Family Connections

How many times have you seen a parent—while, say, waiting in line at the grocery store—hand an elementary or preschool-age child an electronic device? I have witnessed this many times, and even been guilty of it myself. Tablets, iPad, iPhones, and Kindles are finding their way into the laps of our youngest children. Without a second thought, we put access to the whole world in the palm of a child's hand.

Many schools across the country have started 1:1 technology initiatives, sending these devices home with children in their backpacks. Typically, introducing students to digital safety and citizenship is part of the initiative. But there's a key link to making sure students are fully connected to digital safety: parent engagement. How can we be sure parents get accurate information and are tuned in to their children's online activity?

Connecting Online and Offline

How do parents usually learn about digital safety issues? Often, parents are offered some of the same opportunities as students to attend orientations or family information sessions. Links to resources are posted on school websites and emailed home.

Despite these efforts, though, reaching parents can be a challenge. One of the biggest barriers to sharing information about digital citizenship and safety is connectivity. One type of connectivity is accessing information online. A second type of connectivity is parents connecting to the school through personal contact and a physical presence in the building. Both are important for bringing parents into the conversation about digital citizenship.

Assessing families' Internet access can feel like a guessing game. I have been guilty of assuming all of my school families are able to connect online all the time. Most families do have access to the Internet, but some working parents' access may be limited to their work hours. Parents who are

unemployed may only have Internet access connection through a mobile device, or even a friend or family member's device.

Many parents' work schedules may prevent them from being physically present in your school. But, chances are, these parents are still checking backpacks at night and reading email messages from the school and teachers. Parents who may not be able to connect physically to the school still want to be connected to information from school. Paper information is still valuable.

Ultimately, your strategies to engage parents on digital safety should involve both online connectivity (posting resources online, for instance), and in-person connectivity (such as holding information nights).

How to Engage Parents

In our rapidly changing, technological world, there is no better time than the present to engage parents in conversations about digital safety. Parents are already dealing with these issues in their own homes. Making family engagement with digital safety a key issue in your school offers a great opportunity to come together as a community, build relationships, and learn together.

At my school, we just started the first year of a 1:1 environment for fourth grade. The lessons my staff and I learned throughout this rollout will guide our future initiatives. Here are the strategies we will be using next year to engage families with digital safety.

Start early. If you know students are going to be using devices in the upcoming school year, send home information or host information nights before the current school year is over.

Keep up communication over the summer. Start posting and emailing information about technology and safety over the summer. Once the school year starts, parents will be overwhelmed with paperwork and information. By providing this information during the summer months, schools can start the conversation early. Invite dialogue early in the process, as well.

Leverage the power of students' voices. Once the school year starts, harness the energy and excitement of your students. Let them create, share, and plan information for parents. This offers a great opportunity to guide the students through digital safety lessons and empower them.

At Open House, for instance, students can present their work and give their families a "tour" of their devices. Or, invite students to parent/teacher conferences, and while parents wait for their conference, have students work with them on a predetermined tech activity. Finally, host an end of year showcase or technology fair to celebrate student work. This promotes and reinforces the positive role technology can play in a student's yearlong learning experience.

The Principal's Role

To promote digital safety, principals should first model good digital citizenship every day through school-sponsored websites, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. Here are three more key strategies for principals.

Talk about it. In your conversations with families, ask, "Did you see our latest Facebook post?" or, "Last night on Twitter, I was following a chat about parent/teacher connections and I learned..." Eventually, your school community will realize that cultivating a positive online presence is important. Direct your parents and students to your online resources. If parents see you taking pictures at an

event, for instance, tell them to check online later to see the pictures. When you emphasize to families the positive benefits of online tools, you will see positive results in their use, too.

Set boundaries. Years ago, when I created a website for our school and began dipping my foot into the professional aspects of social media, I was extremely cautious. I explained to my school community what was okay and not okay to post to our school accounts. If it's not appropriate for a student to see, I advised, don't post it.

As the school administrator, I reserve the right to approve content posted on school-sponsored websites and social media. The same rule applies to emails or notes. If something inappropriate is posted, I contact that person immediately.

Having the power to delete or control content online doesn't mean ignoring the bad stuff. If one person makes a negative comment, there

may be others who feel the same way. Celebrate the positive and address the negative. For example, here is a message I might post: "Last week, we implemented our new parent pick-up procedures and posted some tips online. Some of you expressed frustration online in regards to the flow of traffic. We have implemented some suggestions and noticed things going more smoothly. We appreciate your feedback and request you contact the office directly in the future."

Parents have been very open to conversations about setting boundaries at home. There must be more to parent communication than simply sending home account usernames and passwords. Encouraging parents to log into these accounts and monitor students' activity is the next step. Next year, we plan to deliver more parent resources online and in paper newsletters. We can embrace the excitement of both students and families during

these crucial years of learning with technology.

Be transparent. Share what goes on behind the scenes with your own learning. If you are new to using online resources for your school, record your journey. Admit your mistakes. It's scary to admit you are wrong, but my personal experience has been that my audience and community respect me more when I am willing to admit missteps.

Kids today are sharing more online than ever. Our children are growing up connected: They can access all the information in the world with just the click of a button or the swipe of a finger. Let's learn to embrace these tools together. Working with our families, together we can prepare our children for the future. **P**

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