

Media education to support safe and responsible use of digital technologies

Introduction

This document is part of a series of three support materials aimed at assisting you in teaching about safe and responsible use of digital technologies through the SPHE curriculum (1999).

This support material should be read in conjunction with:

- Exploring identity, health and wellbeing in a digital environment
- Supporting the development of healthy online interactions.

Children are exposed to multiple media sources, including print media, broadcast media and digital media. The Strand Unit 'Media Education' in SPHE aims to support children to examine various forms of media in a critical way and to develop an awareness of how media can influence their behaviour and opinions. 'Media Education' should be introduced to children in a gradual and structured way, building on prior experience. This document focuses on how the Strand Unit 'Media Education' can assist you in supporting the children in your class to become confident users of digital technologies and the internet, who are perceptive about the messages they receive from different media sources, including digital media.

The sections are as follows:

- Critical thinking skills
- Exploring and critiquing advertisements
- Inappropriate content
- How can I support parents¹?
- Further reading.



Snapshot from research

Media in all forms can affect our actions and behaviour, and our decisions can be unconsciously influenced by the messages we receive through media (SPHE Curriculum). There is an increasing awareness of the importance of equipping young people with the necessary knowledge and skills to become confident and critical users of digital technology who can make informed and responsible choices (UNESCO, 2018). In education, there has been a move from focusing on digital literacy, where children develop skills to use digital tools effectively, to also developing critical thinking skills where children can reap the potential benefits and use digital tools in a responsible and safe way. Children are immersed in digital technologies and have access to digital devices from a younger age, with some research finding that pre-school children sometimes become familiar with digital devices before they are exposed to books (Hopkins, Brookes & Green, 2013). However, increased online activity does not indicate that children have the necessary skills and knowledge to use digital technologies safely and effectively to reap the potential benefits (OECD, 2019).

Critical thinking skills

A core aim of the SPHE curriculum is to enable children to make informed decisions and choices both now and in the future. Young people are increasingly exposed to digital media. Developing critical thinking skills can support children to become active and responsible users of the internet who evaluate and question information, rather than passive consumers of content.

¹ Parents refers to mothers, fathers and those with parental responsibility in different parenting relationships. This may include foster parents, adoptive parents, step-parents, legal guardians, and carers.

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Reflection is an important feature in the development of critical thinking skills. Activities that support children to reflect on their media use can be a helpful starting point, for example, classifying or sorting different activities, surveying the time spent using different media, and sharing preferences. These reflective activities will give you insights into the level of engagement in your class with various sources of media, including digital media, and will help you tailor activities to the needs of your class.

In your classroom, the following resources and activities can support you to create a space for children to critically reflect on the media they consume and the influence it can have on their behaviours and opinions:

- **Be a media detective:** Encourage the children in your class to look at media in a critical way, to ask questions and reflect on its purpose. All media has a creator and a purpose. Activities such as sorting and matching videos or television programmes to a target audience can demonstrate how media can be designed to influence our choices. Exploring how images can be edited can demonstrate how the message we receive is not always the full picture. For children in upper primary, demonstrating how to find out more about the source or creator of the media can help them become more perceptive about the information they receive and empower them to seek trustworthy sources. Questions can support children to be more discerning about the information presented, for example: *Who created it? How does it try to get my attention? Whose opinion is included? Whose view is missing?*
- **Using story to explore different perspectives and disinformation/false information:** Some children may find it confusing when information they read in print or online contradicts what they are told at home or at school. Opportunities to explore how information from various sources may differ can support the development of critical literacy skills. For younger children, the use of story books can introduce different perspectives in an age-appropriate way. For example, reading the story 'The Three Little Pigs' and comparing it to the Wolf's side of the story can illustrate how the same event can be experienced or interpreted in different ways.

When different sources of information contradict each other, it can be confusing to know who to trust. Some children may find it challenging to understand that information they find online is not always true. **Webwise HTML Heroes lesson 3 "What can I trust online?"** (programme for 3rd and 4th class) highlights the importance of critical reflection and speaking to a trusted adult if you are not sure.

News stories, in print or video clips, can be used to explore persuasion techniques and the role of bias. Comparing how the information in news reports differ and reflecting on questions such as: *Who is the target audience? Whose voice is included? Whose voice is not represented?* can help identify the purpose of the news story and explore the role of bias. Comparing headlines and/or inviting children to create headlines can be helpful in exploring how headlines can be designed to grab the reader's attention through the use of sensational vocabulary. Similarly, you might like to examine the choice of image used for different news stories.

This learning can be further supported and integrated with learning in other curriculum areas, in particular with **critical literacy** and learning outcomes in the **Primary Language Curriculum**, for example:

- Reading LO 7: Purpose, genre, and voice
- Reading LO 8: Response and author's intent
- Writing LO 6: Purpose, genre, and voice
- Reading LO 8: Response and author's intent

Exploring and critiquing advertisements

Children are exposed to advertisements from an early age. Exploring and critiquing advertisements can enhance children's decision making skills and support them to be more critical media consumers both now and in the future. Provide opportunities for children to reflect on the purpose and identify the message behind advertisements, and to explore techniques used

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such the use of colour, images, music, and persuasive language.

The following are some activities you might like to try:

- **Spot the target audience:** invite children in a group to identify the target audience in a variety of advertisements. Can they explain why they think this? What techniques were used for different target audiences?
- **Create a logo or design packaging for a product:** Begin by responding to some well-known logos or logos found around the school. Explore the colours, shapes/images and fonts used and discuss preferences. For older classes, you might like to see how a well-known logo has changed over time. Invite the children to design a logo. You might like to provide a product and a target audience. Invite the children to present their logo and explain their choice of colour/shape/image/font.
- **Create an advertisement for a given product:** This could be used for a printed ad, a radio ad or for television/internet. Give each group a product. Invite groups to brainstorm and select ideas. In the planning stage, encourage them to consider the target audience and the techniques they will use. For a video/television ad, they might like to create a story board, film their final ad and add music.
- **Media Wise activities:** **Media Wise** was created by Safefood to support children to develop awareness and understanding of the media. **Topic 3** focuses on target audiences with suggested lessons and activities for all primary classes. **Topic 4** explores how media is designed to influence us.
- **HTML Heroes:** HTML Heroes was created by Webwise. **Lesson 3: What Can I Trust Online** from the 3rd and 4th class programme examines online advertising. Your class might enjoy the video **What is Online Advertising?**

Inappropriate content

Snapshot from research



CyberSafeKids (2022) reported that, while the children they surveyed were largely positive about their online experience and generally felt safe, 26% of children aged 8-12 years old surveyed answered 'yes' when asked if they had seen or experienced something online that bothered them in the past 12 months, and 12% answered they weren't sure. Of the children that had answered yes, 54% of these children told a parent or trusted adult. However, almost 30% kept it to themselves.

As children become more active online and have greater degrees of independence, they may come across content that is not appropriate for their age/stage or that they find upsetting or worrying. Talk to children about their 'gut feelings' or 'natural instincts'. These feelings are often felt when they are in a situation that makes them feel weird, scared or uncomfortable, but they aren't sure why. Teach children that these feelings are sometimes correct, and as a class, you could discuss and devise rules for what to do if they feel this way in a digital environment or come across inappropriate content. The **HTML Heroes Safety Code Song: Stop Think Check** could act as a stimulus for discussion. Reinforce the rules from the Stay Safe programme that they should always approach a trusted adult if they see something online that worries or upsets them.

We know that gaming is a popular online activity for children. Developing an understanding of PEGI (Pan European Game Information) rating systems can help give children greater control over the content they see and support children to choose age-appropriate games. The PEGI rating considers the content from an age suitability perspective but does not consider difficulty level. You can find more information **here**.

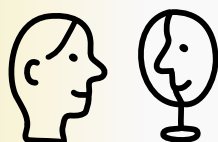
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When considering digital technologies to use in SPHE lessons, it is important that you are familiar with and refer to your school's relevant policies, for example, your school's Digital Learning Plan, which aims to embed digital technologies in school life and develop students' digital literacy. Your school may have an agreed whole school approach for using digital platforms which would be outlined in your school's Acceptable Use Policy.

As the teacher, there will be opportunities for you to model responsible behaviour. For example, you might consider using a child safe search engine in the classroom. It can be helpful to verbalise your actions and demonstrate how to use a search engine, how to find details about the author and date of publication, how to open and close a page/tab, how to find out information about the website and choose reliable sources. Show your class the padlock symbol that is present at the beginning of the web address when the page is secure.

Stop/Think/Check, created by Be Media Smart, has some useful tips which could be adapted to match the age and stage of your class.

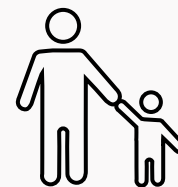
Teacher Reflection



- What digital technologies have you found useful to support teaching and learning in SPHE?
- Reflecting on your use of digital technologies in the classroom in other areas, are there opportunities to integrate learning about safe and responsible use of technology in these lessons?
- Can you think of any missed opportunities to model safe and responsible use of technology? If so, how could you plan for these opportunities in the future?
- How would I describe my own digital skills? Where could I go to for support or to develop my own digital literacy skills?

What's Next?

How can I support parents?



Home learning: You could provide written or reflective activities that encourage children to share some of their learning with parents.

Communications: Communicate with parents that you will be learning about media education and share your approach to teaching the topic. You may consider sharing some of the following links with parents:

- **Webwise Parents Hub** provides information and support for parents, including:
 - Advice on **false information** and a guide to **internet filters**.
 - **#TalkListenLearn** supports parents to have conversations about responsible and safer internet use with their children.
- Tusla **Tips for your child on the internet (6-12 years)**
- ISPCC Parenting Hub:
 - **How To Teach Your Child To Spot Fake News (ispcc.ie)**
 - **A Picture Paints A Thousand Words....But Not Always The Truth (ispcc.ie)**
- Fuse Anti-bullying Centre, DCU parent-hub:
 - **5 Things Parents Can do to Make Gaming Safe and Fun for their kids**

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Further reading



- Webwise: You'll find information, advice and free education resources. The following might be of interest to you:
 - [Digital Literacy Skills: Critical Thinking](#)
 - [Introducing Online Safety to the Primary Classroom – Considerations for Teachers](#)
- The Council of Europe published the [Internet Literacy Handbook](#) which is free to download. It contains fact sheets to develop the technical know-how to navigate communication technology.

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UNESCO (2018). ICT Competency Framework for Teachers Version 3. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265721>

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