

# Right From the Start

IN THE DIGITAL AGE



AN FHI 360 NATIONAL INITIATIVE

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# Right from the Start in the Digital Age: An FHI 360 National Initiative

By Merle Froschl and Barbara Sprung, Educational Equity at FHI 360

## OVERVIEW

FHI 360, a nonprofit human development organization, is spearheading a national initiative to address good digital citizenship beginning with children in grades PreK-3. This initiative, *Right from the Start in the Digital Age*, is designed to lay the groundwork for children to develop both safe and responsible digital citizenship skills that will help prevent and protect them from later behaviors such as cyberbullying. Digital citizenship is a new area of learning for children who are just entering school or in the early primary grades. Because children are using digital devices at ever younger ages, learning how to be safe and responsible online must become an important part of parenting and classroom curriculum.

Ample evidence supports starting early to develop digital citizenship, a term used to express how adults and children can be responsible digital citizens through an understanding of the use, abuse, and misuse of technology as well as the norms of appropriate, responsible and ethical behaviors related to online rights, roles, identity, safety, security and communication (NAEYC, 2012). Classic long-term research, such as the Perry Preschool Project, suggests that starting sooner rather than later will help children develop a strong sense of knowing right from wrong (Schweinhart, Barnes & Weikart, 1993.) It is reasonable to assume that starting early also will help children transfer their understanding of right from wrong to the digital world.

In a foundational study that formed the background for this initiative, FHI 360 interviewed principals, teachers and parents. The message was clear — *start early before children are fully engaged online*. There is a need for PreK-grade 3 digital materials to address the critical social-emotional aspects of digital citizenship. Also lacking are sufficient high-quality print resources about digital citizenship, such as picture books and easy readers that are good literature as well as being developmentally appropriate for young children. Adults, too — parents and family members, caregivers and teachers who are the role models for children's behavior — are in need of resources to help them navigate the digital world in safe and responsible ways.

FHI 360's national initiative, Right from the Start in the Digital Age, will:

- Develop partnerships/collaborations with key organizations that support digital citizenship
- Create a national awareness campaign to engage teacher educators, parent organizations and producers of children's media about beginning early to foster digital citizenship
- Update *Quit it!*, FHI 360's award-winning early childhood teasing and bullying prevention program, to include strategies for teachers, parents and other family members to address positive digital citizenship proactively
- Engage policy-makers in incorporating responsible digital citizenship into their current and future policy development

## WHY NOW?

Cellphones, tablets and other digital devices have become part of the daily lives of young children. By grade 3, 18 percent to 20 percent of children report they have their own cellphone (Englander, 2011). Thirty-eight percent of children under the age of 2 are now using smartphones, tablets and e-readers at the same rate as children 8 and under were using the same devices 2 years ago; and among 5- to 8-year-olds, mobile media usage has risen from 52 percent to 83 percent (Common Sense Media, 2013). In some areas, kindergartners are issued tablets on the first day of school. In FHI 360's study, all parents reported that their children, in grades K-5, used some sort of technology. As the use of smartphones, tablets and other digital devices become part of the daily life of young children, a new avenue for teaching and learning is emerging. In this increasingly digital world, the three "Rs" need to be expanded to include reflection and reasoning (Rogow, 2015).

It is clear that the shift from print to new media will continue to shape the world of young children (Alper, 2011; Flewett, 2011; Linebarger & Plotrowski, 2009). This shift can have both positive and negative aspects and requires literacy skill building that encompasses both digital technology and media.

On the positive side, new technology tools can be harnessed for learning and development (Donohue, 2015; Guernsey, 2014; NAEYC and the Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children's Media at Saint Vincent College, 2012). They can promote new skills, raise achievement and bring children together across time and space (Gutnick, Robb, Takeuchi & Kotler, 2010).

On the negative side, without guidance, children's use of new technology may be inappropriate. While young children may physically know how to swipe a screen or tap an icon, this does not mean that they are prepared to use such devices in responsible ways. As we have seen in recent news, there can be disastrous negative side effects to inappropriate online behavior, such as cyberbullying. A text message, a Facebook comment or an Instagram post can lead to devastating consequences.

Bullying, which has expanded from real time in the classroom and community to the Internet, has become a pervasive source of harm. Its prevalence and permanence is a cause of low-self-esteem, depression and physical and mental illness; it is estimated that 2.2 million students in grades 9-12 experienced cyberbullying in 2011 (NCES, 2013). According to the Pew Research Project, 88 percent of teens who use social media have witnessed other people being mean or cruel on social media sites (Lenhart et al., 2011). Girls are more than twice as likely as boys to experience online bullying. At the extreme end of harm, according to a survey of students conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2014), 16 percent of students who were victims of online bullying reported seriously considering suicide, 13 percent reported creating a plan for suicide and 8 percent reported trying to take their own life in the year preceding the survey. Because cyberbullying reaches its highest level in middle school, starting early to change the tendency of cruelty online among adolescents is critical.

We all know how important it is to teach our children right from wrong, and knowing right from wrong online is no exception. The rapid shift to digital media is reshaping the work of young children, but providing guidance about how they should behave is lagging behind. Therefore, it is important for adults to help children develop skills and establish principles that will help them thrive in both the real and digital world in which they are growing up. Families and teachers alike are searching for ways to address this new form of citizenship so they have age-appropriate ways to help children to be safe, be respectful and use good judgment while online. As they say, “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

## **FHI 360’S STUDY**

In 2012, the Free to Be Foundation awarded a grant to Educational Equity at FHI 360 to advance its long-standing work to address teasing and bullying behavior beginning in early childhood. The grant supported a foundational study of how to create safe and good digital citizenship in young children as they enter the digital world. Activities included interviews with school administrators, parents and a digital media expert, as well as an online parent survey on children’s use of technology.

The interviews highlighted the need for good digital citizenship and underscored issues that are critical to the prevention of cyberbullying. One overall message that emerged was “start early.” Interviewees and survey respondents agreed that children’s use of all forms of digital media was increasing rapidly and was beginning at earlier ages. In addition, during the interviews, the lack of resources for guiding positive use of digital media was noted time and again. While there are excellent resources for all ages in the area of bullying and teasing in real time, there are far fewer that relate to this issue in cyberspace, particularly for younger children. Especially missing are picture books, easy-reader chapter books and classroom curricula activities for children in grades PreK-3.

A major reason to start early to create good net citizenship is to avoid the need to remediate online behavior when children use the Internet more independently starting in 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Parents and other family members are able to exercise more control over use and content with younger children,

ensuring safe interactions. In addition, they can help children choose games that are not violent and that don't promote excessive consumerism.

In all of the interviews, safety was a key concern. A universal suggestion was for close monitoring; keeping the computer and other digital devices in open spaces where a parent or caregiver can see what the child is engaged in. Another strategy that came up frequently was to have ongoing discussions with children about what is and is not acceptable online behavior.

In every interview with parents, the discussion turned to the challenges of keeping a balance between the positive aspects of digital access — such as self-initiated learning, social interaction, fun and entertainment — and concerns about safety such as overuse, diminished physical playtime and lack of understanding about the consequences of online mistakes. School administrators expressed concern that, despite rules that restrict classroom computers to in-school use for curricula projects, students find ways to circumvent those rules, which can and does lead to cyberbullying. The schools where interviews were conducted are known for instilling strong ethics and kindness in students, and each institution has issued guidelines for parents and other family members. In spite of the care taken to mitigate bullying and teasing, it still occurs and increasingly happens online.

An expert on media literacy raised issues that are at the crux of addressing teaching positive net citizenship to young children. A key point that she makes in her workshops for parents and educators is that young children are tech savvy but not necessarily media literate. They might know how to use the device but they don't truly understand its purpose and power. The challenge is how to convey abstract concepts of safety, permanence and privacy in terms that young children can understand.

In addition to the interviews, a survey was conducted to gain further insight into how parents are handling their children's entry into the digital world. The 39 survey respondents are parents of children in grades K-5 in New York City public schools. While the sample is small, the results clearly show that technology is part of these children's lives, with about one-third using the technology to interact with friends online. Parents have devised a number of strategies to limit and/or supervise their children's use of technology. However, not many parents are providing proactive guidance about good net citizenship. Fewer than half the parents have talked about cyberbullying with their children, and in very few cases has it been brought up in school. (A summary of the survey is attached.)

## **A REVIEW OF THE LANDSCAPE**

To better understand how various sectors are addressing the constantly expanding use of digital media, FHI 360 looked at what government agencies and programs, private foundations, media and early childhood and other nonprofit organizations are doing in this arena. At present, school districts, universities and government agencies such as the U.S. Department of Education, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Department of Commerce provide a range of programs and services to address violence prevention in real time and online. These programs center mostly on

preventing youth violence, providing schools and school districts with resources including strategy booklets, model policy statements, staff training and curricula. For example, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has developed KnowBullying, a free app for parents and caregivers that contains bullying prevention tips and strategies.

Private foundations such as the Cybersmile Foundation, a nonprofit organization founded by parents of children directly affected by cyberbullying, and media groups have sponsored TED talks and funded media campaigns to address online bullying. Examples include *To the Bullied and the Beautiful*, a TED video that has reached 3 million viewers, and *Beware/Be Aware* an animated graphic sponsored by MTV. Internationally, the European Union, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia, to name just a few, have promoted bullying prevention programs for youth. While some of the initiatives try to span the K-12 age group, the vast majority focus on students in middle through high school. Recently, however, Child Trends has published a white paper, “*Bullies in the Block Area: The Early Childhood Origins of ‘Mean’ Behavior*,” which provides an overview of risk factors in early childhood for later involvement in bullying and summarizes a variety of strategies, intervention and guidance for parents, caregivers, teachers and others for addressing and preventing bullying behavior in young children (DeVooght, et al., 2015).

Leading early childhood educational organizations and advocacy groups have issued policy statements and guidelines about how to integrate digital devices and programming in developmentally appropriate ways. The National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE), a major organization in this field, works in formal and informal settings to improve media literacy education, which has been defined as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, communicate and act using all forms of media. NAMLE holds a biennial conference that draws a unique mix of educators, media literacy practitioners, scholars, content producers, media-industry leaders and others passionate about media literacy education to share their work and learn from one another. This past year, NAMLE held a pre-conference Symposium on Media Literacy Education for Early Childhood. The symposium emphasized the importance of beginning media literacy as early as possible — to establish the ABCs of media literacy, the skills and knowledge that form the building blocks for the complex capabilities children need as they grow. It also highlighted the importance of using media and technology as powerful tools for learning, communicating, collaborating and creating.

The Early Education initiative at New America provides policy analysis and reporting, and publishes a newsletter, books and other resources concerned with the well-being of children birth through age 8 and their families. A policy brief, “*Envisioning a Digital Age Architecture for Early Education*,” measures the degree to which children and parents use media together (Guernsey, 2014). The NAEYC and Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children’s Media have issued a position statement, “*Technology and Interactive Media as Tools in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8*” (2012). NAEYC has also co-published a book with Routledge, edited by Chip Donohue, a leading proponent of developmentally appropriate use of digital media (2015).

The landscape scan provided valuable information about the many current efforts that address the need for digital citizenship. The organizations briefly described above are contributing essential knowledge about media literacy and online safety that provide families, educators and the general public with strategies and tools. The initiatives by early childhood organizations focus on the important early need for high-quality, developmentally appropriate software and teacher/parent education around its use. Despite all these efforts, however, there is more to be done. There remains a need to pay attention to the more social and emotional aspects of digital citizenship starting at the earliest levels of education.

## IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

During the early years of schooling, children are constructing knowledge in myriad ways, employing all their senses to learn about the world around them. From PreK through grade 3, basic academic skills are acquired, at first through play experiences and then more formally in the primary grades. Equally important to academic learning during these PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade years is the development of social-emotional skills. Although sometimes characterized as “soft skills,” they are anything but soft. Rather, positive social-emotional skills are as essential as academic competence to success in school and life. While social-emotional skill development has always been one of the most important elements in early childhood education, in recent years it has been recognized as a subject that needs to become an integral subject in the K-12 curriculum.

As defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), social and emotional learning “is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships and make positive decisions” (CASEL, 2015).

Social-emotional skills are those that enable children to become socially responsible citizens. Goleman (1995), a co-founder of CASEL and known worldwide for his work on emotional intelligence, believes that social-emotional skills such as self-awareness, self-discipline, persistence and empathy are as vital as cognitive skills measured by IQ and achievement tests. These skills enable children to:

- Recognize and manage their emotions
- Set and achieve positive goals
- Demonstrate caring and concern for others
- Establish and maintain positive relationships
- Make responsible decisions
- Handle interpersonal situations effectively

. A review of three studies conducted by CASEL documented that SEL programs improved students’ social-emotional skills, attitudes towards self and others, positive social behavior and connection to

school. The studies also showed that social-emotional learning programming led to an 11 percent to 17 percent improvement in academic performance (Payton, et al., 2008).

Another critical aspect of social-emotional learning, as defined by CASEL is the ability to feel and show empathy for others. In *Mind in the Making*, Ellen Galinsky (2010) defines perspective-taking as one of seven essential life skills children need for success in school. In her words, "Children who can figure out what others feel and think are less likely to get involved in conflicts." In addition to perspective-taking, Galinsky's list of skills also addresses aspects of social-emotional learning within the larger context of helping children reach their full potential in school. The other six essential skills she identifies are focus and self-control, communicating, making connections, critical thinking, taking on challenges and self-directed engaged learning.

The Center for Emotional Intelligence at Yale University also addresses the importance of social-emotional development in grades K-12. A unique feature of their approach is to help older students acknowledge and learn how to express a broad range of emotions. The Center conducts research, provides professional development and produces curricula.

Social-emotional skill building that includes learning how to be responsible digital citizens is a necessary extension of building these skills in other areas of early childhood/primary education, such as respect for the space and feelings of others, building tolerance and respect for differences, learning how to resolve conflicts peacefully and contributing to the community of the classroom. Typically, children learn these skills through daily interactions with their peers and caregivers/teachers. Adults are the role models that guide children's behavior by example. Through body language, eye contact and conversation, children learn how their behavior affects others. Hurt feelings, angry feelings and happy feelings are reflected in another person's face. A sense of community and belonging is built by welcoming back a sick classmate with a song, by working together to get ready for a celebration or by creating a classroom mural after a trip.

Connecting these essential skills to children's digital participation presents a unique challenge. It's difficult to understand hurt feelings when you don't see facial expressions or body language that reveal sadness. It's easier to say mean words when you don't immediately see the consequences of your behavior. Angry words in the classroom can be forgiven and forgotten. Anger expressed online can go viral and is permanent. And, while it may make a child feel temporarily powerful to involve others in sending mean messages online, it is the opposite of community building. Developmentally appropriate curricula are needed to help children understand abstract concepts such as privacy or permanence that are inherent in online bullying. Strategies are needed to transfer social-emotional skill building to the digital environment.

We have titled this position paper, *Right from the Start in the Digital Age*. We as adults, teach by example. We demonstrate kindness and fairness in our daily interactions with children and other adults; we are empathetic when children are sad and we encourage other children to be mindful of the feelings of their peers. We use "teachable moments" to illustrate pro-social behavior and provide guidance to

solve conflicts peacefully. As adults, we also need to pay attention to the need to embrace these traditional early education principles as we prepare children for digital citizenship. By taking an approach that integrates social-emotional development, we are developing skills that will serve children well when they enter the world of social media and online interaction.

## THE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

Many groups and individuals nationally are interested in helping children enter the digital world ready to take advantage of the positive advantages it presents and equipped with the skills they need to become responsible users of the Internet throughout their school years and into adulthood. FHI 360 has drawn on the expertise of media literacy leaders, early childhood organizations, school administrators, producers of early childhood media and teacher educators to develop partnerships and collaborations that support Right from the Start in the Digital Age. Through discussions with these experts, important topics have emerged to be addressed by the initiative: build awareness, promote Inclusion, take a multi-context approach, provide tools for families and teachers and teach media literacy skills. FHI 360 will create a national awareness campaign and work with publishers to develop picture books and trans-media learning materials to address these topics.

In addition, FHI 360 will bring *Quit it!*, Educational Equity at FHI 360's evidence-based program to address teasing and bullying in grades K-3, into the digital age. *Quit it!* has successfully reduced real-time teasing and bullying behavior in urban and suburban schools in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut by more than 35 percent. *Quit it! A Teacher's Guide on Teasing and Bullying for Use with Students in Grades K-3* is listed in *Human Rights Education in the School Systems of Europe, Central Asia, and North America: A Compendium of Good Practice* (OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2009), which includes citizenship education and education for mutual respect and understanding. Under this initiative, *Quit it!* will be updated to include lessons for children about responsible use of the Internet and strategies that adults can use in the classroom and at home. The expanded version of *Quit it!* will be available in a digital format suitable for downloading to a cellphone, tablet or other digital device.

FHI 360 is excited and challenged by the opportunity to spearhead a national initiative to address digital citizenship beginning with children in grades PreK-3. We look forward to bringing this critical issue to the forefront of early education.

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## **FHI 360 PARENT SURVEY ON USE OF TECHNOLOGY AND CYBERBULLYING**

The thirty nine (39) parents who responded to this survey in 2013 are parents of children in grades K-5 in New York City public schools. While the sample is small, the results clearly show that technology is a part of these children's lives, with about a third using the technology to interact with friends online. Parents have devised a number of strategies to limit and/or supervise their children's use of technology. However, not many parents are providing proactive guidance about good digital citizenship. Fewer than half the parents have talked about cyberbullying with their children, and in very few cases has it been brought up in school. Following is a summary of the results of the survey.

### ***What types of technology does your child use?***

All parents in the survey reported that their children, regardless of grade level, used some sort of technology. A computer was the technology predominately used, with 84.2 percent of parents reporting this result; a tablet came in second, with 60.5 percent; a cellphone third with 42.1 percent and an iPod fourth with 36.8 percent. There was little difference between grade levels for use of all types of technology.

### ***Do you have family guidelines for the use of technology?***

A large majority – 32 out of 39 (84.2 percent) -- of parents reported "Yes" to this question. Most of the guidelines related to limits and/or supervision such as time restrictions, parental approval of sites, controls and filters on devices, and discussions of games played. Two parents reported having guidelines that addressed good digital citizenship, for example, "Don't text anything that you wouldn't say in person to someone."

### ***Does your child interact online with friends?***

Seventy three (73) percent of parents – the majority of which had children in grades K-1 -- reported "No" to this question. Those whose children did interact online, described those interactions as playing games, texting, using Instagram, using Face Time and sending occasional emails.

### ***Do you talk about cyberbullying with your child at home?***

More than half (57.9 percent) answered "No" to this question. Those who answered "Yes," described that they "explain how it's just as bad as bullying in person -- either way it is just wrong" and that nothing is to be put in an email or text that is hurtful or could be misconstrued as hurtful. One parent said that her daughter, who was in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, received a group text saying that they should talk about someone. "I told her that no matter how she is feeling about that person at the moment and wants to talk about them with the others, she needs to think about every possible consequence first. She should assume that the person they wanted to text about would eventually see every text about her. I told her if she wanted she could just text back that she was busy and couldn't text if she didn't know how to get out of it otherwise."

### ***Has the issue of cyberbullying come up at school?***

The majority of parents answered "No" to this question. Only 7 said "Yes;" in one case because of an incident in the middle school. In two cases, parents responded that while cyberbullying had not been discussed, the general issue of bullying had, with one school having had an anti-bullying workshop.



**About FHI 360:** FHI 360 is a nonprofit human development organization dedicated to improving lives in lasting ways by advancing integrated, locally driven solutions. Our staff includes experts in health, education, nutrition, environment, economic development, civil society, gender, youth, research, technology, communication and social marketing — creating a unique mix of capabilities to address today's interrelated development challenges. FHI 360 serves more than 70 countries and all U.S. states and territories.

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