

# PARENTING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Technology is wonderful, but today's parents never faced growing up with their lives posted permanently to World Wide Web. Schools are now teaching parents about the web and why it is important to be vigilant. *By* NICOLE RUSKELL



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In the midst of the Digital Age, our lives are now interconnected with the World Wide Web, a limitless source of knowledge and instant global connection. Expat families have it better than ever; able to see their loved ones back home with two taps of a finger and update friends on social media with precious moments with the kids. While this seems like a utopia of interaction, there is a downside to all this digital technology: the health and safety of young children can easily become compromised on the Internet. Parents today have learned to utilise digital technology, but they don't necessarily understand the pitfalls. We spoke with Mougins

School and the International School of Monaco (ISM) about how they protect students and teach parents about the digital world our children are growing up in. From classroom lectures to recorded podcasts, both schools are making great efforts to bring parents into the discussion.

Brian Hickmore, Headmaster of Mougins School says that preparing students for the high-tech world can be difficult because technology is advancing so rapidly. He welcomes the new technology, but is careful for his students' safety:

"More and more lessons involve technology, making teaching and learning exciting and

varied. The only way we can hope to ensure [students'] safety is by dialogue – lessons like PHSE (personal health and social education), can absorb new issues relating to eSafety with motivational speakers, films etc. We can make sure we teach it and hope we do enough to provide the children with the information they need to stay safe."

The Director of ISM, Francis Gianni, tells us: "We prepare students to communicate effectively, to be skillful and safe users of digital technology; to use data honestly and with social responsibility in our ever-changing world."

## 'Screen Time'

Tablets are one of the most amazing inventions of our time. We can do so much with them. However, their effects on very young children can be potentially dangerous. The founders of our Digital Age, including Bill Gates and the late Steve Jobs, highly restricted their children's use of technology. Even the designer of the iPad, Jonathan Ive, refused to let his young children use one. The reasons are many, but the biggest threat is to babies, as touch screens can interfere with early brain and fine motor skill development. The *American Academy of Pediatrics* recommends strict limits to children's screen time and urges no screen time before two years. Both Mougins School and ISM agree on the need to protect the youngest children from too much screen time. Headmaster Hickmore recommends that small children should only use tablets in public spaces in the home and not to let children take the tablet into their room. Even older children should be restricted on screen time, he says, and suggests parents install an internet shutdown device to avoid overnight gaming.

## Cyberbullying

Bullying has always existed in schools and many parents pass-off this new digital version as just another way kids are mean. But cyberbullying is not just a digital version of what happens in schools. According to Headmaster Hickmore, cyberbullying reaches a different level of " nastiness " because the person is not face to face with their victim. The anonymity allows them to use stronger language, post a more embarrassing photograph or go beyond the level they otherwise would—and the audience is much larger. An embarrassing moment in school could be shared with entire student body (humiliating as that may seem), but cyberbullying has an unlimited audience, picking up momentum as an incident turns 'viral.' This has had detrimental effects, even leading to some children to take their own life out of shame.

"Parents need to understand cyberbullying and talk to their children on a regular basis about their use of social media," says Headmaster Hickmore. He stresses that parents need to stay vigilant with what their adoles-

cents are posting. Mougins School teaches students the importance of careful posting of photographs on social media how the law prohibits posting pictures of someone without their permission. "It takes a while to sink in," he says, "but we have noticed some change in behaviour."

ISM has a very strict "Acceptable use" policy for online posting and a "powerful filtering system" in the school. "We have our own definition of 'digital citizenship,' says ISM Director Gianni. "In the Secondary School, we encourage students to 'T.H.I.N.K.' before posting on social media. This means: Is the post True, Helpful, Inspiring, Necessary and Kind?" They also practice what they preach: "We try to lead by example, always asking permission before posting any pictures of our students in our publications or on our website."

### Teaching parents 'eSafety'

Both schools offer lectures and workshops on cyber-security for parents. These not only inform but also reassure parents if they feel overwhelmed by the task of 'gate keeping' their child's internet use. The head of ISM's Middle School holds regular workshops for parents which have proved helpful and informative. Those who aren't able to attend the lectures can download the talk by podcast.

This past November, Mougins School brought in eSecurity specialist and digital parenting coach, Elizabeth Milovidov to speak with students and parents and opened the talk to the local community. An American born law professor, Elizabeth works with the Children's Rights Division of the Council of Europe as an independent expert on Children and Internet safety. She provides support to governments and associations on Online Child Protection, travels the world to lecture on Internet Safety and coaches both parents and educators on the best practices in the Digital Age. She points out that this is the first generation to parent in the Digital Age without any instruction or guidance from our own parents. "We need to teach ourselves," she says.

Headmaster Hickmore told Riviera Insider: "Elizabeth is an excellent motivational speaker and captured the children's attention immediately. The Primary School children were extremely attentive to her strong guidance. The presentation to parents in the evening was also very well received – it was pitched at a different level without requiring any technical knowledge or training and presented the dangers the children face on a daily basis on their smartphones."

Both Mougins School and the International School of Monaco welcome technology and are very positive about the amazing changes it has brought to our lives. They also take the safety of their students very seriously. ISM told us: "Technology is here to stay; our children need these skills but it's all about finding the right balance." ▀

## TEACHING FOR THE DIGITAL AGE

*The International School of Monaco answers our questions about teaching students and parents.*

**Monaco is committed to being a world leader in technology. How does ISM strike a balance between preparing students for the digital age while protecting students' safety?**

Excellent IT skills are essential for anyone entering the workplace or continuing education and our students start learning these skills right from the early years. For our youngest children, screen time is really limited and we encourage a love of books and reading first. Further up the school technology has a more important place. In practical terms, this means that we teach students to behave responsibly and safely in the digital world. Examples of this can be found in our Cyber-Bullying course activities taught in Information Technology and Homeroom classes, as well as the 'Action Innocence' speakers who come to run special in-class sessions with students.

**What are some of the IT classes or special workshops that prepare students for the digital age?**

Students take coding classes in the Middle School and we have an enthusiastic robotics club. There is one to one iPad programme and a focus on digital citizenship. The "Big 6" is a trademarked model of six steps to go through when conducting any kind of research and helps students to distil what they really need from the overwhelming amount of information available on the internet.

Older students learn about digital responsibility when they create their Internal Assessments and Extended Essays which must all be fully referenced, listing all research sources utilised, especially any sources they may have found online.

**Do you have lectures for teenagers on 'eSafety' or the risks of posting personal information and photographs online?**

It's not just for teenagers these days! Children are using the internet, and devices



with games and Apps, at an even earlier age. For many years we have worked closely with Action Innocence, a Monaco based charity helping to educate children and their parents on how to use the internet safely. They conduct workshops with our students each year and give wonderfully interesting presentations to our parents as well on how they can help ensure their children's safe and responsible use of their devices, and how to control their screen time.

**Does ISM offer any lectures or speakers on online safety for parents?**

Yes, absolutely! In March one of our graduates working in cyber security came to talk to our parents on how to monitor your "digital footprint." That is the trace you leave when using social media such as Instagram and Facebook and goes beyond what we'd call internet safety; our security specialist also conducted workshops with our students. This is just as important for parents as it is for students.

Our Head of Middle School, Mr James Wellings, recently conducted two interactive workshops with our parents, one on general internet safety and how to keep on top of developments, and a second workshop specifically dealing with online bullying. For those who couldn't attend the workshops, we sent out a podcast with video to all parents. The comments afterwards were really positive. Soon we will be offering some "clinics" on how parents can set up their children's devices for maximum safety and benefit.