



Putting the “I” into cybersafety

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When your child starts secondary school there is a lot to take in I discovered, as my daughter headed off to year 7 at Melbourne’s Ivanhoe Grammar School (IGS) last year. I was deluged by a plethora of forms, schedules and procedures, all of which were new to me. In amongst the downpour, I signed up for “icybersafe” updates, without fully recognising exactly what this entailed. But as the months wore on, I found myself becoming increasingly hooked in by the email notifications I received about icybersafe posts: *A “dummy’s” guide for parents to Twitter*, *Facial Recognition is coming*, *Firesheep alert*.

The posts covered a variety of topics linked to online behaviour, including changes in technology, stories from the media and suggestions to help parents understand and deal with online issues. As a parent, I have found this information extremely relevant and useful, but as an educator, I also became interested in the origins and the impact of icybersafe.

The initiative was the brainchild of Renata Rowe, Head of Secondary and Deputy Head

of Campus at Ivanhoe Grammar’s Plenty site. Rowe explains that the Principal became aware that different sections of the school, which comprises the Prep to Year 12 Plenty Campus, as well as an Early Learning Centre and primary school (Buckley House) and secondary school (Ridgeway Campus) based in Ivanhoe, were all trying to manage the issue of cybersafety. The need for a coordinated approach was evident. “At that stage, we were trying to put our fingers in the dyke,” Rowe says.

The school established a committee who conducted focus groups and surveys to gain parental input. Overwhelmingly, and somewhat ironically, parents wanted information online. The Principal was initially against the idea amid concerns that it may be difficult to monitor and control content. Options such as a flyer or booklet were considered, but it soon became apparent that information, and technology itself, was changing so quickly that printed matter would be rapidly outdated.

Once it was agreed to use an online medium, the next step was to determine how. The IT

Team at IGS suggested a blog as an appropriate mode of delivery and created a mock structure in WordPress. Rowe is quick to admit that she knew nothing about the technology initially, and after a lesson from IT staff she spent hours deciding what would be included and how content would be organised.

The result is evidence of Rowe’s passion and dedication to the cause of cybersafety. Headings along the navigation menu allow direct access to topics in categories such as “Parental Concerns”, “Social Media” and “School Policies”, while the home page features posts from key IGS staff that keep users up to date with a range of cyber-related issues. Subscribers to the blog – and membership is generously not restricted to the school community, but is open to all – receive an email to alert them when new content is added.

The content itself is rich with links to relevant websites, and offers edifying and often entertaining insights into both technical and social aspects of internet use. For example, if you select “Twitter” from the Social Media menu, you can access a short YouTube video



called *Twitter in Plain English* that uses hand-animated drawings to demonstrate the Twitter process.

Rowe writes and chooses content that she believes will help parents keep ahead of the game, often inspired by incidents encountered in the course of her day – “names changed, of course!” It is Rowe’s contention that parents have found cyber issues especially fraught because they have no parental models to copy; they are the first generation to have to support their children to deal with these problems. “The next generation of parents may be more adept, but today’s 30-year-old parents didn’t grow up with this technology. They have no benchmarks or lines in the sand,” she explains. Couple this with the rise of teenagers recognising that they have certain rights, and the tendency of parents to therefore accord them more rights, and it is easy to see why concerns from cyber bullying to video game addiction feature prominently in the media.

It is for this reason that icybersafe offers advice to assist parents with managing online behaviour. “We give parents support that they are not the only ones saying no. If parents know all parents are getting the same message, it gives them permission to say no,” Rowe asserts. The recommendations are practical and realistic. For instance, the *Managing Internet Time* topic acknowledges that, “to a teen ‘more is never enough.’ This is important for us as parents to know because no matter how much we agonise over the decision about whether we will accept an hour or 90 minutes or two hours no teen will ever be happy with any limit.”

Rowe subscribes to a number of information services, such as Google Alerts for cyberbullying and Mashable, to ensure that she is across important changes and innovations in the area of cybersafety. She also particularly looks for Australian content whenever possible, and when relevant includes information specific to the school, such as its recently completed Social Media policy. Of late she has noticed escalating

use of inappropriate language by young people online, and her post *Cyberbullying World Map – Australia Rated as 5th Worst* addresses this issue, urging parents, “Someone has to teach our young that there are consequences for using offensive language in a public forum and/or being mean.”

Yet the role of schools in managing online behaviour off campus is somewhat of a grey area. “Some schools view it as none of their business,” Rowe says. “Ivanhoe Grammar School’s view is that the school created the opportunity for the students to have a relationship. Anything that impacts on student wellbeing at school is our business.” She also points out that it is often easier for schools to investigate issues than it is for parents and that parents are generally grateful for the assistance.

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Feedback for the initiative has been overwhelmingly positive. After icybersafe’s launch in 2010, Rowe says that, “Parents wrote in droves about how pleased and supported they felt.” Although this has naturally died off, the success of the blog can easily be judged by the number of hits it receives. More than 700 people have signed up as subscribers and impressively, the blog has registered nearly 45,000 views, with the average number of hits growing to between 500 and 600 per week. Rowe also notes that not all of the hits are coming from signed up users; people from the UK, USA, Canada, India and even China have accessed icybersafe via sites such as Google and Twitter. “A recent post on gaming addiction was copied in Korea,” she says, explaining how pleased she is that others are taking an interest in educating and supporting technology use, rather than banning it. “We have a window of opportunity for six years to teach students to use IT appropriately and responsibly.”

Rowe encourages parents to become educated about technology by, for example, setting up their own Facebook accounts to learn how it works. An advantage of WordPress is that it offers readers the opportunity to share items that they like via other websites such as Google+, Facebook and Pinterest, and parents have shown their increasing mastery of online processes by doing this with many of the icybersafe posts.

Ivanhoe Grammar School also works hard to ensure that students are aware of the ramifications of their online behaviour. Recently, it established “CyberAngels”, a group of year 10 to 12 students from the Plenty campus who are canvassing the secondary school for input into a student-created Social Media Code of Ethics. The initiative will be rolled out to the primary campuses and the Ridgeway campus and extended to students in Years 7 to 9. A representative from each group will then meet with a copy of their draft so that consolidated primary and secondary school versions can be written, representing the views and ideas of all students. Rowe believes that this process will be more meaningful because it is the students’ own Code. “Who are kids going to listen to?” she asks. The Code of Ethics will represent a baseline by which staff and students can judge the appropriateness of online behaviour.

With texting and social media increasingly moving young people’s interaction from a verbal to a written arena, schools and parents alike face a challenge to keep pace not just with the technology itself, but also with how this can affect student relationships. The success of Ivanhoe Grammar School’s icybersafe initiative represents genuine collaboration between key stakeholders such as teachers, parents and students to find a strategy that can and has evolved with the changing landscape of student communication.

icybersafe can be accessed at
<http://icybersafe.com/>

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