

e-Safety Newsletter

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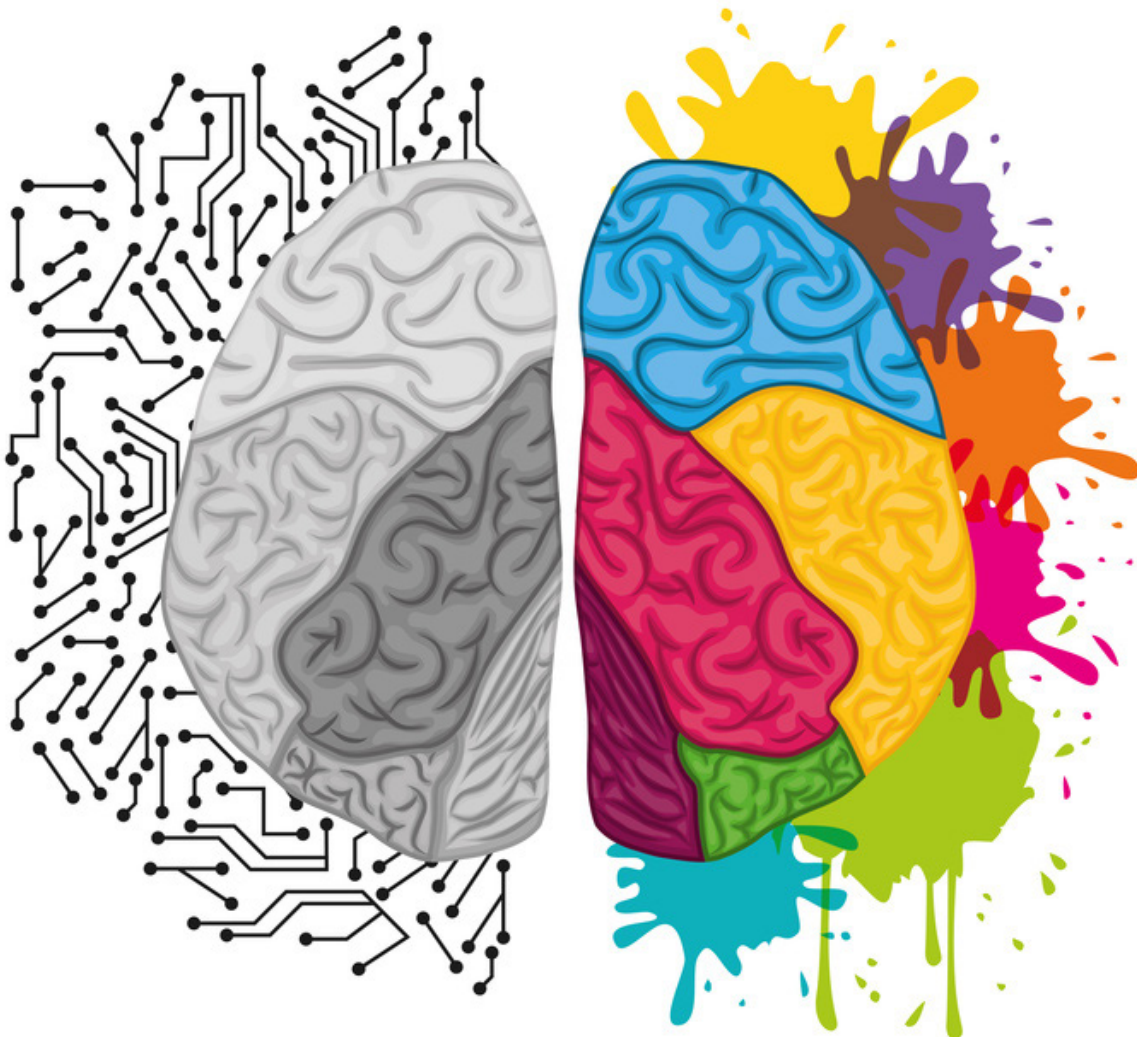
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Risky Behaviour

Is science the answer?

Neuroscience
and adolescence

Cyberpsychology
and online disinhibition





Alan is a consultant who has worked in the education sector for many years. Previously the service manager for 350 schools and also leading on internet safety, he has a deep understanding of the needs and frustrations of schools.

Alan now works for himself, in partnership or collaborating with many others, across the country helping and advising schools, charities and other organizations with a specialist focus of online safety.

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Foreword from Alan Mackenzie

Back in the good old days, many years ago when I had hair, I was a young submariner in one of Her Majestys' finest. Well, when I say finest, my first 'boat' was diesel electric and already 28 years old when I first joined it; more like a scary, leaking rustbucket, but a lot of fun. If you've ever seen the film Das Boot, there you go!

Anyway, I was very lucky, the particular submarine I was on travelled to all corners of the world, but prior to going alongside in any foreign port, the captain would receive what was essentially a diplomatic pack going into things like the language, culture, even areas of interest, tourist attractions etc. As there were only 67 of us on the boat, this pack was shared amongst us all to read and digest.

The important section was right at the back, **BANNED AREAS**. Where do you think we spent most of our time, and why?

Risky behaviour

Is science the answer?

We all take risks, every single one of us. As adults, those risks are usually calculated through conscious thought, perhaps based on previous experience or knowledge. But is that the case with children and young people?

There doesn't seem to be a day that goes by where the media is telling us about the trouble children and young people are getting into, the risks they're taking, theories about how technology (and in particular social media) is having an adverse effect on the brain, relationships, social and thinking skills and much more.

My problem with this is that it just heightens fear; there is rarely a good balance with proper context and much of what you read is based on opinion rather than fact (myself included).

Thankfully there is more and more science-related research going on into various aspects of how technology is (or isn't) affecting us all, particularly in the areas of neuroscience and psychology, particularly cyberpsychology; a basic understanding of these can really help us to understand more..



Risky Behaviour

Continued

The trouble is, some of this research can be quite conflicting and that's not surprising, it's early days. Remember, the internet isn't that old, the world wide web is even younger (1989), and our use of 'mobile' is still in its infancy but growing hugely.

Evolution teaches us that society changes and adapts; the motor car, the printed newspaper, the telephone, all those things we now take for granted, yet have had a fundamental and life-changing effect on all of us. But if you look back through history all of these changes caused a big stir as to how all of our lives would change for the worse.

I think part of the problem with technology is that it is moving at such an incredibly fast rate that we simply have little understanding of any negative effects. Furthermore when you're talking about online life, it's just that - life, so where do you start?

For schools and other professionals working with children and young people, there are some really good insights now starting to appear. An understanding of these will help all of us when we're talking to children and young people about their online life.

Our fears are quite often based on the unknown, understandably so, but there is an important point that is often missed: technology isn't going away, usage is increasing not only in our personal lives but also in our professional lives. We need to stop fighting against it as that is a losing battle, but find ways in which we understand the changes that are taking place in regards to our social and emotional wellbeing. Once we have a better understanding of what is going on then

we can look at ways of how we move forward in a positive way. But I think for the moment the age-old advice stands - online and offline balance. Over-simplified yes, but I think this has to be the key for the moment!



I'm sure we're probably a long way from understanding all of the issues fully, if we ever will, but as professionals if we have a basic understanding it starts to give us good insights into behaviours, and therefore how we can better help with those behaviours.

Neuroscience

Adolescence

The first aspect I want to briefly look at is neuroscience, particularly in respect to risk-taking, teens and adolescence. We've all heard (and likely seen) the 'boy-racers'. Those young drivers who take extraordinary risks seemingly without a care in the world putting themselves and others into potential danger, and yet that's after they've had a lot of instruction and education. Is this deliberate behaviour? Perhaps apathy?

This is where technology really starts to help us out, specifically the wider availability of MRI and fMRI tools where researchers have found several changes in the brain during puberty that go some way to explaining risky behaviour.

In particular, the pre-frontal cortex is responsible for self-regulation, what is sometimes termed as the 'seat of good judgement.' We talk about the moral compass, good and bad, knowing that something is bad or a risk and we do it anyway. The problem with adolescents is that the area of the brain responsible for judgement simply isn't developed, and some



have even stated that it is the last part of the brain to develop fully. The end of adolescence for most people is the mid-20's! Theories such as this could start to explain a lot.



To explain in much better detail than I can, there is a fascinating TED video featuring Dr. Sarah-Jayne Blakemore who is a cognitive neuroscientist ([link on the Useful Links page](#)) where she explains in a little more depth what she calls 'the mysterious workings of the adolescent brain.' in a very easy-to-understand way.

Dr. Blakemore explains the part of the brain that changes most dramatically during adolescence is the pre-frontal cortex which, importantly, is responsible for inhibiting inappropriate behaviour as well as many other things. such as impulsiveness, organization etc. She further goes onto explain why teenagers sometimes have difficulty taking into account other peoples perspectives. In the context of this newsletter, this information can greatly help us in understanding inappropriate online activities and I strongly recommend you watch the TED video.

Cyberpsychology

Online disinhibition

Cyberpsychology is hugely important in understanding online behaviour, specifically **online disinhibition**.

Those schools who have had me in to speak know that I touch on this subject, explaining that in some circumstances knowing 'why' people do things online can be more important than 'what.' In other words, if we can understand the why we can help with the what.

The Online Disinhibition Effect was first coined by [Professor John Suler](#), who is my go-to person when it comes to cyberpsychology.

So what is online disinhibition? In simple terms it's described as "a loosening (or complete abandonment) of social restrictions and inhibitions that would otherwise be present in normal face-to-face interaction during interactions with others on the Internet." In other words, in real life we have social norms; we respond to situations in certain ways, we adapt our behaviour to those around us.

Online, those norms are often stripped away as there are no visual cues as to what somebody might be thinking, there is no immediate sharp intake of breath from our friends if we say something inappropriate or 'that look' from our peers if we're about to do something wrong. This lack of visual cues can be both a good and a bad thing, for example people may be more honest and open online or the other effect is that they can do or say things that they

wouldn't ordinarily do in the real world.

Perceived anonymity online can also exacerbate negative online behaviours; if you don't know me (or can't see me) then I'll get away with it. But we must also remember that online anonymity can be a good thing, it's not all about the bad!



From an educational perspective, a basic understanding of the principles of online disinhibition can help us greatly and we can have really good, open conversations with students.

As a really basic example, two students talking face-to-face where they can see each others reactions. Now stand them back-to-back or behind a screen and remove those visual cues; what has changed, how do the students feel: more free, more open, disinhibited? Get them to discuss and debate this, then move that conversation into an online perspective, perhaps discussing why some may create and send wholly inappropriate Snapchat images or eye-opening Facebook update.

One of the most basic things students tell us in regards to e-safety education is that they want to understand 'why.'

Introducing them to and discussing these concepts with them will greatly help with that understanding.

Useful Links

Article

Concerns over claims about how technology affects young brains

[CLICK HERE](#)

Infographic

The neurology of gaming
- the parts of the brain impacted by games

[CLICK HERE](#)

Video

A good, basic explanation of the online disinhibition effect on YouTube

[CLICK HERE](#)

Book

Psychology of the digital age
- Humans Become Electric by John Suler

[CLICK HERE](#)

Video

A TED video titled "The mysterious workings of the adolescent brain"

[CLICK HERE](#)

Article

The Online Disinhibition Effect by Professor John Suler

[CLICK HERE](#)

For all your e-safety training and consultancy needs please contact me:

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or via

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Whenever I'm doing parents talks in schools, an hour isn't a lot of time to get across much information.

Therefore, I've created a new [website](#) which is essentially an extension to my talks, and simply signposts parents to relevant information, advice and resources.

There is also a dedicated [Facebook](#) page where there are more regular updates.. Feel free to link on your school website or your own Facebook page..



internet safety

www.parentsonlinesafety.com
www.facebook.com/esafetyadviser



Safer
Internet
Day 2016

Tuesday
9 February

Play your part for
a better internet

www.saferinternetday.org.uk



Don't forget, Safer Internet Day 2016 is nearly here
- PLAY YOUR PART FOR A BETTER INTERNET -
Click [HERE](#) for free resources from UKSIC

Bits n Bytes

Article

The rewards and risks of giving babies social media accounts

[CLICK HERE](#)



Department
for Education

New Website

Educate Against Hate

[CLICK HERE](#)



Department
for Education

IMPORTANT

Keeping Children Safe in
Education - consultation
document

[CLICK HERE](#)



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