Are we being responsible Netizens?

Being a cohesive community now means we watch over the little ones left adrift on cyber waters

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This hypothetical situation is for the surfing the Internet, and you chance upon a website that asks you to rate your classmates based on how cute and smart they are. What will you do? (a) Rate them (b) ignore it (c) Find out who manages the website and ask them to remove this exercise.

This hypothetical situation and question are partly patterned on a poser anyone playing any of the games at Digital Passport is likely to have faced. With questions like the afore-mentioned one, this game teaches participants to be an 'upstander' in the context of dispensing one's duties as a digital citizen. With more and more children using smartphones and other digital devices to chat, text and play, digital citizenship skills are imperative. By informal definition, a digital citizen is one who is ethical, has control over the time spent on the Internet and stays safe online while helping others to stay safe and secure. With summer holidays round the corner, do look out for camps conducting digital citizenship programmes. Or, check out some online platforms that teach children to be internet-safe. Privacy Playground, NetSmartzKids and Common Sense Digital Passport are a few amongst many that through games and activities, educate children to be mindful users. Fighting gadget addiction, understanding web safety including cyber bullying, many say, needs an institutional push.

Last year, Google launched its digital citizenship initiative, where it partnered with National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) to teach lessons under four themes – being smart, being safe, being a digital citizen and being future-ready. Bethany High School in Bengaluru’s Koramangala area has a policy to restrict screen and gadget time at school as well as at home. The first Monday of every month is observed as 'Digital Detox Day'. Wi-Fi on the campus is turned off. Teachers, the school management and parents are asked to keep their phones switched off. Reminders are sent to the school community through children and SMses.

Delhi Public School (North) has a module on cyber safety in the curriculum. Through its Cyber Peace Clubs set up in various schools across India, Cyber Peace Foundation, an organisation working towards cyber security, has been nurturing digital warriors.

Taking tech help

Tejaswini Uthappa, a parent, runs a campaign #timeoutfromplugins on Facebook to warn people of the dangers of excessive use of technology. Every Saturday, between 7 pm and 9 pm, the campaign asks people to plug out of all digital devices and plug into real life.

Dr Manoj Kumar Sharma, who runs the SHUT Clinic, an acronym for Service for Healthy Use of Technology, located at the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS) in Bengaluru, says technology-based addiction for children and adults is a growing cause for concern. “Your phone is not vibrating, but you have a tendency to keep looking at it. We call it the ‘Phantom Vibration Syndrome’ where checking the phone becomes a compulsion,” says Sharma, professor of clinical psychology. Apart from reaching out to NOTEWORTHY SPACES WEBITES: Common Sense Digital Passport, Privacy Playground and NetSmartzKids FACEBOOK: #timeoutfromplugins

schools and colleges, NIMHANS has been training professionals to take digital citizenship lessons to their community.

Sharma says these interventions should be scientific. But, isn’t it an irony that we use technology to wean people off it? Sharma says there is nothing wrong in it, as far as the antidote is administered in the right dose. “As a majority of us are using online platforms, the same medium can be used for enhancing cyber literacy as well to maximise the reach,” he says.

“We haven’t done any survey to see how many people comply with it, but I am sure we are ringing in the message that children must cut down on gadget time, by sending constant reminders and involving parents too,” says Robert Khin, principal, Bethany Institutions. The school also rewards children who stay unplugged on Digital Detox Day.

“Every six months, we honour such children with gift hampers, such as board games and books. It is usually parents who nominate their wards,” adds Khin. “Nobody likes to be told what to do, so we ask communities to come up with their own ideas to fight digital addiction,” says Tejaswini.

A vow to the web

Digital citizenships are the new e-pledges for the next gen