

A GUIDE FOR SCHOOLS

Waking Up to the Modern Era of Online Safety

bark 

Introduction

The past 10 years in education have seen an extraordinary rise in complexity thanks to the advent of social media, AI and the era of the smart phone.

Adolescents adopt new technologies and applications faster than the parents, educators and communities around them can keep up. As the negative impact of social media, screen time, and overall digital footprints became clearer, many leaders have tried to enact change to protect these students online. The [U.S. surgeon general](#) recently issued an advisory on youth mental health and social media, and [10 states](#) have passed laws requiring parental consent for social media use, with many more laws being proposed each day, including the [Kids Off Social Media Act](#) at the federal level.

But guess what? [New data](#) from Bark shows these efforts are not making the desired impact. In fact, more and more teens and tweens are experiencing negative impacts to their mental health due to online activity, unsafe scenarios from online predators, and online social situations that bleed into concerning behavior at school. The time is now to stop being reactive as new threats emerge. Communities

need to come together to proactively prepare young people for what they'll continue to face in a postsecondary world — a world with rapid tech adoption and evolution like previous generations haven't experienced.

This paper will focus on **four areas where schools and districts can fill a crucial need** that fits the role they play in students' lives today: education, skill development, and closing the resource gap for those students without guardians to help or protect them. With these actions, younger generations can learn how to build a healthy relationship with technology and recognize dangerous scenarios online.

Change will require continued coordinated efforts in our communities, across the public and private sectors. But by taking a proactive stance, schools can help reduce cyberbullying, support student mental health, prepare students for the evolving digital landscape and protect the most vulnerable youth.

In [Bark's 2024 Annual Report on Children and Technology](#), the percentages of children experiencing serious online threats — everything from grooming by online predators to explicit photos in text messages — rose in nearly every category, revealing just how overwhelmed kids are with potentially damaging content every single day.

The issue:

Lack of direction for schools in the changing digital environment as online safety continues to rise as a key issue

Most schools have put in place acceptable use policies and semi-robust firewalls to help manage online dangers when kids are at school or on school-issued devices. Some states have even added resources for education programs focused on safely using technology, or provided additional funding for mental health resources.

However, many don't feel equipped to handle all of the different challenges facing them vis-a-vis student online safety. In addition, it's hard to know where to start with such a complex and robust issue. But, as the Bark Annual Report and multiple sources of research show, the issue requires a comprehensive response with more resources than are being allocated today.

Consider just a few negative outcomes associated with low digital literacy:

- According to a [recent study](#) from the Cyberbullying Research Center, the percentage of students who reported staying home from school because of cyberbullying went from 10.3% in 2016 to 19.2% in 2023. Absenteeism further impacts academic performance.
- A [study](#) showed that adolescents who spend more than 3 hours a day on social media experience poor mental health outcomes including symptoms of depression and anxiety.
- Social media platforms can be a platform for predatory behavior. In [this study](#), nearly 6 in 10 adolescent girls said they've been contacted by a stranger on a social media platform in a way that made them feel uncomfortable.
- Children and adolescents with disabilities are [more susceptible](#) to online sexual exploitation and abuse, due to factors including social isolation, lack of parental monitoring and limited risk perception.
- Many experts agree that the digital footprint left by teenagers can negatively impact future professional opportunities. According to the [Family Online Safety Institute](#), it can also increase the risk of identity theft. Finally, as eSafety warns, teenagers often share photos or other content without fully understanding the potential for violation of personal privacy.

As [this research](#) outlines, mental health professionals, educational institutions, and individuals must "take responsibility for mental health and well-being in the digital age." Schools have a critical role to play in promoting digital literacy and responsible social media use among students.

The solution:

A more proactive approach for schools

Schools perform a critical role in supporting digital well-being, namely where students learn skills to set them up for postsecondary success and disadvantaged populations are provided resources not available elsewhere. By taking a proactive approach to show students what a healthy relationship with technology can look like, schools can teach how to safely navigate the digital space and identify dangerous scenarios like threats of grooming or human trafficking.

The first step is for school districts to take an active role in **providing education and infrastructure to support digital health.**

This could include formal trainings for students, like those offered by the Organization for Social Media Safety, as well as educational opportunities for staff.

“It is most effective for the programming to be designed and implemented by those who are uniquely well-versed in this specific field as platforms, technologies, and contexts are constantly changing. Social media safety programming must be research based and

cutting-edge, and schools and districts already assume the vast responsibility of effectively educating all children on the required curricula within a limited timeframe, with limited resources, with a varied audience of learners with different needs. Educational institutions need help to address social media related dangers,” said Dr. Sarah Krongard, vice president of programming, Organization for Social Media Safety.

Stay connected to what adolescents are facing today and share that information. Schools have access to trends and information that a parent of one child does not.

For context, [a study](#) by EE found that 62% of parents do not fully understand what a digital footprint is and the increased risk of children creating content and posting online without fully comprehending the consequences.

Schools can help facilitate the education of parents and families about digital dangers through

community tech nights. “Tech nights enable parents, administrators, faculty, and staff to learn about, discuss — and address — the real issues facing children online,” said Titania Jordan, chief marketing officer at Bark Technologies.

Take action to **identify gaps or differences among student populations** in your district, ensuring all students have access to resources to support their journey in building a healthy relationship with technology.

[Data](#) from SchoolHouse Connections shows a 17.5 point difference in national high school graduation rates in 2022-2023 for homeless students compared to all students. Supplying unaccompanied youth with phones provides invaluable location services and administrators with a reliable number to reach them when needed.

Providing safer phones or digital devices to vulnerable student populations allows them to stay more connected to their academics, feel connected to their community, access safe ride shares and learn key skills to set them up for postsecondary success. Without access to a safer device, foster

youth and other vulnerable populations who have a higher risk of danger online are left unprepared and without protection.

For others, safer digital devices can provide an opportunity to teach critical skills. Counselors can use real examples and scenarios facing adolescents online to support students with special needs in transition planning. Adolescents with disabilities, already identified as a group more susceptible to danger due to low risk perception, can receive education around the risks of social media. Teaching digital literacy can mean increased confidence in their safety while allowing a sense of normalcy and connection to peers.

Finally, recognizing that **digital health and mental health are related** is essential for supporting students today.

A report from the Department of Health and Human services [stressed](#) the importance of providing strategies that address both online safety and mental health support to truly reduce risk of negative outcomes associated with social media.

In New York, the Governor has focused on mental health in addition to social media-specific legislation — a significant step in acknowledging that mental health is significantly impacted by digital health and online activity.





The state [made available \\$20 million in 2024](#) for more school-based mental health clinics, funding 71 new clinic satellites since that announcement, many in high need districts. More than 1,100 now exist statewide.

The outcome:

A safer, more supportive digital environment

This list isn't comprehensive, and new threats are constantly arising, becoming more difficult to detect with AI and caused by large digital footprints left by teenagers on social media.

But by taking a proactive stance, schools can help:

-  Reduce cyberbullying and navigate online risks
-  Support student mental health
-  Prepare students for the evolving digital landscape
-  Protect the most vulnerable youth

Technology has its advantages — the same report referenced above from the HHS showed the positive side of social media, like increased feelings of acceptance and the availability of a group to help them through tough times. EdWeek reported in the same [article](#) the danger of social media for students with disabilities — who are 1.8x more likely to be victims of social media related cyberbullying — and the positive benefits it provides for those same kids who find support in those same platforms.

Removing digital access entirely is not the answer, but we do need to create a safer, more supportive digital environment to equip these audiences with the skills and resources to stay safe online.

At Bark, we've been working with schools and parents to help protect tweens and teens over the last eight years by providing content monitoring and smartphones with advanced parental controls and social media monitoring with alerts for parents. We're passionate about online safety for students, and are concerned about the negative trends shown in the recent annual report.

Now is the time to rethink digital safety strategies in education — addressing all aspects (social media, digital footprints, online threats) and acknowledging that technology will always be two steps ahead. Let's prepare our students for their future, providing resources to navigate whatever is to come.

About Bark



Bark is an online safety company that helps protect over 7 million kids at home and in more than 3,600 schools and districts across the U.S. Offering content monitoring, screen time management, location tracking, and more, Bark is the leading digital safety solution for parents, families, and schools. Products include the Bark app, the Bark Phone, the in-home web filter Bark Home, and the community give-back program Bark for Schools.

Using highly sophisticated artificial intelligence, Bark's award-winning monitoring technology alerts an identified trusted individual to concerning behaviors in a variety of categories,

including bullying, suicidal ideation, threats of violence, sexual content, and online predation. Bark monitors many popular social media platforms and apps, as well as text messages, images, videos, chats, emails, and files.

Recognized as one of [TIME's Best Inventions of 2023](#), [Editor's Choice for Best Kids' Phone by PCMag](#), and the [Best Overall Kid's Phone by the Kid Safety Awards](#), Bark is a trusted partner for parents and schools in the effort to help keep kids safe online today, while equipping all parties with the tools to be prepared as new threats arise.

Learn more by [connecting with a Bark team member](#) today.

About the Organization for Social Media Safety

The [Organization for Social Media Safety](https://www.socialmediasafety.org) is a national 501(c)(3) nonprofit dedicated to making social media safe for everyone through education, advocacy, and technology development.

Young people, caregivers, and educators require comprehensive, evidence-based social media safety education to protect themselves and their communities from the many risks related to social media, including cyberbullying, fraud, sexual predation, and human and drug trafficking.

The Organization for Social Media Safety's K-12 educational interventions raise awareness of these threats and teach concrete, evidence-based practices to mitigate their harm. Their offerings are tailored to specific audiences, and the curricula are intentionally differentiated based on the needs of learners.

In implementing its research-based programming, using a rigorous testing protocol and ongoing formative evaluation processes, the organization continuously gathers data on our impact.

Here are some examples of specific cases where it has seen measurable harm reduction:

“Since the presentation... at the end of September there have been no cyberbullying incidents at Burlington High School.”

—Teresa Giallorenzo, Burlington School District

“Having had OFSMS at our school, stopped a molestation of one of my 6th grade students.”

—Sandra Cruz, Principal Patrick Henry Middle School

The Organization for Social Media Safety also captures qualitative insights regarding how their programming changes mindsets and perspectives:

“You taught me, today, all the things my parents have been trying to tell me that I wasn't listening to.”

—Sixth grade student, Miami, FL

“I left the workshop feeling more informed and better equipped to guide my child in navigating the digital world safely.”

—Parent, Manchester, NH

Visit www.socialmediasafety.org to learn more.