Promoting Safe Online Behavior among School Students

Literature Review and Extraction of Tacit Knowledge from School-Based Programs

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Abstract

Background

The use of social media has been growing steadily over the past decade, particularly among children and youth. Social networks and smartphone apps are platforms for users to create online identities, to communicate, and to build a network of social contacts. The internet, as an additional "living space," has its own unique characteristics that can increase risks for children and adolescents and expose them to bullying, violence and abuse. On the other hand, the web provides opportunities for personal development and learning, and provides information and help. In Israel, as in other countries throughout the world, numerous programs are being implemented to prevent cyberbullying among children and adolescents and to teach and encourage safe online behavior.

The Psychological and Counseling Services (PSC) at the Ministry of Education commissioned the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute (MJB) to conduct a review of the international literature to identify best school-based practices to teach and encourage safe online behavior as well as to extract tacit knowledge from school programs that promote safe online behavior in Israel.

Study Goals

To identify factors that contribute to the success of school-based programs to promote safe online behavior and to recommend policy and program development.

Study Methods

1. International literature review of papers published in peer-reviewed journals as well as materials published on websites over the past decade, with an emphasis on evaluation studies that examined the relative effectiveness of different programs and practices.
2. Extracting tacit knowledge: Learning from the field about success factors for promoting safe online behavior. To this end, we conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with 28 professionals involved in five different school-based programs in Israel that promote safe online behavior and are considered effective.

Findings

Findings from the Literature Review

The literature focuses on three key risk areas in internet use: exposure to bullying, overuse of the internet, and exposure to abusive websites or content. The literature also notes the advantages of the internet such as developing computer literacy, social engagement, and forming identity and relationships.

Intervention programs for safe online behavior include training programs for teachers, parents and students that are aimed at preventing abuse and addressing abusive incidents on the internet, as well as raising students' awareness of the issue and developing personal responsibility. The literature indicates the need for supervision and monitoring of abusive incidents during implementation of the program, for measurement and improvement. The literature also highlights difficulties in implementing the programs: The scarcity of reports of online violence make it hard to identify and address abusive incidents. In addition, it is necessary to reduce the digital gap between adolescents and professionals and to mobilize parental involvement. There is evidently a lack of programs to care for victims, deal with cybercriminals and prevent recidivism, and to consolidate policy and legislation.

Findings from the Process of Extracting Tacit Knowledge

We identified basic principles for successful programs. These include instilling basic values of "mutual responsibility" by fostering student peer leadership. Involving committed students in leading the programs also increases their effectiveness through their influence on their peers.

For the programs to be successfully implemented in schools, it is vitally important to mobilize the support of the school principal and teaching staff, and the school counselor, as well as to establish municipal coordination to support the program. Furthermore, steps must be taken to introduce the program into the school curriculum in cooperation with the extracurricular activity system. In order to consolidate the program's contents and activity, a "ready to go" kit should be prepared, while allowing for the program to be tailored to the needs of each school and the different age groups and keeping it relevant by updating the material, and involving all concerned – teachers, parents and students. Despite the principles noted to ensure successful programs, difficulties were found. The school staff's heavy workload makes it difficult to designate time for the activities and for mobilizing and training staff. Another difficulty is maintaining discipline in the classroom when students are running the activity. Additional challenges noted in the interviews were negative parental behavior online and students' resistance to staff and peer involvement in how they conduct themselves online.

Conclusion and Programmatic Directions

The study presents recommendations that emerged from the process of extracting tacit knowledge and from the literature review about elements found to be important to the success of programs to promote safe online behavior and prevent cyberbullying. The main elements are: Preparing all-inclusive programs; using a common language for programs at the national level, while allowing schools flexibility to add and update content due to frequent changes in social media; developing leadership among the adolescents; paying attention to the entire school community; building a good school climate; pooling resources and collecting and monitoring data to evaluate the programs.