

Digital safeguarding resource for children – Dot Com Digital

Police use of a free digital resource to help children and schools navigate safeguarding risks.

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Key details

Stage of practice	Untested
Purpose	Prevention
Topic	Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) Community engagement Cybercrime
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Region	Eastern
Partners	Police Business and commerce Education Private sector
Stage of implementation	The practice is implemented.
Start date	January 2020

Key details

Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Children and young people

Aim

The digital safeguarding resource used by Essex Police has several aims relating to online grooming, radicalisation, exploitation and bullying. These are:

- to prevent children becoming victims
- to provide children with the skills to recognise warning signs
- to give children the confidence to reach out to an adult for help
- to provide every child with support and access to reporting
- to break down barriers with the police through Positive Action roadshows

Intended outcome

- Increased identification of vulnerability by schools.
- Earlier intervention and referrals by schools to either social care or the police.
- Increased reach to children through in-person and digital events.
- Increased trust and confidence in the police.

Description

Background

Essex were involved in the development of content for a digital education safeguarding programme. The force uses the programme as a free safeguarding resource which they encourage schools to use alongside, or in replacement of, teacher-created but police-initiated safeguarding lessons. Essex bring the online content to life through annual roadshows.

The digital education safeguarding programme used by Essex is Dot Com Digital. Dot Com Digital is a platform offering an enhanced online version of an education safeguarding programme which

started as an annual paper-based journal of police safeguarding messages. The online platform is hosted by education technology company 2Simple and was developed alongside Essex Police and the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) internet intelligence and investigations unit.

Essex run annual BT hothouse events. These events provide an ethical place for large businesses (such as BT and Microsoft) to support public safety and crime prevention initiatives. The original Dot Com programme was featured at the first BT hothouse event in 2018. Attendees discussed how the programme could be scaled up and made accessible to as many children as possible. It was decided to launch Dot Com Digital in partnership with education technology company 2Simple.

The digital programme

Dot Com Digital uses character based learning to help children develop skills to manage their own safety and wellbeing. Through stories, cartoon character Dorothy Com (or Dot Com to her friends) helps children learn about the risks they might encounter in the digital world and what to do. The platform aims to prevent children becoming victims of online grooming, radicalisation, exploitation and bullying. It seeks to give children the confidence and skills to recognise the warning signs and reach out to an adult for help.

The free version of the platform covers five themes: feeling safe, recognising personal warning signs, grooming, county lines, violence against women and girls (VAWG) and consent, hate crime, drugs (cannabis edibles) and knife crime. The themes are selected in consultation with both children (through working groups with Year Six children) and the police, and can be updated depending on current issues. The characters on the platform express their feelings and encourage children to do the same.

Schools can also enable a 'Dot Com Minute' feature where children can click a button to discuss their fears or worries with their teacher, without anyone else in their class knowing they have asked for help. Teachers can keep a record on the platform of their conversations with children, enabling schools to keep an audit of safeguarding issues.

The crime prevention parts of Dot Com Digital are free to all schools nationally. There is also the option for schools to procure enhanced versions of the product which meet the personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) and relationships and sex education (RSE) curriculums. The full option costs schools £500 per year. Police forces can also purchase licences for the

enhanced version at a reduced price. However, it is the free resource that Essex promote to their schools and use as a preventive measure. It is entirely up to the schools if they wish to purchase the enhanced product.

The role of Essex Police

A team led by the head of digital at Essex supported the development of Dot Com Digital content. Officers highlighted the key topics that lesson plans should cover based on the current threats and harms to children. Essex also supplied factual information on the crimes to support teacher guidance. The force reviewed and approved all the lessons and content.

Dot Com Digital is also used to support an annual Positive Action roadshow led by Essex. This roadshow involves five days of events. The five days include two days of virtual content for primary schools and two days of virtual content for secondary schools. The fifth day is an in-person event which provides the opportunity for the police to network with pupils, aiming to break down barriers between young people and the police. The themes covered by the roadshow bring to life the topics and issues covered by Dot Com Digital.

In terms of the resources required to be involved in Dot Com Digital, police time and staffing is considered fairly minimal with the sustainability of the programme managed through school delivery. Other resource requirements, such as running the annual roadshows, are considered to be part of ongoing community engagement work. Planning for the roadshows starts with a kick-off meeting in January and these develop into weekly calls by March ahead of the roadshow launch around Easter. In Essex, Dot Com Digital and the linked roadshows are supported by:

- a senior officer at chief superintendent rank – this officer acts as the main point of contact for Dot Com Digital and arranges for police resource to be available when required (for example, at the roadshows)
- a member of the force positive action team
- a police sergeant
- a police constable – this officer helps organise the roadshows, such as being responsible for logistics and communicating with schools

Since the inception of the original Dot Com programme, funding has been awarded from various sources including the Metropolitan Police Service and the Home Office.

Overall impact

- Currently 400 schools in Essex are signed up to Dot Com Digital, with over 1000 signed up nationally.
- One of the early pilot schools saw identification of vulnerability (pupil disclosures) increase by 20%. A further pilot school won a mental health award for the use of Dot Com Digital during COVID.
- The Dot Com Digital Roadshow in 2023 reached over 3,000 children with in person and digital events.
- The introduction of Dot Com Digital was referenced in the June 2019 version of the Department for Education's 'Keeping Children Safe in Education'.

Learning

Essex Police emphasise that investment is needed from the police as well as the digital safeguarding provider to effectively engage schools. Community partnerships are also needed to help promote the linked roadshows. Essex have the support of partners such as the local authority. The force has also found headteachers to be particularly effective community champions.

Essex have found that schools have increased their use of technology to run lessons since the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, the concept of Dot Com Digital has been able to land effectively in schools. The force has found that schools appreciate having a product to support PSHE lessons without having to create the content themselves.

In terms of promoting digital safeguarding resources, Essex recommend using both school professional networks (such as head teachers associations) and also individually approaching schools. A police constable did this in Essex Police when Dot Com Digital and the roadshows first launched.

If other forces are looking to run roadshow events to support online safeguarding messages, Essex recommend ensuring that special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) schools are invited. The force has found that the inclusion of SEND schools at roadshows and with Dot Com Digital can help break down barriers between young people with SEND and the police.

Whatever digital safeguarding resource organisations use, these should be easy to sign up to and have an extensive range of free resources. In Dot Com Digital, the 'Dot Com Minute' feature is part

of the extended package. However, this decision was made as a safeguarding mechanism, ensuring only vetted teachers have access to this tool.

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