

Safety in Cyberspace

New courses teaching children to be vigilant in the world of cyberspace, were well received by the children in an elementary school in the East of Iceland. The project manager for "Heimili og skóli" [Homes and Schools] says that there has been a great need for such material and the creation of the courses were very welcome.

Embla the cyber dog is a project coordinated by Heimili og skóli – a country wide organization acting as a bridge between teachers, parents and children on a wide range of safety education matters, and SAFT, a European initiative focused on building awareness of technology. The courses can be delivered by both teachers and adults and are designed for all age groups of school children. The courses were launched on the International Safer Internet Day, February 11 this year.

Two courses, for 5-6 year olds and 7-9 year olds, have already been launched and four more courses will follow shortly for children all the way up to secondary school [16-20].

Material for the youngest was missing

The thought behind the project is to instil the children with a certain amount of vigilance in dealing with cyberspace, using metaphors from road safety – a familiar theme for them. "You don't run across the street without stopping and thinking, which also applies to cyberspace. If something happens in cyberspace and the children don't know what to do, they should stop, think and then ask someone they trust for advice and finally when they know that it is safe to proceed," says Björn Rúnar Egilsson, project manager for Heimili and skóli and SAFT. "Courses and teaching materials for the youngest children have been missing and as well a sort of a tool kit for how we approach the internet with that age group. We are not going to tell them horror stories about cyberspace but teaching them to be careful. We therefore got a grant from "Þróunarsjóður námsmanna" [The Development Fund of Teaching Materials – a body under the Ministry of Education].

Not making things too complicated

The courses have already been run in Nesskóli in Neskaupsstaður [elementary in the East of Iceland] and were very well received. "It went fantastically, the kids were singing along with Embla's song and we heard afterwards that the kids were talking about it a lot at home – of Embla's adventures and how they needed to be careful in cyberspace. The metaphor really hit home with the kids. We decided not to introduce the children to a new set of rules but rather to use metaphors to road safety. But it was really pleasing how well the courses were received by the children," says Björn Rúnar. "We have only launched the courses in this one school and now it's up to the schools to book us."

Using road safety rule sets

Embla the Cyber Dog is the brainchild of Chris Jagger, based on his pet dog Embla. "The idea was born when I was thinking about how you teach a five year old about cyber security. I was sitting there staring at my dog, who loves children and children love her, and then it occurred to me that she could be the main character of the project. Children find pets very exciting and they also find road rules exciting and that is something that is instilled in the children from the start, to be careful around roads," says Chris who owns a company specialising in educational materials for children.

“In the courses the kids take a walk with Embla through Cyber Town, which is based on Reykjavik. When the kids and Embla come across a busy road they need to stop, think and ask an adult for help before proceeding, just like they do in traffic in real life.”

The cleverest dog

Chris says that the goal of the courses is teaching the children vigilance in cyberspace. Until the age of 10-11 we do not teach the kids detailed aspects of certain types of risks or threats in cyberspace. We should rather teach them to be on guard and be alert of dangers in the world of cyberspace. “When they get a little older, at an age where they have their own computer, smartphone or pad etc. we can start teaching them about certain dangers. But first we need to teach them vigilance and to do so positively.”

Embla was born in Iceland and is three years old. She is a mix of an Icelandic sheep dog and a border collie. “I have had many dogs over the years and used to work for a time with the police. I have therefore worked with lots of police dogs and can safely say that Embla is the smartest dog I have ever met. She has lived in several countries and has travelled the world with me but she is now back home,” says Chris.

Picture one:

Chris and Embla are great friends and Chris claims that Embla is the smartest dog he has ever met

Picture two:

Embla the dog is the star in the new courses about cyber security for kids