

## Are kids better than adults at teaching digital citizenship?

By Nicole Krueger 1/22/2019



While adults can be powerful role models for kids, peers often exert even greater influence.

It's as true online as it is off. Yet many schools still teach digital citizenship using traditional methods: a lecture here, an assembly there, one more lesson plan stuffed into an already busy day — all delivered by adults.

Last year, Pedro Aparicio decided it was time to change that.

Like Nick Fury recruiting the Avengers, the teacher at Northridge School Mexico in Mexico City assembled a team of third-graders to join a digital citizenship club, in which they explored topics such as copyright law, online safety and cyber-bullying. Then, casting themselves as superheroes protecting their school against digital dangers, they started sharing what they learned with their peers — as well as parents and teachers — through speeches, classroom demonstrations and video talks.

“They truly believe they’ve got the power to do something positive to change their small worlds,” Aparicio says.

### **Students learn more when teaching others**

As teachers across the globe seek effective ways to engage students in digital citizenship, peer-to-peer learning has emerged as a potentially powerful means of harnessing students’ social influence for good. Whether they’re serving as role models for younger kids or learning collaboratively by exploring separate topics and then coming together to exchange knowledge, students gain a deeper understanding of the subject when they’re responsible for teaching it to someone else. And when kids see other kids advocating for positive online behavior, they may be more likely to take the message to heart.

“You can stand up and say stuff to students or young people over and over, parents can say it over and over, grandparents can say it over and over. But when it comes from their peers, it carries extra weight,” says Patricia Silverthorn, instructional technology coach at Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia, where eight-graders from Rachel Carson Middle School visit local elementary school students to lead discussions about digital citizenship and act out scenarios students may encounter online.

Persuading students that digital citizenship matters can be a tough for adults. Peers, on the other hand, may be better equipped to speak to the “whys” of digital citizenship as they share their own experiences and discuss real situations they’ve encountered online.

“The older kids can create a path for the younger students going forward about their digital responsibilities and help them sort out for themselves what they're going to do when they get in those inevitable situations where they're going to have to make the right choices about digital devices,” Silverthorn says.

### **Younger students want to emulate peers**

The first time Aparicio’s students presented to first- and second-graders classrooms in their school, he was curious to see how the younger kids would react.

“They were asking questions. They wanted to behave like their peers,” he says. “They think, ‘Maybe I can also be a superhero.’ ”

Not only does peer-to-peer learning help motivate younger kids to become positive digital citizens, but it gives older kids the opportunity to embody ISTE’s new Digital Citizenship standard by becoming digital agents who leverage digital media to raise awareness among their peers and influence social norms within their school community.

It can also help trigger their empathy. Once members of the Justice Little League realized just how many potential dangers lurk online, they grew concerned about the digital safety of those around them — not just to their peers but their parents, as well. They began to see themselves as protectors and champions of their school community, Aparicio says.

“If they see cyberbullying, they won’t ignore it,” he says. “I’m sure of it. They will stand up speak for others.”

### **Students get more out when they learn from peers**

While society often looks to teachers to be superheroes, sometimes passing the cape to students is the best way to make an impact. With peer-to-peer learning, all students involved get something more out of the experience than they might from an adult-driven lecture.

“In the past, I thought my duty was to wear a cape and become a hero by helping others,” Aparicio says. “But after this experience, I would say my role is to make other people superheroes — not just other teachers, but students as well.”

Nicole Krueger is a freelance writer and journalist with a passion for finding out what makes learners tick.