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It's commonly understood that children acquire many behaviours, both good and bad, by watching the adults around them. In this vein, we aim to create school environments where young people are exposed to positive and caring adult role models. Unfortunately, this emphasis on positive modeling appears to fly out the window when implementing digital citizenship programs and curricula.

Take, for instance, the idea that young people should be critical readers online. Certainly, we know that young people struggle to identify fake vs. factual news, but a **recent study** showed that they are a great deal better at it than older generations.¹ We see this deficit playing out in schools when educators continue to use inauthentic examples and outdated checklists when teaching about how to determine the truthfulness of a digital site or article. And outside of school settings, young people need only glance online to see countless examples of adults sharing fake or photoshopped images without stopping to check the source or verify the content.

Another oft-touted digital citizenship narrative is the necessity to keep one's online presence squeaky clean; this is frequently framed in alarming ways, with adults telling young people that a single digital mistake can cost them future careers or even the chance of a university education. Of course, most of those same adults who warn about the dire consequences of online errors grew up in a pre-Internet world, one in which typical teen behaviours and "missteps" were not constantly being permanently documented, shared, and even glorified online. It seems unfair to hold today's youth to standards that most of us (if we are being honest) could never have lived up to ourselves. Even the simplest, most basic directive to "be kind" online is problematic when adults regularly criticize, harass, and even threaten each other on social media and in the comments section of articles.

If there is any hope of helping young people to become positive digital citizens, we will first need to step up and model the behaviours we want to see. Our current practices are often hypocritical, and at worst downright counterproductive. As educators, parents, and adults generally, we must begin to practice what we preach and to follow our own instructions to be wise, kind, and positive citizens in the (digital) world.

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MEET THE EXPERT(S)



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