

Media Literacy: 21st Century Learning

By Frank W. Baker

The media, for better or worse, deliver us the news and the gossip; they entertain, educate and inform. The media tell us what to buy, what to eat and drink, what brands are cool, what to read, who or what to listen to, and who to vote for. Unless you are media literate, you may not think twice about the powerful and influential role the media have on our lives.

The media have not always been in American classrooms. Yes, teachers teach with media, but rarely do they teach *about* the media. It's called media literacy. Most of our students are not receiving adequate media literacy instruction, mostly because their teachers have not been adequately trained—neither at the college level nor through professional development.

You might be asking: What is media literacy? My favorite definition comes from the Ontario Ministry of Education's *Media Literacy Resource Guide*:

“Media literacy is concerned with helping students develop an informed and critical understanding of the nature of mass media, the techniques used by them, and the impact

of these techniques. More specifically, it is education that aims to increase the students' understanding and enjoyment of how the media work, how they produce meaning, how they are organized, and how they construct reality. Media literacy also aims to provide students with the ability to create media products.”

The National Association of Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) also advocates six core principles through their project The Core Principles of Media Literacy Education (CPMLE):

- 1 Media Literacy Education requires active inquiry and critical thinking about the messages we receive and create.
- 2 Media Literacy Education expands the concept of literacy (i.e., reading and writing) to include all forms of media.
- 3 Media Literacy Education builds and reinforces skills for learners of all ages. Like print literacy, those skills necessitate integrated, interactive, and repeated practice.
- 4 Media Literacy Education develops informed, reflective, and engaged participants essential for a democratic society.

- 5 Media Literacy Education recognizes that media are a part of culture and function as agents of socialization.
- 6 Media Literacy Education affirms that people use their individual skills, beliefs, and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages.

The following essays represent some of the brightest minds in media literacy education. I encourage you to consider how these recommendations can enhance what you and your teachers are doing for media literacy instruction.

“The Core Principles of Media Literacy Education.” National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE). <http://namle.net/publications/core-principles>.

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Inquiring Minds Want to Know: Media Literacy Education for Young Children

By Faith Rogow

I read recently that there are now more than 200,000 available iPhone applications. That is quite impressive considering that just five years ago there was no such thing as an iPhone. Half of the top one hundred applications are targeted at preschoolers (Shuler). These tidbits underscore the challenges of keeping up with an unending array of media technology options and the need to prepare even the youngest children for life in a media rich world.

Inquiry-based media literacy is an increasingly important component of an educator's toolbox. My own concerns about definitions of media literacy have given way to a focus on establishing clear goals for media literacy education. The National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) articulates these goals:

"The purpose of media literacy education is to develop the *habits of inquiry* and *skills of expression* needed to be critical thinkers, effective communicators and active citizens in today's world."

"Library media professionals are logical coordinators for inquiry-based media literacy education efforts."

No matter what the next new gadget is, students will need to be able to analyze the content to which it provides access, reflect on the meaning of that content for themselves and others, and evaluate its utility for accomplishing their own communication tasks. The essence of inquiry-based media literacy education is asking questions. Lots of questions. All the time. About everything, but especially about media. That is what NAMLE means by "habits of inquiry."

Developing Habits of Inquiry

People who automatically ask questions as part of their daily routine are primed for higher

order thinking skills. Imagine the iconic scene of a department store Santa Claus asking a child, "What would you like for Christmas?" Children are able to provide easy answers because they know that the question is coming. In the weeks before Christmas, the anticipation of being asked what they want serves as a filter through which many Christian children see the world, evaluating nearly everything they encounter—a friend's toy, the neighbor's dog, a classmate's video game, a pop star's outfit—in terms of its desirability as a possible gift.

What if, instead of material-based questions, we offered children predictable opportunities

to respond to (and ask) analytical questions? As educators, it is not our place to use holiday gifts to motivate students, but by giving them a chance to share what they think and paying attention to what they say, we can offer the very substantial reward of making each child feel visible and appreciated.

A New Role for Library Professionals: Integrating Inquiry

Library media professionals are logical coordinators for inquiry-based media literacy education efforts. To call attention to that role, I propose a new job title. Imagine that every school had a “Chief Inquiry Officer.” The primary responsibility of the people working in the library would be to promote active inquiry in every facet of school life.

Media literacy is an expansion of traditional literacy, and books are media (yes, just like electronic or screen-based technologies, books are media). The Chief Inquiry Officer’s hunt for opportunities to integrate inquiry might begin by looking at instruction involving books and reading. When students come to storytime knowing that they will be asked, “What in the story (or in your experience) makes you think that?” they understand that they will be expected to give evidence-based answers, or in more developmentally appropriate terms, to name the specific clues they are using to form their ideas. Like the anticipation of the question from Santa, this expectation changes the way that children look and listen, drawing their attention to important details in the media document. Ask the question enough times and children will begin to ask themselves and one another.

Add Questions and Stir

In preK and the early grades, adults serve as especially important models for how and when to ask analytical questions. The creative challenge for teachers is to determine how to ask important questions in developmentally appropriate and curriculum-relevant ways.

A helpful starting place is the list of media analysis questions included in NAMLE’s Core Principles of Media Literacy Education in the U.S. Within each of the categories (authorship, purpose, economics, impact, response, content, techniques, interpretations, and context), teachers are encouraged to adapt the language of specific questions to meet their needs. For

“Resistance to (or a lack of access to) technology should never be an obstacle to media literacy education. When media literacy is about developing ‘habits of inquiry’ or ‘skills of expression,’ many substantive activities require no technology at all.”

early childhood educators this might mean rephrasing a question like, “Why was this made?” which assumes an understanding of unseen players and motives, with the more concrete, “What does this want you to do?” or “What does this want you to think?”

A teacher who uses the KWL process (what students *know*, *want* to know, and *learned*) might think of the initial step as a two-part question: “What do you know?” and “Where did you learn that?” In many cases, the answer will be traceable to a media source (e.g., knowing that mice eat cheese because that is what children have seen in *Tom & Jerry* cartoons). Follow up with, “Is that a good source of information on this topic? Why do you think so?” and you have a ready-made opportunity to help students build discernment skills.

Media Literacy without Technology

Resistance to (or a lack of access to) technology should never be an obstacle to media literacy education. When media literacy is about developing “habits of inquiry” or “skills of expression,” many substantive activities require no technology at all.

For example, a kindergarten teacher might use a video game paradigm to assess students’ recall of a lesson on healthy eating. She asks her class to imagine that they are going to create a video game. She shows them a picture of a funny looking person sitting at a table filled with different kinds of food. Based on what they have learned about nutrition, students decide what should happen when a player clicks on each food and drags it to the person’s giant mouth. They sort the items according to

which foods would earn a lot of points, a few points, or no points at all. There could even be a category for items that would be unsafe to ingest that would result in a player losing points. Using the scoring system allows a teacher to engage in a discussion with children about how scoring is linked to values. Things that score highly are valued highly. From there it is easy to help students make the connection between their activities in class and the video games they play at home.

In a world where more than half of four- to six-year-olds play video games and one in four plays several times a week or more (Kaiser Family Foundation), the ability to look at a scoring system to determine the values embedded in a game has great consequence. Media literacy provides a way to integrate skills and content so that a lesson’s benefits extend well beyond classroom walls.

Making Media

Media literacy education would be incomplete if it instilled “habits of inquiry” without also providing “skills of expression.” In today’s world, that means learning how to use common electronic communication tools. What distinguishes media literacy education from a simple “how to” approach is that it infuses production activities with opportunities to analyze and reflect.

Creating media offers concrete, hands-on learning opportunities that can include, but don’t necessarily require, the ability to read or write words. Consider, for example, a first grade teacher who is helping her students use digital cameras to document their day in preparation for an Open House presentation. Before she hands out cameras, she engages her students in

planning. She introduces the vocabulary term “documentary” and guides the students as they generate a list of all the things that would be important to include if they wanted to give people an accurate portrait of a typical day in their class. Once they have a master list, they talk about the types of pictures that would best convey the essence of each item on the list.

Without realizing it, these first graders are already learning about editorial decision making, but the teacher knows they are capable of more. As students begin to practice with their cameras, she goes through the room, asking children to describe pictures they have taken. This gives the students a chance to exercise their speaking skills. Children also provide evidence-based answers as she prompts them to explain exactly what it is that makes the picture a good representation of the class activity.

By the time the students have taken their final photos, they have made decisions about framing, angle, representation, and more. In other words, they have gained a sense of the rather complex media literacy concept that “media are constructed,” though they probably are not yet developmentally ready to start using that phrase.

Some classes might stop there, but a Chief Inquiry Officer might encourage the teacher to go one step further. Is there something that hasn't been photographed? The teacher might notice that no one has photographed the tray of seedlings in the window. She asks why they are missing. The students respond that the classmate assigned to watering the seedlings

did his job before they had a chance to take pictures. The teacher calls the class together to see if they can help solve this team's problem. Can they think of another way to document how the class works with the plants?

One student suggests that they recreate the scene, but the team rejects that idea as dishonest because it wasn't what actually happened that day. After a short discussion that includes not wanting to drown the plants by watering them again, they opt instead to show a student measuring the height of the seedlings, a task that will occur later that afternoon. They agree that this shot will show how they include the plants in their math and science lessons and is therefore better than the watering shot anyway. Before the group moves on to the next activity, the teacher congratulates the students for working through their dilemma and observes that journalists, people who report the news, have to make the same kinds of decisions as the students.

Conclusions

Because media literacy education with young children is still relatively rare, we lack a rich research base to assert its efficacy with absolute confidence. But that is beginning to change. Jeff Share's research on the SMARTArt project at the Leo Politi Elementary School in Los Angeles is chronicled in his book *Media Literacy Is Elementary: Teaching Youth to Critically Read and Create Media* (2009). Share finds that inquiry-based media literacy helps children build the capacity to act as critically autonomous thinkers.

Just as Vygotsky observed that students learn best when we push them just a bit beyond their current abilities, teachers (and Chief Inquiry Officers) can challenge students to ask ever deeper and more sophisticated questions. In that kind of atmosphere, young children can learn “habits of inquiry” and “skills of expression” as surely as they learned to wash their hands or brush their teeth.

Inquiry comes naturally to most children. When media literacy education provides an outlet for young students' voracious curiosity, children embrace it enthusiastically, because, as the old advertising slogan goes, inquiring minds *want* to know. They just need some help from their local Chief Inquiry Officer.

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Learning Tunes: Promise and Pitfalls of Pop Music in the Classroom

By David Cooper Moore

Opening the floodgates to popular music in the classroom is a daunting prospect for many teachers. The venues through which children find music have changed dramatically, with complex online information networks increasingly taking the place of more centralized sources like music videos on television and radio. Though music charts still play a major role in shaping young audiences' listening

habits, the charts themselves have become wildly unpredictable owing to the inclusion of downloading programs and streaming audio into the traditionally sales- and radio-based barometer of Billboard's pop charts (Mayfield). It is more difficult than ever to know exactly where students are hearing the music they like, which puts an impetus on educators to actively get to know individual students' tastes through

open discussion rather than merely scanning the pop charts or music on television.

Music is also an integral part of the everyday media experiences of children and adolescents. In the 2009 Kaiser Family Foundation survey of media use among children and teenagers, research found that overall reports of music-listening are up nearly an hour a day from



the previous two studies in 2004 and 1999 (Rideout, Foehr, and Roberts). Even that figure does not include probable multitasking; many students listen to music while playing videogames or using other forms of media. Beyond its seemingly increased prominence, music is a crucial aspect of identity formation. Musical taste is both unifying and divisive, clustering a given classroom by gender, status, and maturity level.

Popular music can be a rich and engaging teaching tool. Children often intuitively gain complex layers of experiential meaning more readily from music than other forms of plot-driven media where their narrow focus on literal interpretation and plot recitation can bring thoughtful conversation to a halt. Though the academic applicability of intuitive understanding should not be overestimated (a *sense* of meaning does not necessarily translate to an ability to *express* these meanings), we found that pop music was the only entertainment media we used in the classroom in which having students identify a plot rather than an abstract idea, tone, or feeling was actually a *problem*. Instead, students immediately wanted to talk about what we

thought were key media literacy topic areas that were harder to engage in activities involving television or film—audiences, themes, motifs, and participatory social contexts. It was only through training and discussion that students developed the vocabulary to articulate and verbalize these ideas, but the potential for abstract thinking was obvious.

Music puts us in a position of interpretation and analysis automatically, and each interpretation of a song may be quite different according to point of view, experience, and visceral impact. Understanding how different audiences interpret media differently is a widely recognized core concept in media literacy education (NAMLE), and acknowledgement of diverse audience tastes is immediately apparent in any general discussion of a pop song in the classroom. Children quickly judge themselves and imagined “other” fans in heated debate. I personally found that the risks associated with using popular culture as a text for media analysis are outweighed by rewards in students’ personal investment, and the willingness with which they can begin, with teacher guidance, to think abstractly about representation, identity, target audience, and how interpretation can be

dependent on social position and point of view. With careful lesson scaffolding and instructor direction, popular music can be a valuable tool for media literacy learning precisely because of the strong feelings, reactions, opinions, and ideas it often elicits in listeners of all ages.

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Exploring MEdia & MEaning in Middle School

By David M. Considine

In a commencement address in Virginia last year, President Obama confronted the class of 2010 with the challenges presented by the modern media landscape that surrounds them. “You’re coming of age in a 24/7 media environment that bombards us with all kinds of content and exposes us to all kinds of arguments, some of which don’t always rank that high on the truth meter . . . information becomes a distraction, a diversion, a form of entertainment, rather than a tool of empowerment . . . We can’t stop these changes, but we can channel them, we can shape them, we can adapt to them. And education is what can allow us to do so.”

A report for the British Library concluded that despite access to information provided

by contemporary technology, there had been no increase in the information literacy of students (Joint Information Systems Committee). A study of nine- to seventeen-year-old girls, reported in *Health Education Research*, indicated the girls experienced difficulty recognizing persuasive techniques, “message purpose, target audience, and subtext” (Hobbs, Broder, Pope, and Rowe 719-730). This inability left them ‘cognitively vulnerable’ to messages that are both pervasive and persuasive, particularly in the case of early adolescents and teens whose identity is still being shaped.

Major publications from the National Middle School Association, including “This We Believe” and “From Rhetoric to

Reality,” recognize that the mass media is a powerful presence in the life of our students and that the curriculum should respond to this fact. “This We Believe” argues that adolescents are socially vulnerable to “media messages which may negatively influence their ideals and values, or encourage them to compromise their beliefs” (National Middle School Association).

MEdia Inventory

One simple way library media specialists can recognize and respond to media in the lives of our students is to survey their media tastes, habits, and preferences. This simple instrument can often generate rich quantitative and qualitative data as students



reflect on and describe the type of media they are exposed to each day, their personal program and media preferences, as well as the crucial context in which they are exposed to these messages (alone in their bedroom, viewing with siblings, without or without parental supervision etc.). Among other potentially valuable outcomes of such a survey is the insight it gives us into their favorite media and genres (film, TV, music, graphic novels, magazines, video games) and the opportunity to help them further examine and expand these interests. Prestigious organizations, such as the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, believe that understanding pop culture goes hand-in-hand with understanding our students. “The world of adolescents cannot be understood without considering the profound influence of the mass media, especially television, but also movies and popular music” (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development).

FOX TV’s *Glee* for example finds a receptive adolescent audience because it is set in high school, which appeals to age-aspiring middle schoolers. It is also skillfully marketed, being programmed to follow immediately after *American Idol*, which also has teen appeal. As a genre, *Glee* borrows from familiar media conventions and narratives evident in, for example, *Fame*, *Mr. Holland’s Opus*, and *High School Musical*.

Can our students detect stereotypes in the depiction/representation of teachers and administrators? Can they find values in the television series that their parents and other adults might object to? Do they believe that it is possible for *Glee* and other shows to influence and affect audiences? Do they think the program is a credible and realistic depiction of school in general and show choir in particular? Some members of real show choirs, like the Classics at Warrensville South High School, have criticized the show for creating “a false image” and making the performance process look “too easy.” What critical criteria can your students use to evaluate their favorite programs?

This type of inquiry is consistent with national and state information literacy standards that expect students not only to access but also evaluate ideas contained in texts that are read, heard, and viewed.

Take AIME at the Frame: Movies as Mentors

One rule of thumb suggests that less is more; that our students learn more and are more actively engaged when we show short clips (not two-hour movies screened during a single session), followed by discussions and activities. Gavriel Salomon developed the notion of AIME (Amount of Invested Mental Energy), which demonstrated that students comprehend more and recall more when we preview clips prior to showing them and focus student attention on key concepts we want them to think about while they are viewing (89-103).

The following activities utilize sequences from film that run no longer than eight minutes. The questions, answers, discussion, and activities students engage in as a result of seeing these short clips, are considerably longer as they experience the process of richer reading of media texts.

Don’t SKIP the Start

The start of *My Dog Skip* provides an excellent opportunity for richer reading of movies. Our role as instructional intermediaries between pupils and program is to create attention anchors that keep them focused on key content.

At the beginning of the movie, a camera pans very slowly around a room. Turn the sound off so the students concentrate only on what they see. Their task is to make inferences about the person who lived in the room and to provide evidence for their responses from objects they see in the room. It is important that you tell them they can only answer based on what they see in the sequence, not based on prior knowledge of the novel or film.

The story is set in a small southern American town during World War II. You can build a bridge to the present by asking students to take photographs or make a video of their own bedroom. How has childhood changed? How is it still the same? What interests evident in a 1940s bedroom are present or absent in their bedrooms, and what has been added?

The next two minutes of the film provide an opportunity to develop critical listening skills, teach about film language and

techniques, and build empathy between students and characters.

The sequence begins when “Based upon a True Story” appears on the screen. At this time the sound is turned on. Before showing the clip, ask students to answer the following questions:

- Where is the story set?
- When is the story set?
- What was happening in the nation at the time?
- Who was president of the United States at the time?
- In which season is the scene set?
- What crop is referred to?
- How big is the town?
- What is life like in the town?
- What experience does the boy have with other kids in the town, and how might this be relevant to students today? (bullying)

The answers to all of these questions are provided by the narrator. It is a common device in many movies for young people. It has traditionally favored male narratives as, for example, is evident in the opening of the movies *Holes*, *The Outsiders*, *Stand by Me*, and numerous others. It is important to also find examples of stories told from female perspectives. Good examples include *Because of Winn Dixie*, *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, and *Twilight*.

Stand by Me is a good model to demonstrate ways of grabbing attention. The movie begins with the statement, “I was twelve going on thirteen the first time I saw a dead human being. It happened in the summer of 1959; a long time ago, but only if you measure it in years.” How does this grab the viewer’s attention from the start? Compare and contrast it with Stanley’s voice-over at the beginning of *Holes* or with the first words we hear from Bella at the beginning of *Twilight*.

Character Development: Reading Ray’s Relationships

Language arts standards often stress character development and the ability of students to make inferences about characters based on what they say, how they look, and how

they behave. One film for which I have successfully developed these skills is *War of the Worlds*.

This activity takes a scene that is approximately seven minutes long and commences immediately after the title of the movie fades from the screen.

Students are told that, during the film sequence, they will be introduced to Ray (Tom Cruise) and five other characters. Their task is to make inferences about Ray and his relationship with each of the characters and to provide evidence about their conclusions from what they see and hear. Once again, they cannot use prior knowledge from having seen the entire film. The activity works well when a graphic organizer is used with blank bubbles for Ray and the five other characters. Students can make notes about each character inside the bubbles.

After the students have had time to complete their notes about Ray and the other

characters, discuss their conclusions focusing on the evidence they give. Typically there will be some differences in the way they think about each character. The process is not focused on right answers but on richer reading and students' ability to document their inferences by what they saw and heard.

Experiment with some of these techniques in your own classroom and media center, and you'll soon discover media literacy opens eyes, hearts, and minds. Could we wish for any more as we seek to reach and teach our students?

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Hand in Hand: Media Literacy and Internet Safety

By Frank Gallagher

Internet safety cannot be effectively taught without also teaching media literacy. The two go hand in hand, and both are necessary, but neither is sufficient. To understand why, we must first appreciate what the real risks to children are. Many of the early Internet safety programs were based on a fear of predators. Predators turned out to be a far less prevalent danger than was originally thought.

The Federal Trade Commission and other organizations group the digital dangers kids face into three broad categories: inappropriate contact, content, and conduct. Inappropriate contact is communicating with anyone whose aim is to harm. This could be a predator, a hate group or an organization that promotes dangerous behaviors, like drug use or anorexia. Contact includes not only receiving and responding to a message from someone else, but also seeking out or instigating a risky connection through which a child can cause harm to himself or others.

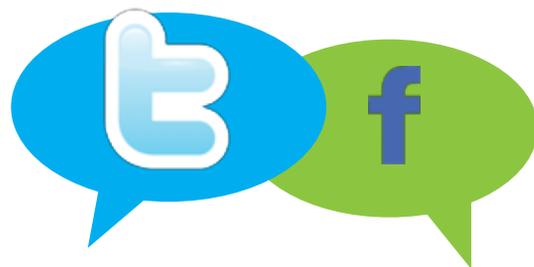
"We also do children a disservice if we don't teach them how to act in ethical and effective ways that enhance their reputation and their ability to communicate."

Inappropriate content can include pornography, hate speech, dangerous or illegal behaviors, scams, viruses, and inaccurate or misleading information, as well as making private or personal information public. Children can actively look for or inadvertently stumble across inappropriate content. They can also create it.

Inappropriate conduct includes sexting, cyberbullying, plagiarism, hacking, spreading false or malicious information, posting embarrassing or potentially harmful content

about oneself or another, as well as other dangerous and unethical actions. Any of these actions can be dangerous. Some are illegal, and all can affect a child's digital reputation.

In each of these instances, we can tell kids what not to do, but then we wind up creating a long laundry list of prohibitions. To me, that's been a big problem with many Internet safety programs. They wind up being a series of unrelated modules addressing different risks. We need a more holistic approach.



We also do children a disservice if we don't teach them how to act in ethical and effective ways that enhance their reputation and their ability to communicate. Even if we block, filter, and restrict access in school, the vast majority of kids are using computers, smart phones, game consoles, and other devices to connect with others outside of schools, and they will need to use digital tools in the workplace and communities they'll inhabit when they graduate. Organizations such as the Partnership for 21st Century Skills recognize that, to be fully prepared for social, civic, and economic life, children need to know how to use digital tools to communicate safely, ethically, efficiently, and effectively.

We cannot do this without media literacy, without teaching the skills to "access, analyze, evaluate, create, and participate in" (Jolls 42) the media messages of the Internet, television, print, and other platforms. How do we do that in a K-12 classroom or library? A recent report to Congress by the Online Safety and Technology Working Group recommended promoting digital citizenship and digital media literacy as a national priority (Collier and Nigam 6). At *Cable in the Classroom*, we've been working with educators, Internet safety experts, and the companies that provide Internet service and digital content on digital citizenship, a concept that includes Internet safety and security, media and information literacies, ethical behaviors, and effective engagement in digital communities.

I've visited schools in the United States and Canada where digital citizenship is part of the culture of the school and the district. Media literacy, Internet safety, and digital ethics are everyone's responsibility and are taught across the curriculum. Children are taught, from the earliest grades, about safe and responsible behavior. There are lessons on fire safety, Internet safety, playground bullying, and cyberbullying. Students learn how to search for and identify reliable

sources of information in the library and on the Internet. Classes talk about behavioral expectations within the classroom and school community as well as in email exchanges, blogs, social networks, and other digital spaces. Students examine the photographs in textbooks and Web sites, determining what information and feelings are being conveyed. Children are asked to consider how different people might interpret a blog post or SchoolTube video.

If children are to identify, avoid, and protect themselves from inappropriate contact, content, and conduct, filters aren't enough. They need media literacy skills. If children are to act responsibly, refrain from engaging in inappropriate behaviors, and be good digital citizens, rules and prohibitions aren't enough. They need media literacy skills. 🌈

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Recommended Web Resources:

Cable in the Classroom: www.ciconline.org
Features a comprehensive section on digital citizenship, including a searchable database of resources.

Common Sense Media: <http://www.common SenseMedia.org/educators>
Internet safety, media literacy, and digital citizenship programs for parents and teachers.

Connect Safely: www.connectsafely.org
Anne Collier and Larry Magid offer clear and thoughtful tips, blog posts, and up to the minute insights into Internet safety issues.

The Internet Keep Safe Coalition: www.ikeepsafe.org
This site was originally created for young children but has expanded. It includes video tutorials, expert interviews, and the C3 Digital Citizenship Matrix (<http://knowwheretheygo.org/c3matrix>) for teaching cybersafety, cybersecurity, and cyberethics.

The Media Literacy Clearinghouse: www.frankwbaker.com
Run by award-winning media literacy expert Frank Baker, the Clearinghouse is one of the best and most comprehensive places to find media curricula, background information, and up-to-the-minute news about media literacy.

The National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE): www.namle.net
NAMLE is a professional organization for those interested in media literacy education.

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