



# Digital Citizenship Includes Rights and well as Responsibilities

By Larry Magid

*(this article was originally posted in November, 2011 but updated in May, 2013)*

A lot of people have been talking about “digital citizenship” lately and, of course, I agree that being a good digital citizen includes respecting others and oneself. Clearly that means being nice to people online (and off) and being careful about your own online reputation.

For example, just about any adult in authority will tell kids that they should avoid posting potentially embarrassing information online and avoid plagiarism, meanness, cruelty and a host of anti-social behaviors that constitute what we call “cyberbullying.”

Some people are associating “empowerment” with digital citizenship, but empowerment is a pretty vague term. I’ve used it myself and I hear it bandied about frequently but rarely with any definition as to what it means.

Even the definition of digital citizenship is a bit vague. In a [blog post](#), my ConnectSafely.org co-director Anne Collier points out that there “still isn’t complete consensus on (the) definition” of digital citizenship, but she did advance the discussion in that post, arguing that “Young people will be safer online when they see that they can make a difference online and when their agency is acknowledged, respected, and guided by the adults in their lives.”

I agree, but I would like to propose yet another topic for the discussion as we explore what it means to be a “digital citizen.”

## **A Citizen is a Free Person**

Being a citizen is also about rights. Strike the word “digital” and we’re left with the word “citizen” which Merriam-Webster online dictionary [defines](#) as “an inhabitant of a city or town; especially : one entitled to the rights and privileges of a freeman.” Yet, when many adults start talking to kids about being good “digital citizens,” they are talking about only half the equation. We’re asking them to be responsible, but we’re not always treating them as “freemen” (and women).

## **The Rights of the Child and Freedom of Expression**

I thought about this when I was at the United Nation's Internet Governance Forum (IGF) in Vilnius, Lithuania in mid-September. Several panelists at the event talked about the need to protect children from all sorts of dangers, both real and imagined. But, in Europe and much of the world, there is also a subtext when it comes to child protection which is inextricably linked to rights or, as the U.N. puts it "the rights of the child."

Article 13 of the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (ratified by every country in the world except Somalia and the United States) states "The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include *freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds*, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice." Clearly "any other media" includes the Internet which means that, by international law, children have codified rights when it comes to what they can read and what they can say." The article does go on to say that "The exercise of this right may be subject to certain restrictions" but "these shall only be such as are provided by law and are *necessary*." And even though the U.S. hasn't ratified this convention, Americans do have First Amendment rights which, as far as I can tell, apply to everyone, including minors.

Banning children from content — especially social media where they can both express themselves and access other people's content — is not the same as keeping them away from alcohol or tobacco. Access to media is speech and, with some rare exceptions, speech should not be regulated as harmful.

Now, admittedly, parents have rights and responsibilities too, including the responsibility to protect children from danger as well as their own indiscretions. I'm not suggesting that the U.N. convention or the U.S. Constitution be interpreted to imply that parents and educators have no rights when it comes to helping determine what sites their kids should be allowed to visit or what content kids are allowed to post online. But I do think that, in engaging in these responsibilities, parents, teachers and other authorities need to be mindful of children's rights, including their right to express themselves.

Besides, giving students a bit more freedom might make them safer. A [report](#) issued by the British government's Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) found that "Pupils in the schools that had 'managed' systems had better knowledge and understanding of how to stay safe than those in schools with 'locked down' systems. Pupils were more vulnerable overall when schools used locked down systems because they were not given enough opportunities to learn how to assess and manage risk for themselves." The report called upon schools to "help pupils understand how to manage risk; to provide them with richer learning experiences; and to bridge the gap between systems at school and the more open systems outside school."

Although not always consistent in the way they implement it, Europeans have a different legal framework than Americans when it comes to children's rights. At a panel on location-based services at the IGF, John Carr of the UK Children's Charities' Coalition for Internet Safety pointed out that it is illegal in Britain to use a cell phone or other tracking device to track the location of a child without that child's permission. And that law applies to everyone, including the child's own parents.

In a follow up conversation, Carr said that that same principle could also be used to prevent a parent from using software to monitor a child's Internet use though he quickly pointed out that, in practice, it would depend on such factors as the child's age, maturity level and risk profile. "Under British law," he said, "the moment the child is born they are considered an individual when it comes to rights under our privacy laws. In principle, the older and more mature the child is, the less right the parent has to block or monitor access."

In fact, many British parents and most British schools do use blocking or and monitoring software and not all British parents are respectful of their children's' rights. But the principle remains on the books not only in the U.K. but much of the world.

### **Unintended Consequences**

There is also the issue of the unintended consequence of "safety" measures actually putting youth in danger. There are cases, for example, of young people who have been abused by a parent reaching out online for support or even emergency services. Banning these young people from social media could put them at greater risk. Likewise, there are numerous reports of youth using social media to express suicidal intentions only to be talked out of it by others in their circle. There are young people who would not be alive today if they were banned from social media.

### **The U.S. Cares More about Parents' and Schools' Rights than Children's Rights**

Although not all American adults feel this way, the United States seems to have more respect for the rights of parents, schools and authorities than it does for the rights of children. And this includes control over what children can see and where they can express themselves by limiting access to certain websites including (in the case of schools) social networking sites. And while I fully understand the inclination to protect children from inappropriate content and disclosing too much personal information, adults need to find ways to be protective without being controlling. That's a tough balance but one worth thinking about as we struggle for ways to parent and educate in the digital age while respecting the rights of young people.

So, as we go forward to discuss digital citizenship, let's remember that citizenship is a two-way street. Citizens do have responsibilities but they also have rights.