



Operation250:  
Prevention Through Education

A review of the Operation250 educational program  
and the lessons learned over the previous three  
years.

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This report is a summary about the Operation250 educational method, the role this work plays in violence prevention, and some findings and best practices from the Operation250 work over the past number of years in the internet safety education space. This report is built to achieve two goals: (1) to learn of the importance of online safety education in prevention, and (2) for educators and community leaders to learn about best practices and strategies to best engage youth in effort of keeping them safe in the online environment.

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We developed this report for educational purposes. We encourage the sharing of this report in any form, online or physical copy.

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## Introduction

Internet safety education touches on many topics: mental health, bullying, friendship building, science and technology, digital literacy, hate speech and violence. While some of these topics may seem unrelated – they are connected by a common thread: the virtual environment. As such, the need for updated and improved internet safety education has only increased in recent years as researchers and practitioners have continued to learn more about ‘what works’ and ‘what doesn’t’.

The threat of hate and extremism online has increased in recent years. Both in online and offline spaces, the perpetration of targeted and hate-motivated violence has been on the rise<sup>1</sup>, including in Massachusetts<sup>2</sup>. As the threat of violence continues to grow, so does the exposure to and risk of being victimized by hate-based violence in the online space – where 11–14-year-olds spend an average of 9 or more hours a day<sup>3</sup>. This intersection, between the rising risk of hateful content online and the growing dependence on social media, puts critical emphasis on the way we prepare youth for online life and the preventative skills that we as educators help to build in our younger populations.

From the skills we focus on in the classroom, the way we build and format lessons, or the approach taken to a topic, there are several considerations when addressing these concerns. Over the last two decades, internet safety education has been reviewed and evaluated to better understand best practices. The following report is going to share many of those findings, in conjunction with the many lessons learned by Operation250, about how this all relates to prevention, and ultimately, what can be done to keep our youth safe.

We, Operation250, are a nonprofit educational organization located in Massachusetts that works with schools and communities to keep youth safe from threatening materials and individuals online. Ultimately, we aim to build preventative skills aimed at keeping protected from unsafe situations online, as well as better preparing and increasing the confidence of the gatekeepers in these communities when educating about these issues in the classroom. This is achieved through both the student-based and educator training programs that are delivered by the Op250 team and specifically made for each school and community it works with. This has included programming focused on everything from online risk-taking to the growth of hate-motivated content in Massachusetts. Since the 2020-2021 school year, as part of a project funded by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships, we’ve run educational programming with over 1,800 students, educators, and other community leaders in the Northeast.

This report will offer a review of how online life affects youth, and share activities and methods that have been found to be effective in ultimately preventing the spread and engagement with unsafe, violent materials online.

## Understanding the Threat

A number of online risks faced by youth have been highlighted by the U.S. Surgeon General<sup>4</sup>, including everything from mental health to the spread of misinformation or hateful content on social media. Nonetheless, the time youth are spending online is greater than ever before as virtual connectivity is becoming more and more critical to the socialization of young people in today's world.

Recent research has found that cyberbullying, one of a myriad of concerns faced by youth online, has been reported by anywhere from 15%<sup>5</sup> to over 50%<sup>6</sup> of young individuals. Further research shows that around one out of every five students are finding themselves in unwanted conversations, and the same rate for students that are receiving explicit images from others<sup>7</sup>. Additionally, just over 13% of youth are encountering a stranger online that wants to meet them offline. These statistics are undoubtably worrisome and have been the cause for much concern and attention over the years in classrooms and schools. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for youth to view these situations and risks as being a natural part of their online lives, as they have described online aggression and hostility being common behavior online and even become normalized to its offensiveness.

In more recent years, the risk of hate and extremism in both the online and offline environment has become a growing concern. In the online sense, 57% of youth have been exposed to hate content online over the course of a two-month timeframe, and 20.8% of young people have encountered someone trying to convince them of racist views online as well<sup>8</sup>. It is important to note that a majority of young people are being exposed to this content by accident, however just because someone encounters this content accidentally does not mean that it is riskless. In fact, frequent exposure to

### Involvement in Hate & Extremism

There is no one "pathway" or reason someone becomes involved in extremism. It is typically a collection of "push" and "pull" factors that can influence this decision. And it is important to know that just because someone might begin to sympathize or adopt extreme views does not necessarily mean that they are going to commit acts of violence.

hateful content online more than doubles the likelihood that they engage with content that advocates for violence<sup>9</sup>. Coming across hateful content online can reinforce ones' discriminatory views<sup>10</sup>; and the exposure to hate speech is a significant and negative predictor of sensitivity to hate speech (meaning those exposed become less sensitive to that content) and lower levels of sensitivity is associated with stronger out-group prejudice<sup>11</sup>.

The threat of hate and extremism is not a simple one and cannot be reduced to a couple of

simple decisions made by young individuals. Rather, it is a series of decisions made over large spans of time that can culminate in increasingly problematic thoughts and behaviors. This repeated exposure is further facilitated by hateful content being populated by a number of different sources. Youth also run the risk of coming across hateful content in the places they are spending most of their online time – traditional social media sites, video services, or gaming. However, beyond social media sites, there are also cloaked and overt hate sites as well. A cloaked hate site is a source online that deliberately disguises its hidden agenda. Overt hate sites are everything from platforms run by hate groups themselves, or by extreme ideologues that host a platform for people who subscribe to those hateful ideas to connect and share materials and ideas among one another. This makes online safety skills critical for proper development of our young digital citizens.

This is especially true given that the threats of hate content are not solely online, either. Looking just in Massachusetts, the Southern Poverty Law Center identifies 11 extremist groups in the Commonwealth, five of which are active statewide<sup>12</sup>. The FBI's hate crime report has shown that Massachusetts hate crimes have increased by 31% between 2020 to 2021<sup>13</sup>. While the Anti-Defamation League reports that Massachusetts had 643 hate incidents in 2022, while having 393 in 2021 – further signifying a growth in hate activity both online and offline<sup>14</sup>.

## **Prevention Through Education**

We then turn our attention to how we can address these issues with education – and specifically internet safety education. Taking a primary prevention approach to these risks and threats means that we need to move 'upstream' to address these issues. This does not necessarily mean that we need to input prevention programming into younger and younger students (in fact, there is some research to suggest that going too young is met with no long-term impact), but instead we need to build foundational skills, like digital literacy, communication, and risk assessment. By using internet safety education and evidence-based teaching strategies, youth can be better prepared to address harmful content online and prevent the threat and spread of hate and extremist content online.

To develop possible preventive solutions, it is also important to better understand the needs of both the educators and students as well. While the last 20-years has seen a shift in attention toward more online safety-specific approaches to violence prevention, we are still learning more about effective and ineffective practices every day.

### **Students' Needs**

It is important to first understand that overwhelmingly, youth report either a positive or neutral view toward social media in their lives<sup>15</sup>. This is important to note for discussion because it can be very easy to take a negative approach in classroom discussion; however, given the feelings and perspectives of young people about social

media, a negative approach can often make students feel there is a perceptual gap in understanding between them and educators or other adults – which can lead to falling short of certain classroom objectives.

The most important consideration is that what youth need most is skills-based online safety education. This should include everything from problem solving to coping, and digital socialization skills (such as anger management and de-escalating peer-conflict). Depending on age, there are several approaches and skills that we have seen to be most important.

<b>Elementary School</b>	<b>Middle School</b>	<b>High School</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Introduction to the concept of digital literacy.</li> <li>- Examination of the difference between the online environment and the offline one.</li> <li>- Development of communication skills.</li> <li>- Improving understanding their digital footprint and digital reputation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Building both assertive and technical coping skills to stressful situations that youth may encounter online.</li> <li>- Improving situational critical thinking skills.</li> <li>- Improving problem-solving skills.</li> <li>- Expanding youth perspective-taking to couple with improved communication skills.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Extending assertive and technical coping skills to a range of threats online.</li> <li>- Empowering youth action and confidence in online spaces.</li> <li>- Integration of peer-de-escalation skills.</li> <li>- Improving youth ability to handle online social pressures associated with online decisions.</li> </ul>

Every classroom and community are different and there will be variation in what strategies and content are needed. Research has suggested that early elementary students won't necessarily remember early prevention internet safety teachings as they progress on<sup>16</sup>, which is why we suggest taking more common skills (e.g., communication) and putting them in the context of the internet. To do this, we suggest starting with building young students' ability to identify when they should be communicating with adults or asking for help. This can include situations where they are uncomfortable online or do not understand something they've encountered. Similarly, we want to build young students' capabilities of starting conversations with their peers and trusted adults about when they need help or have questions. Lastly, late elementary school is when youths' time online becomes more autonomous, and we want to focus

on improving their understanding about the difference between the online and offline environments and the risks associated with this separation. This includes the differences between the communication in these two places, as well as starting to identify the many ways that online threats can be presented to them in different environments online (i.e., gaming vs. social media).

When the students move into upper elementary and early middle school, there is a need for the students to improve coping skills. Coping has been found to be an effective approach to address some of the underlying risks associated with hate and extremism. One of these is the exposure to and interaction with hateful content. Assertive and technical coping skills have shown to mitigate the harm that online hateful content and cyberbullying can cause to both bystanders and victims<sup>17</sup>. This is also a key time to begin engaging with youth with problem-solving capabilities. Youth have several opinions about online safety and the internet, and we should offer engaging opportunities for them to develop solutions to the problems they face.

Yet again, as the students get older, many of those same skills continue to be critical yet more complex. Coping and problem-solving should still be a vital part of your online safety education. Furthermore, however, we identify the need for additional “digital socialization” skills as well. These include the improved ability to handle social pressures online, to de-escalate potential conflicts, and skills to manage their own frustrations and anger online as well. As mentioned above, some of these skills are not dissimilar to those that have been used in efforts for offline violence prevention as well – however when put into the context of the internet they can serve for online violence prevention.

### **Educators’ Needs**

Over the years working in this space, we have learned a lot about what educators need for their classrooms, as well as learning what research suggests should be considered. Briefly, we want to blend these findings – both from an anecdotal, in-class perspective of what we have heard and seen, as well as research perspective.

Online safety education can be challenging to keep up with. It is a constant moving target and often changes year to year – whether that be the threats that are of gravest concern or the apps and trends that youth are engaging with most frequently. This leads to one of the most common “needs” we hear from educators, which is online safety education with a longer shelf life. One way of achieving this is related to the needs of the students too – which is making your curriculum entirely skills-based and limiting the need for updated “information”.



## What about things we *shouldn't* do?

It is just as important to know what *doesn't work* when it comes to online safety education as well.

One such approach is focusing heavily on the legality of certain actions or the danger of engaging in certain behaviors. This can be a part of your messaging, but we don't recommend it being a large piece.

We also suggest trying to avoid combining too many risks and threats together, especially for those not directly related. Online safety topics deserve their own time and attention. Combining unrelated concerns can cause some confusion in the classroom and ultimately affect the possible impact of your lessons.

Secondly, there is a need for this education to be largely 'student-centric' programming. What we mean by this is that the lessons and activities that we integrate into curriculums should put our youth directly at the center of the lesson plans. We should be engaging our young people so we can learn what they know and what they think. Unfortunately, youth often feel they know more about the topic and how to stay safe online than adults do. This is why we should get them more directly involved in lessons to not only lessen this perceptual gap, but also achieve a couple of other known effective approaches in this space.

The activities that you use are vitally important to the success of your lessons. Equally as important – the use of active learning. The more active learning you can integrate into your classroom, the more successful you will be in your teaching of online safety. Over

90% of known effective internet safety education programs utilize active learning over inactive learning strategies<sup>18</sup>. There are a number of ways that you can do this for your classroom that we have had success with. Below are brief outlines of a few:

### *Case Study Learning*

Using real life examples and turning them into activities is a great way of engaging students into critical thinking and building some of the key skills discussed above. Whether they are originally built to fit your needs, or a real case out of the newspaper, this is a chance for the students to be placed into situations and analyze the decisions of the victim, a bystander, or a friend to possibly seek help.

### *Role Playing*

Depending on the age of the group, this activity is a way for students to communicate directly with their peers about situations they might encounter online and need to



analyze together. One example might be of two students coming across a message with hateful language posted by their classmate on an Instagram story. What course of action should these students take? What might be a safe way of reacting and possibly confronting this person? This is another way of building some of the communication and coping skills in young people.

### *Problem-Solving*

We love to run problem-solving activities with our students and the results are always great. These work best with middle and high school students. Allow the students to identify a problem (related to online safety) they find to be affecting them and their peers and then work to develop a solution that puts them directly in the center of it. Some of the groups we've worked with have developed school events aimed at eliminating any stereotyping happening in their school; or an anonymous newsletter that is sent around to students with stories of ways they were helped in situations where they were being victimized online and why others should step up and do the same. Online safety is frequently centered around how risks are impacting youth – however this gives youth the chance to develop ways for them to impact those risks.

As we continue to seek ways to get the most out of our online safety education (and students), there are a couple of lessons we learned along the way as well. As we previously mentioned, there is a need to make your lessons student-centric and skills-based, however that does not mean that the lessons should be without information or facts. We use the data and research to inform the materials and activities that we integrate into our classrooms. For example, research shows that YouTube is a place where youth encounter hateful messages more frequently than other places online<sup>19</sup>. Therefore, we built examples and activities that include YouTube being the platform these risks are presented. This might sound obvious and not groundbreaking, however, we saw that students generally struggled to apply the situation to their own lives when speaking about risks in more theoretical terms. The more specific you can be in your teaching, the easier it will be for the students to grasp concepts.

Another factor we've learned to consider is the messenger of online safety lessons. Online safety is a sensitive subject to a lot of young people. Additionally, as we have previously mentioned, youth perceive a gap in understanding about the internet between them and those who teach it. Therefore, we work to change-up the messenger of the message from time to time. This includes inputting videos into lessons instead of

## Class time

The amount of time you spend on online safety education is one of the most important factors in effective education. We suggest running briefer lessons more frequently instead of doing longer lessons less frequently.

It is okay if lessons are only lasting 15-20 minutes in a day, and then returning to do the next step of those lessons in the following days.

We have found that lessons that take too long will lose the interest of the students and ultimately that will hurt the objectives you are seeking to achieve.

adding any sort of lecture (which we should always avoid), as well as using youth themselves as a messenger. This can be done through activities that ask the students to ‘be the expert’. This, in our experience, keeps the classroom active and many of the students become more comfortable engaging with a peer as opposed to a teacher.

## Seeking Solutions in the Classroom

With a better understanding of the problems youth face online, their offline ramifications, and some of the needs from both youth and educators’ perspectives, the final step is integrating these strategies into classrooms. This presents its own successes and challenges as well. Each classroom and community are unique, and some activities and strategies might work better with some students than others. However, the important aspect is that the tenets of these lessons – like skills building – are integrated throughout the curriculum you choose. Below we outline some of the most successful activities we have used in classrooms, all part of lessons that have yielded positive feedback and aimed at keeping young people safe online from threats related to forms of online violence, online hate, and extremism.

### Opening Lessons

When opening lessons, we frequently use this time to seek answers to the questions *what do they know* and *what do they think?* Whether this is elementary school or high school, seeking answers to these questions can both inform this lesson as well as future programming as well. Example of this programming includes:

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#### *Invisibility Cloak – Elementary School*

Online disinhibition is a core part of the Operation250 educational program. The loosened up and less restrained feeling can lead youth to take more chances and risks when online. Conceptualizing this to elementary students can be a challenge, however that doesn’t mean we should ignore approaching it with this age. Two versions of this activity include, (1) a Harry Potter video of him sneaking around in an invisibility cloak, and/or (2) giving students old 3D glasses and telling them they’re invisible when wearing them. While different approaches, it considers a few different key aspects of effective online safety education – including active learning and changing the messenger. The Harry Potter video is challenging the students to reflect on where they can feel like Harry does when nobody can see or hear him. Similarly, the 3D glasses activity is a chance for the students to explore what they’re comfortable doing when invisible, and identifying as a group that this feeling can lead to unsafe situations.

Our experience doing these activities is that the students will not make the connection right away – and that is entirely okay. This is meant to be a fun introduction to the internet and what the psychological feeling is to being online. Each of these should only take 5-7 minutes in total.

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### Social Media Paradox – Middle School

In the introduction of lessons, we always suggest putting youth in the position to actively engage with you and their peers about relevant topics. To introduce the complexity of social media life, the class is divided in half and each half is provided one of the following headlines:

*WHITE HOUSE RAISES ALARM ON RISK OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR KIDS – Politico*

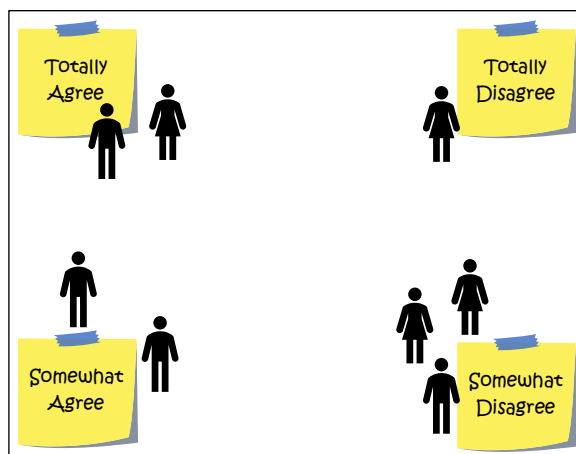
*TEENS SAY SOCIAL MEDIA IS MORE POSITIVE THAN YOU THINK: HERE'S WHY – CNN*

Once we hand out these headlines, the students formulate arguments that defend their headline. The purpose is for the students to develop arguments to these contradictory, yet equally true headlines. Running this activity kickstarts conversations with the students, informs you as an educator as to the relationship between the students and social media, and asks for the students to self-reflect and begin analyzing the positives and negatives of the internet.

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### Take a Stand – Middle & High School

This is a common activity found in classrooms, but nonetheless a great opportunity to learn about your students and garner critical conversation in the class. To kickoff the lesson, you make statements and ask the students to move around the classroom and stand where corresponds with their feelings about the statement. The four options are: *totally agree*; *somewhat agree*; *somewhat disagree*, and *totally disagree*.



By running this activity, the students are able to visualize their peers' perspectives, as well as engage in a controlled conversation about key concerns that they may be experiencing. This activity gives the educator a chance to understand where their students are coming from on these topics, and actively gets the students introduced to the topic and themes of the day.

- I see some form of hate every day...
- I think my friends and family are doing enough to stop hate and discrimination around me...
- The internet makes it easier for me to say and do things I might not do offline...

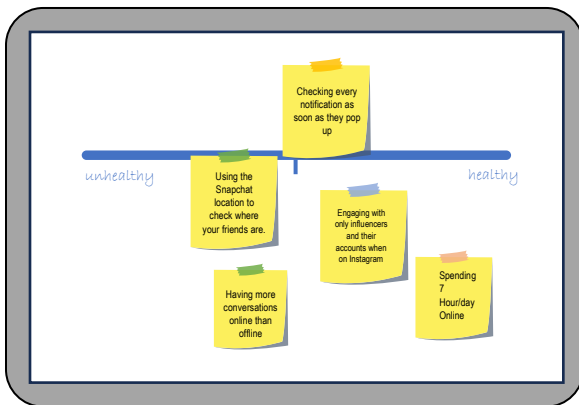
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## Skills-Building Activities

The core of the lessons we run have skills-building activities at the center of them. Each activity aims at building the skills that have been identified earlier in this report to be effective in keeping our young people safe online. Whether it is coping skills or communication skills, these activities should blend the critical skills building needed with effective classroom practices to protect youth online.

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### *Digital Health Balance – Elementary & Middle School*



A great way of engaging the students and challenging them to analyze situations (and their relationship with social media) is by presenting them with quick cases in an activity. This activity includes a scale on the whiteboard at the front of a classroom, and a list of 10+ brief online actions and behaviors each on their own sticky notes. You then go one-by-one as a class and ask students to come to the front of the room and place the action/behavior on the scale (left).

Allow the students to discuss whether they agree or disagree based upon where the situation is placed on the scale. For the situations that are deemed to be more unhealthy or unsafe, ask the group to develop a coping strategy to either alter that behavior or stop it all together. These can then be shared with the class and discussed about the pros and cons of each action to minimize the negative effects of these behaviors.

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### *Case Studies – Middle School & High School*

One of the most common activities we will use in classrooms is case studies. These are real life situations, or original situations that are informed by real cases that overview an unsafe situation unfolding online. There are a couple of ways of using this in the classroom. With middle school students, we use the 3-in-1 method for case studies – which tells the same case from three different perspectives: the victim, a bystander, and the perpetrator. Once they read through the case, the students then answer a collection of questions from different perspectives of the case. Examples in a case including encountering hateful content might include:

Victim question: After being exposed to this hateful content, what is a safe reaction that can limit future exposure to this type of situation?

Bystander question: What action can this person take to lend support to the victim of this case?

We like having students work together on these and inputting 3-5 different cases into the classroom with each group having their own case. Each worksheet/case should only be a page in length and this activity shouldn't take longer than 15-20 minutes in total.

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### *Pass the Risk – High School*

Similar to case study learning, this activity breaks the students into 4 groups. Each group is given a different one-paragraph situation that unfolds online. The group reads their scenario, discusses the risk, and then identifies one action that can prevent the consequences of this risk or react safely to a threat.

Once the students do this, they pass their risk to the next group and receive another group's risk and their identified response. The students then read the new scenario and then analyze the response that the previous group developed. Once they have done this, the students then create a pros and cons list to the response that the group before them developed, and then identify a new or altered preventative action to the scenario. This continues until all four groups have seen each scenario. Each of these are then reviewed together as a class. The intention is for the students to develop these preventive skills and critically think about the actions they might take. For the scenarios, we recommend each to address a different online concern, such as online hate, mental health online, personal expectations, and cyber cruelty. This activity can take upwards of 30 minutes and follow-ups and debriefs can happen on the following day if necessary.

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### **Closing Lessons**

Concluding lessons should aim at reinforcing the core skills focused on and getting a sense as to what the students have taken away from the lesson. The more complex or sensitive of an issue covered in the lesson should call for a longer conclusion and debrief with youth as well. Below are some examples of conclusions that we use in our lessons that we find to be successful:

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### *Exit Tickets – All Ages*

Different forms of exit tickets are great for you to get a sense of what your students thought and took away from the lesson. One method with elementary students is to document learning, such as having them write down three things they learned, two things they found interesting, and one question they still have. Another, with younger audiences, is to have each student pose one change they would make to the internet with the goal of leading to a safer environment.

### *Action Review – Middle School & High School*

As with many of the activities, adding an in-depth review to the end of the lesson is one way of reinforcing the goals. One of these is an “action review”, which we use after activities that ask the students to develop action plans to certain risks. After the students develop an “action plan”, or a plan for how they would react to a risk, ask the students to share and review the positives of those actions and the potential downfalls of that plan as well. This calls on the students to use their critical thinking and reflect on their own action plans.

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### *Digital Journal – High School*

The internet can be a challenging environment for young people to spend time on during such a formative time in their lives. As a recurring conclusion to lessons, you can ask the students to rate their days online, keep track of any online events that might have been upsetting or exciting to them, and their overall general usage. At the end of a month, you can then have the students review any trends that might have led to more negative online days and identify ways to limit those negative experiences in the future.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

Educators are uniquely positioned in communities as key actors in primary prevention efforts. With the growing concern of targeted violence and terrorism, we should be best preparing youth to stay protected from threatening materials and individuals in the online space the most we can.

Online safety education can address a number of topics and threats and can be adapted to meet the needs of the youth you interact with. With the continual growth of hate content online, the need for effective education grows. This report has sought to review those effective practices. Possibly most important is the need to be flexible in the classroom with internet safety. Due both to the constant changing that happens in the online environment, as well as the semi-unpredictability that comes with the students’ reactions to the topic, educating on this topic means we need to be reactive to whatever might arise in the classroom.

A prime focus on skills building and aiming to address these concerns before they arise should be at the forefront of our efforts. We hope that this report encourages you to implement some of these strategies in your own classroom and take the lessons we have learned over the previous three years and integrate them into your practice.

We at Operation250 are confident that prevention can be achieved through education, and we hope you are part of those efforts.

## Endnotes

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## What is Operation250?

Operation250 is a nonprofit educational organization located in Massachusetts that works with students and educators to keep youth safe from threatening materials and individuals online.

Op250 has worked with thousands of educators, students, and community leaders in New England since its formation in 2016. The organization's educational programming focuses on online safety and anti-hate with the goal of improving youths' skills at identifying risks, their own online decision-making, and problem-solving capabilities.



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