

ONLINE TOLERANCE AMONG PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN

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Abstract

The problem of online tolerance is especially relevant today, when a modern child spends a lot of time in Internet and communicates with children and persons over the age of 18 from all over the world. Unfortunately, online communication carries risks, and children are most vulnerable because they are naive and uninformed enough about it. Anonymity may be maintained in Internet, leading to impunity for acts that should be punished, which makes behaviour in the virtual space freer than it actually is in reality.

The idea of tolerance education should cover children from the earliest possible age when their views, attitudes, expectations, and rules for communicating with peers and other people are formed. It follows that online tolerance definitely must be nurtured, which is not supposed to be a form of behaviour, precisely because the Internet gives more opportunities than just limits. The study, some of the results of which will be analysed in this article, was conducted among 234 primary school students. The aim is to examine their attitude towards the lack of tolerance in Internet, the use of insults and threats on social networks, rejection of others' point of view.

The survey was conducted through a questionnaire of 20 questions that seek students' opinions in several aspects, listed below in the article, and their experience with intolerant behaviour online, which has been their action or which has made put them in position of victim.

It is wrong to think that insults and rude language are normal for today's students, who are heavily influenced by the media, the Internet, and social networks. Rather, adequate methods must be sought to respond to roughness with tolerance and positive communication. The fact is that the higher the computer literacy of students is, the more their online behaviour is targeted and with less risk of being socially unacceptable.

Keywords: Tolerance, Internet, online behaviour, primary school students, school, family and society impact, Internet culture, soft skills, emoticons.

1 INTRODUCTION

It is an indisputable fact that tolerance is a quality that is brought up, from an early age. The main pedagogical subjects that bring up tolerance are, of course, family and school. The ability to show tolerance to others develops until it becomes not only a sustainable personality trait, but also a hallmark of the society of which the individual is a part. In this sense, not only the family and the school are responsible for educating tolerance, but also the society as a whole. This is not just about the notion of tolerance in its classical definition of accepting people who are different from us. Rather, we are talking about the ability of children to be patient with the other persons, to listen to them, to tolerate their personal opinions, to try to understand them, and not to react instinctively, sharply and immediately every time when something is disliked or they don't approve it. The sooner a similar attitude towards the other begins to form, the more persistent the tolerance will be as a personal characteristic. This also addresses the topic of Internet tolerance or how a modern child reacts when he/she doesn't approve another child's behavior on the network.

Usually tolerance is associated with empathy and socio-emotional learning. Discussions on various topics at school are thought to develop students' listening to others' points of view skills. Commitment to others, the promotion of tolerance, conflict resolution skills, and the reduction of aggression in schools should be the main goals of educators, because school is the ideal environment for this. A number of educational programs can be implemented in this direction, which will influence students' behaviour and lead to high results [14, p. 8]. In fact, being tolerant is not easy, even for the adults. The lack of understanding and patience affects family, school, society. Tolerance therefore often qualifies as an educational problem. The culture of children's communication must be developed because children do not always manage to behave politely and appropriately, even knowing that they have to behave well with other people, regardless of their differences [11, p. 514]. Students at school very often are exhibiting

behaviours of disrespect and intolerance to each other. That is why the necessity of tolerance and diversity education is apparent, although a practical solution for this problem was not so easy to identify [8].

Many authors share the opinion that it is urgent to start building a culture of tolerant communication between children and this should start in pre-school age [6]. Other researchers think that the formation of personal identity starts in teen-age and this is the period that it should be developed tolerant behavior in students. This is the time, as well, when they make their circle of relationships wider and it is possible to meet more situations they have to show understanding in [12].

The benefits of information and communication technologies and digital devices are indisputable to the extent that we cannot imagine life without them anymore, especially the generations who were born after their progress. In the same time, it is absolutely unacceptable to turn a blind eye to the risks and dangers posed by the Internet, including not only organized crime, but also the health of children and other users. It is a fact that in today's information society there are many opportunities to protect children from potential dangers, but those who are affected are suffering severely. That is why it is very important to develop the digital culture of students, and family, school and society play a very important role in this aspect. Not only role but responsibility as well [5]. Digital innovation raises the question not only of children's safety, but also of their education at school – many authors make researches in this aspect. Some of them share their opinion that “technology cannot compensate for poor teaching”, but it is a good way to facilitate it [2, p. 14].

On the Internet, a child forms its digital identity. He/she should be presented with a username and avatar, should follow security rules, should not share personal information, should use complex passwords, should protect itself. This position of defence implies treating others in the network as attackers and, even more, as enemies. Such an understanding can naturally lead to intolerant and aggressive behaviour, and which is more important, hidden behind the convenience of an avatar or a digital anonymous profile. Therefore, the formation of digital culture, in particular, the upbringing of Internet tolerance, at an early age or in the first steps in the Internet space, is a huge responsibility of the school, family and society. According to the curriculum of the new school subject “Computer modeling”, included in Bulgarian primary school since 2018-2019 school year, the expected results of the key digital identity management competency in third grade are geared toward the knowledge and skills of creating a profile and being aware of the difference between physical and digital identity with all possible threats and ways to respond if someone gets in a dangerous situation in the network. In fourth grade, more emphasis is placed on the knowledge of avoiding risks, dangers, seeking help when is necessary, rules of ethics in the cyberspace and so on” [10, p.111].

Today's children use a different language for online communication that includes not only words, but emoticons as well, pictures, punctuation, symbols, abbreviations and so on, all of which makes this language more expressive, colorful, diverse. Internet language gives the opportunity very easy and rather fast to express emotions and to show the others someone's mood and personal opinion about them. Emoji or emoticon for example, “is an icon or picture that can support message's meaning and its usage is needed in interpersonal communication to strengthen the message meaning so that it can be easily understood” [1, p. 125]. This means that a word can easily be replaced by an emoticon in Internet chat, and its message will be well understood. Using emoticons is a commonly employed practice to express moods when communicating on web forums, in instant messaging and online games” [13, p. 35]. The language of Internet communication is not studied at home or at school; it is even “foreign language” for a big part of the adults.

There is no one single definition about tolerance. Different authors research different aspects of its meaning, because it is not only a personal characteristic, but it is a society's attitude as well. As per Cambridge dictionary tolerance is “willingness to accept behavior and beliefs that are different from your own, although you might not agree with or approve of them” and “the ability to deal with something unpleasant or annoying, or to continue existing despite bad or difficult conditions”¹. Another definition about tolerance is “sympathy or indulgence for beliefs or practices differing from or conflicting with one's own” and “the act of allowing something”². “Tolerance for somebody is the willingness to accept or tolerate somebody/something, especially opinions or behavior that you may not agree with, or people who are not like you”³. These definitions are pointed in order to compare students' answers with. Then it will be possible a conclusion to be made if their opinion responds to the scientific definitions. Some

¹ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/tolerance>

² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tolerance>

³ <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/tolerance>

authors search a connection between tolerance and personal characteristics as humanism, altruism, sympathy, empathy and trust which make someone to forget his/her prejudices and negative attitudes, to respect other's liberty, to avoid conflict situations based on differences between people [15]. Such a person has different opinion about dogmas and a much more humanistic outlook to the others and to the world as a whole [7]. It becomes absolutely clear that such a person will be much more tolerant in different situations. Other authors speak about tolerance as an ability for co-existence – a definition that is based on the lack of an exact equivalent of the word and supposes that tolerance is more a notion than an action and it relates especially to political, social and cultural practices [3]. Some researchers propose a definition of tolerance that “functions at the interpersonal level of our relationships and interactions with others”; the authors define tolerance “to mean respecting and considering the humanity of a person as more important than any idea or ideal we or they may hold” [16]. In addition to this definition, we must be particularly tolerant of people who have some difficulties as a result of their specific characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, nationality, which we must treat with respect, understanding and equality [17]. There is no doubt that the issue of tolerance is already stirring the whole world and everywhere it is debated what deserves to be tolerated and what is not [4].

Included definitions about tolerance are an excellent base for an indication of several aspects of the concept that will be sought in the responses of the students surveyed:

- Accepting an opinion, behavior or a person that is different from us.
- Ability to deal with something unpleasant or annoying.
- Being altruistic and humane to the others.
- Avoiding conflict situations based on differences between people.
- Showing sympathy and empathy to others' bad feelings.

2 METHODOLOGY

A number of 234 elementary school students were studied (mostly 3-4 grade). The survey was conducted through a questionnaire including 20 questions. The purpose is to examine students' opinion about online tolerance and, in general, about behavior that is permissible on the Internet. Students' opinion is examined in the following aspects:

- Do they know the meaning of the concept of "tolerance"?
- Have they been threatened or insulted on the Internet and how do they actually react in such a case?
- Did they offend or threaten anyone else on the Internet and how did they feel about it after their offence?
- Do they use emoticons to express their feelings?
- How do they express feelings and mood through the text?
- Do they really comply with the time they communicate through messages or video links with others?

In addition, the study focuses on their perspective on tolerance in general - can children provide a definition, can they give an example and how theoretical knowledge influences their real behavior.

Some of the questions, especially those that are discussed here in this article, are open, so the children have the full opportunity to express their opinion in the way they like: with words, with emoticons, with pictures and so on. This is done, because of the respondents' age and to assure space for personal point of view.

3 RESULTS

The results will be pointed in a specific order according to the responses received as a percentage. Relevant conclusions will be drawn on this basis. The analysis is made in several subsections.

3.1 Students' definition about tolerance.

The first question that will be analysed in the article is what does it mean to be tolerant and pupils are asked to give at least two examples for that. The question is open, answers are free, so every child has the opportunity to express its opinion with as many words it wants. The answers have been summarized and then the following basic models have been formulated regarding children's understanding of tolerance.

3.1.1 *Definition 1 – to be tolerant means to be a good person.*

Most of the children underline that to show tolerance means to be good and sophisticated, to smile, to be patient, respectful, hearty, careful, responsible, nice and kind to the others, to treat them well, to show humanities to everyone else, to respect all the people and to treat them all, but not only relatives and friends, to have well-meaning thoughts. This is the definition of tolerance as per 122 pupils which means 52,14% of all questioned.

3.1.2 *Definition 2 – to be tolerant means to accept the different people.*

Next are respondents that define tolerance as follows: to accept and to understand others without matter of their differences and not to isolate them, but to agree with them; to play with children who have problems as well. This is the answer of 48 students which are 20,51% of all.

3.1.3 *Definition 3 – to be tolerant means to respect the opinion and the ideas of the others.*

Other children think that it is very important to respect someone else's opinion, rights and all the people themselves; to listen to them so to have idea about their point of view, to pay attention to their words – 11,54%.

3.1.4 *Definition 4 – to be tolerant means to be a good friend.*

Some children associate tolerance with friendship and think that all people should be a good friend and to love and to help their friends; to play with children that have no friends and that are alone – 6,41%.

3.1.5 *Definition 5 – to be tolerant means not to fight with the others and not to offence them.*

Next opinion is not to fight with your classmates and others and not to use bad words; not to be rude and nasty to others; not to annoy and harass people, not to hook them – 5,98%.

3.1.6 *Definition 6 – to be tolerant means to be an excellent student and to listen to your teachers.*

Some children's opinion is that tolerance has common with education and declare that it is very important to be educated, smart, intelligent, hardworking, having your own opinion, giving your opinion when you disagree with something, and to respect your teachers as well – 5,56%.

3.1.7 *Definition 7 – to be tolerant means to be kind and polite*

It is similar as to be a good person, to be honest, to behave always very well, speaking in a kind manner, to be polite – 4,27%.

3.1.8 *Definition 8 – others*

And finally there are some opinions that are in smaller percent as follows:

- not to make fun of others; to be an example for others; to stay behind your words, to be honest; adults must define that you are tolerant; to tell the truth; to help people, especially old ones; to be smart, to study hard; not to sadden your parents – 4,70%;
- not to offend or tease the others; not to be angry with them – 3,85%;
- to help people, especially those in need – 2,56%;
- to be obedient, to respect rules – 2,14%;
- helping people with underdeveloped limbs; not to be rough with children with disabilities and do play with them, even to be friends with them – 1,28%;
- to be brave – 0,85%;

- to accept religion of others – 0,43%;
- not to slander – 0,43%;
- to like everyone: they can be acne, handicapped, of other origin or else – 0,43%.

Unfortunately, there are some kids that haven't answered the question (9,83%) and that have pointed that they don't know (1,71%).

And finally two students (0,85%) confess that sometimes they are good, and sometimes they are bad which probably means that in some situations they are tolerant, and in other – they are not. There is an answer according to which tolerance is a change: if others respect one, he/she will respect others. Such children and adults are defined as mirror people - if you are good with them and they are good with you, if you are bad with them and they are bad with you. This becomes a philosophy of their life, which blurs the notion of right and wrong, good and bad. So, it is not a good opinion for a child because its personality should be developed in other direction: positive communication and good co-existence with the other people.

3.2 Students' reaction when they don't like someone online.

Next question that will be discussed is how the children show someone that they don't like him/her on the web. Pupils have been asked to explain if they use emoticons, upper and lower case letters, or other. This question is open as well and answers are absolutely free. They are pointed in some groups to be analysed more clearly.

The study shows that primary school students are well aware of the concept of tolerance and make a strong statement that their behaviour is in line with their perceptions of good behaviour towards others. At the same time, however, there is a language of symbols online that allows us to show clearly our dislike of the person opposite, for example by using capital letters to symbolize anger, rage or by using emoticons. Children know this language and use it in their everyday virtual communication. Being tolerant in word is not so hard as being tolerant in our dialogue with others and students prove this. As per results taken by research it becomes clear that children do not accept everyone else, do not respect his/her opinion and often it becomes necessary to show their disagreement, even dislike. It happens in one of the following ways.

3.2.1 By using emoticons and words.

It coming out that 19,66% of the students will use emoticons and words when they want to show that they don't like someone in the net: some of them will use crying emoticons, other angry or sad, broken heart, devil, dislike, sunglasses. 6,41% will explain with words the reason about their dislike but being polite and kind. Some children share that will use emoticons like love or kiss to show their mocking attitude to the one they don't like.

3.2.2 By blocking him/her

Some of the pupils will limit the access of the "unpleasant person" – these are 6,41%. This is an example for a good digital culture and actions for self-protection in spite of insulting someone. In addition, there are pupils (6,84%) that will not write to him/her, will ignore him/her; will not communicate with him/her or will not pay attention to him/her. 0,85% would delete a conversation with a person that they don't like.

3.2.3 By using capital letters

Other children should use capital letters (5,56%) which are a common sign of disapproval or dislike of someone on the network.

3.2.4 By using threats and bad, even swear words

Next sentences are quoted literally: "I don't like you!", "I hate you!", "Get out of here!", "Don't take my attention!", "You are not a friend of mine!", "Watch your business, you little flea, miserable one!", "I don't want to communicate with you!", "I don't want to be your friend!", "I will not write with you!", "I'm sorry, but I don't like you and I don't like people like you!", "I don't love you!", "Don't annoy me!", "I'm sorry but we have no common interests" and so on – 18,37%. This a pretty high percentage shows that children are in fact regularly confronted with negative networking situations and have learned a rather colourful language to express themselves online. It is disturbing that this language is learned from the web, and

not from parents or teachers. What has been learned on the net now is like learned on the street for the previous generations.

3.2.5 Others

Some children have pointed different options: by using emoticons, words, capital and small letters (2,99%); by very rough behaviour (3,42%) and others.

There are students that have never done such a thing, because they are afraid that will insult someone, but they are only 3,85% of all questioned.

Unfortunately, the biggest part of the pupil surveyed hasn't answered this question – 25,64%. On Figure 1 the results are summarized. We see that the most popular ways for students to show that they don't like someone in the web are to use emoticons or to respond using rough insulting words.

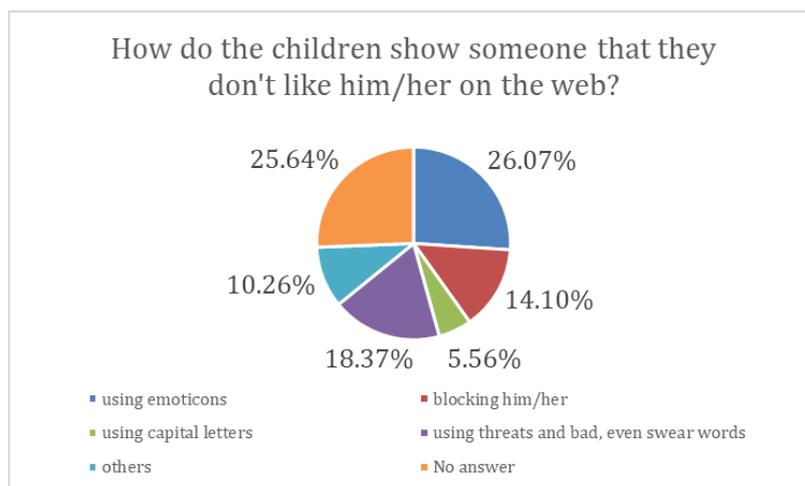


Figure 1. Summarizing results about way of children's expression of their negative attitude in a web.

It is clear that very few children do not approve showing of dislike to someone because they may offend or hurt him and his feelings. Everyone else of the respondents knows the expressive means of disapproval online and apparently uses it quite often. If we return to the definitions of tolerance, it will become clear that children find it difficult to accept others' actions, criticize them rudely, and are not particularly kind and polite.

3.3 Children's reaction against receiving a very angry emoticon

The last question that will be discussed in this article is what shall be the students' answer if they receive an emoticon as this from Figure 2 ⁴:

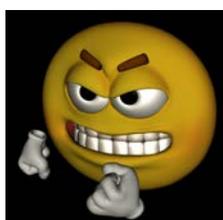


Figure 2. A very angry emoticon

As the previous, this question is open too and gives the opportunity for full expression of the feeling and the emotions. Actually, students have been asked to picture their answer, but many of them have answered with words.

⁴ Image source: <https://www.publicdomainpictures.net/en/view-image.php?image=151078&picture=smile-emoticon-angry>

The main purpose here is to research whether there is a difference in children's attitude to be tolerant when they are in real situation and when they are in virtual space and protected by anonymity and long distance.

3.3.1 *"I will answer with emoticons"*

Children share that probably will send and emoticon in answer in order to show how they exactly feel without using unnecessary: angry – 24,36%; surprise – 7,26%; cry – 5,98%; devil – 5,13%; laugh to tears – 4,7%; smile – 2,99%; with the same emoticon – 2,14%; tongue or fist – 1,28%; sunglasses, hug, shit or bye-bye – 0,85%; OK, bad, hug, scared, love, sleeping, happy, boxing glove – 0,43%. Some children shall use not only emoticons but words too.

3.3.2 *"I will threaten him"*

Some of the children think that it is better to react as searching for help by adults (parents, institutions): "If you threaten me, I would tell my parents about it"; "I will call the police" (0,85%). But other children rely on themselves and definitely threaten with physical aggression: "I will find you and I will beat you" (2,56%). This answer is indicative that not so many, but there are some children that are not only far away from showing tolerance to someone or something they do not like, but they are even willing to turn away with physical violence. Prove of this is that some pupils confess that this emoticon will make them really very angry – 1,71%.

3.3.3 *"I will not answer him at all"*

Some of the respondents will show tolerance in its meaning of not paying attention to someone or something annoying and would no answer to the provocation or will stop communication with the sender, but this is only 0,85% of all questioned. Other answers received are: "I will do nothing" (3,41%), "I don't care" (1,28%), "I will block the sender" (2,56%) or "I will cut his/her friendship" (2,14%). The lack of adequate response to the manifestations of intolerant behaviour can be understood in many ways, for example, as fear, inability to cope in conflict situations, lack of communicative skills, etc. But it can be regarded as a lack of self-tolerance, as an acceptance of the other at all costs in order to avoid conflict or as a complete lack of attitude on the subject. It should be emphasized that this is not a substantive reaction especially at primary school age.

3.3.4 *"I'll take the blame"*

Other answers are quite self-blaming as: "I will ask him: "What happened? Why are you angry with me? Why?" or just "???" (5,56%); "I'm sorry!" (1,28%). Some answers even demonstrate fear: "I will understand that someone is angry with me or he will beat me and I will escape to the end of the world" (2,14%).

3.3.5 *"I will be vulgar"*

"I will show him/her vulgar hand gesture" – 4,27%; "I will answer him: "You are very stupid!!!" – 0,43% or "I will use bad words" – 1,28%.

3.3.6 *Others*

There are children that are aware of the lack of such an emoticon, which has been chosen only because of its provocative manner, and respond that it is not possible to receive this picture because this emoticon doesn't exist – 1,72%. Other options are: "I will answer with the same" – 0,43%; "I will tell him/her to calm down, to stop" – 0,85%; "I will ask him/her to watch his/her business" – 0,43%; "I will ask him if he is crazy" – 0,43%.

11,54% of the respondents hasn't answered the question.

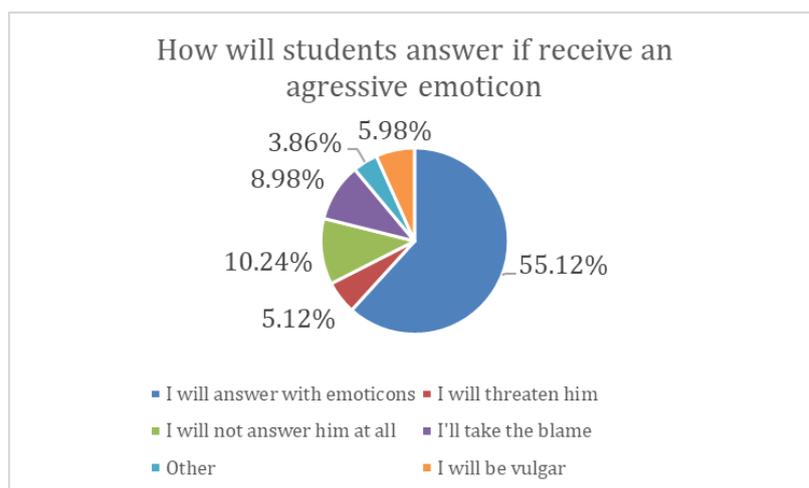


Figure 3. Summarizing results about way of children's reaction to negative behaviour on a web.

It turns out that there is not a large number of respondents who will show tolerance or patience to behavior that they do not approve. Children are more likely to respond promptly than to provide space for the others to express themselves. The transfer of guilt within oneself can also not be considered as a tolerant manifestation, but rather as weakness, fear, and lack of protection of one's own position. Online language makes it much easier for today's children because they don't have to think about their reaction too long – everything is accessible by a touch only, and the abundance of emotion symbols is huge.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The respondents' quoted answers are extremely indicative not only of the level of tolerance formed as a personal characteristic, but also of the sincere desire to show tolerance for others, regardless of their differences. Based on the results obtained, the authors draw several main conclusions.

4.1 Children's concept about tolerance

Most of the children are familiar with the content of the concept of tolerance, although it is a little bit chaotic, associating it mostly with a display of kindness, patience and respect for others, regardless of their differences, peculiarities, characteristics. However, if a comparison is made between the definitions of tolerance considered and the responses received from the students studied, it becomes clear that most of them associate tolerance with being good, which is not the basis of the definition. This means that their concept of this word is not quite exact and correct.

Something more, despite the good idea of the concept, its practical application is not apparent – it turns out that when children do not like someone, they immediately show it to him. There are very few students who think they may offend someone by telling they don't like him. That's why it has online tolerance been researched: it seems that when intolerant behaviour doesn't happen, children do not realize it as an insult, an affront, an attack against the others.

4.2 Online tolerance

Online tolerance is not a concept that is often discussed at home or at school. It turns out that the use of the Internet language (emoticons, symbols, gestures, punctuation, words, pictures) is especially daunting for children because it is very imaginative and allows one to describe his/her feelings, moods and attitudes to others.

It turns out that online tolerance is even more instinctive because cyber language allows you to respond promptly – there is an emoticon for every mood, or to show the desired reaction immediately almost without reservations.

4.3 Online communication

The students surveyed know well what signs to use when they want to show their disapproval of someone on the web, when they want to show dislike or respond to a provocation. It turns out that students who recognize tolerant behavior as accepting others when they are online it is very easy to show their disapproval of others (with capital letters, angry emoticons, rude language, blocking, exclusion) and they respond quite sharply when have been provoked (even with threats). So, the following aspects of tolerance definition: accepting an opinion, behavior or a person that is different from us; ability to deal with something unpleasant or annoying; being altruistic and humane, are known by heart but are not always realized in interpersonal relationships between children in primary school.

Online tolerance should be more often put on focus from teachers, parents and in society in general. The language and the culture of the net are too important for nowadays and it is of great importance to us to bring up one tolerant generation with clear understanding for the diversities and how to cope with them both offline or on the net.

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