

# Activating Methods in Prevention of Online Risky Behaviour

## Aktivizujúce metódy v prevencii online rizikového správania žiakov

Zuzana Hrabovská<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract:

More often occurring risky online behaviour of children and youth currently represents a severe problem manifesting in excessive usage of the internet, cyberbullying, risky online sexual behaviour and many other negative manifestations. Schools play an important role in the process of solving this issue. By their competent influence, they ensure not only educational but also primary and secondary preventive process. The usage of suitable didactic methods enabling the active involvement of pupils in preventive educational process have appeared highly effective in eliminating risky online behaviour. The aim of this theoretical study is to approach the problem of risky online behaviour of children and youth, to reflect on current prevention in schools and to point out the possibilities of implementing activating didactic methods in the preventive-educational process of schools.

### Keywords:

Risky online behaviour; pupils; prevention; activating methods


### Abstrakt:

Čoraz častejšie vyskytujúce sa online rizikové správania detí a mládeže predstavuje v súčasnosti závažný problém, ktorý sa prejavuje v excesívnom využívaní internetu, kyberšikanovaní, v online rizikovom sexuálnom správaní a mnohých iných negatívnych prejavoch. Školy zohrávajú dôležitú úlohu v riešení uvedenej problematiky. Svojim kompetentným pôsobením zabezpečujú nielen vzdelávací proces, ale aj primárny a sekundárny preventívny proces. Použitie vhodných didaktických metód umožňujúcich aktívne zapojením žiakov v preventívno-výchovnom proces sa javí vysoko efektívne v eliminácii online rizikového správania. Cieľom teoretickej štúdie je priblížiť problematiku online rizikového správania detí a mládeže, reflektovať súčasnú prevenciu na školách a poukázať na možnosti implementácie aktivizujúcich didaktických metód do preventívno-výchovného procesu škôl.

### Kľúčové slová:

Online rizikové správanie; žiaci; prevencia; aktivizujúce metódy

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Pedagogy and Andragogy, Faculty of Education, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, The Slovak Republic, iveta.babjakova@student.umb.sk, ORCID 

## **Introduction**

Digitalisation and the Internet have brought speed, simplicity and accessibility of information into our lives, but they have also become a means of communication, entertainment and relaxation. On the other hand, the increasing incidence of risky online behaviour among children and young people is now a severe problem, manifesting itself in excessive use of the Internet, cyberbullying, risky online sexual behaviour and many other negative manifestations. Schools have an essential role to play in tackling this issue. Through their competent action, they provide an educational and upbringing process and a primary and secondary prevention process. Experts attach great importance to preventing risky online behaviour, the effectiveness of which depends, among other things, on the choice of didactic methods. Activating didactic methods appear to be an effective tool in eliminating risky online behaviour. The present paper tries to present the issue of risky online behaviour of children and young people, reflect on the current prevention in schools, and point out the possibility of implementing activating didactic methods in the preventive-educational action of schools.

## **Selected types of risky online behaviour**

A view of risky online behaviour of individuals is reported by Dulovics (2018, p. 7), who characterises it as "an individual's behaviour in virtual space by which he or she knowingly or unknowingly endangers himself or herself and those around him or her". In the intentions of scientific-empirical research, the following types of risky online behaviour are currently receiving particular attention. Excessive Internet use: (Blinka, 2015; Dulovics, 2020, 2023; Kuss et al., 2013; Northrup et al., 2015; Whang & Chang, 2004). Cyberbullying: (Domonkos, 2014; Hollá, 2017; Willard, 2007). Risky online sexual behaviour: (Hinduja & Patchin, 2022; Jaishankar, 2009; Wolak & Finkelhor, 2011).

Excessive Internet use is now coming to the forefront of professional attention as the primary trigger for all online threats to children and youth. Although the term is predominantly associated with excessive time spent on the Internet, it is not necessarily the only trait associated with potential problems - the risks of Internet use in children and youth. The term 'excessive' in the abovementioned issue is not only related to an increased likelihood of online threats but also indicates patterns of Internet use such as repetitiveness-cyclicity, compulsiveness and uncontrollability. Excessive Internet use can negatively affect several aspects of adolescents' lives: health and physical fitness, poor school performance, disinterest in hobbies, increased strain in social interactions, as well as psychological problems such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Šmahel et al., 2012).

Cyberbullying is characterised by Hollá (2016, p. 15) as: "aggressive behaviour that involves harassing, threatening, stalking, humiliating and other negative behaviour of a child or adolescent towards the victim or victims, through repeated attacks via computers, mobile phones and other electronic devices whose content causes emotional harm". Hollá (2016) adds that anonymity, pseudonymity, deindividuation, inhibition and loss of control are characteristic factors for cyber environments and are closely linked to aggression. Hollá (2017) adds to the above the risks of cyberbullying, which can cause, among other things, significant emotional stress, trauma, psychological discomfort, anxiety, frustration, a feeling of being in an intractable situation, and loss of self-esteem and self-worth.

Authors such as Dulovics, 2018; Emmerová, 2022; Hollá, 2016; Livingstone & Smith, 2014 include sexting, sextortion - sexual blackmail, sexual abuse and child pornography in the category of risky online sexual behaviour. For our paper, we will introduce the reader to the issue of sexting, which Hinduja and Patchin (2022, p. 2) define as "the sending or receiving of sexually explicit or sexually suggestive images or videos over a mobile phone". Currently, different forms of sexting are defined, which mainly refer to consensual and non-consensual sexting. Consensual sexting is seen as an evolving form of contemporary sexual communication between adolescents, which, although considered a risky practice, is generally not such a serious social problem. Non-consensual sexting, on the other hand, takes place without the consensual disclosure of sexually explicit content. Zetterstron Danlqvist & Gilander Gadin (2018) found that (35%) of adolescent girls received unsolicited sexual requests, with one of the most common forms being a request to meet outside of a virtual environment. Sexting can result in coercion or blackmail of the person involved and is a severe problem that can have serious consequences for the person concerned (Dodaj & Sesar, 2020; Molla Esparza et al., 2020; Mori et al., 2019). According to EU Kids Online Slovakia IV (2018), (67.6%) of children and adolescents have received a message with sexual content over the Internet several times in the last year.

## **Prevention in schools**

In Slovakia, the prevention of risky behaviour in primary and secondary schools is carried out by pedagogical staff (coordinator in education and training, teacher) and professional staff (social pedagogue, school psychologist, and the like). The social pedagogue is exceptionally competent in preventing risky online behaviour in schools. Niklová (2019) explains that primary prevention is primarily about providing essential information on the safe use of the Internet, in particular:

- the importance of observing the rules of decent behaviour in virtual communication,
- familiarising with the possible negative consequences of anti-social behaviour in virtual space and, last but not least,
- informing pupils how to prevent various forms of risky behaviour.

Hollá (2016) adds that schools pay much attention to diagnosing, preventing, and eliminating various educational problems, including bullying. On the other hand, teachers and school administrators are insufficiently aware that harassment also takes place through information and communication media.

We agree with Hollá (2016) that reducing the risks associated with sexting and cyberbullying is also crucial in education and upbringing, especially in the subjects of media education and ethics education. Media education is coming to the forefront in primary prevention education due to the pitfalls of particular media. In the same way, ethics education, by its fundamental nature, plays a vital role in the primary prevention of risky behaviour in schools. Hollá (2016, p. 141) further adds that ethics education enables, among other things, "to guide pupils' behaviour so that they can manage their emotions, resolve conflicts effectively, use effective communication, develop a positive self-image, self-esteem and appropriate self-confidence". We also add that a cross-cutting theme, Social and Personal Development, can be included in civics lessons and offers many benefits in preventing risky behaviour. Čerešník (2021) further states that in the prevention of risky behaviour, schools should focus more on the development of pupils'

meta-skills and abilities by engaging in pro-social activities in the educational process and less on school talks and lectures that introduce pupils to the primary negative consequences of risky behaviour. According to Čerešník (2021), adolescents are often aware of the consequences of their behaviour, but the benefits of risky behaviour are often much stronger for them. A similar view is expressed by Dulovics et al. (2023), who also view current prevention in terms of its effectiveness, considering lectures, talks, intimidation and passive transfer of information without follow-up activity by pupils to be ineffective in preventing risky behaviour. At the same time, these authors stress the importance of early primary prevention of risky online behaviour in schools, which they see as effective in prevention programmes, projects and long-term training with active involvement of pupils.

The views mentioned above on effective prevention of risky behaviour are also demonstrated by research meta-analyses of long-term school-based prevention programmes (Carr, 2002; Gaffney et al., 2019). From their results, we learn not only about the prerequisite for effective prevention, which is the long-term implementation of a prevention programme but also about the strategies and methods that are highly effective in preventing not only risky online behaviour. Carr (2002) expresses the belief that effective school-based prevention programmes for the prevention of risky behaviour should target training in the development of behavioural skills by using a range of didactic methods such as didactic teaching coupled with discussion and modelling, rehearsal, role-play, social reinforcement, corrective feedback and extended practice. The author adds that the prevention methodology implemented this way is oriented towards individuals and requires active involvement in the cognitive, emotional and behavioural planes.

## **Pupil activity and the essence of the activating method**

As we mentioned above, contemporary approaches to prevention emphasise the validity of the individual's active participation in preventive-educational action. However, what is meant by activity in the educational process and the essence of the activating method will be explained in the next section.

In the educational process, the concept of activity is attributed only to those activities in which the pupil has to engage in and display a certain level of independent and initiative activity. It is also assumed that the pupil puts in a certain amount of effort and endeavour, and at the same time, the activity in question requires the pupil to be efficient and effective (Fulková, 2011).

Tomengová (2012) further discusses active learning in which the teacher tries to avoid passive information delivery as much as possible while teaching methods and strategies are aimed at skill development as much as possible. However, the learner activity itself should be designed to require the learner to engage in higher-order thought operations such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation. It is considered crucial that the learner simultaneously reflects on what he/she is doing during the activity.

The essence of the activating method lies in a specific process that takes the learner out of his or her comfort zone, so to speak, and into the learning zone. This zone is characterised by an encounter with a new stimulus to which we do not have a learned pattern of behaviour or do not know the correct response.

Tej et al. (2017) were inspired by Tucson's model of learning, which distinguishes three learning zones:

1. A comfort zone in which the pupil feels safe and free from fear and anxiety. This zone is based on the assumption that each individual acquires specific knowledge, skills and experience throughout his/her life, which can be both positive and negative. In the same way, he or she maintains his or her patterns of behaviour, forms his or her value system, achieves new goals and discovers the meaning of life. This acquired experience becomes a safe comfort zone through repetition because the individual has assimilated and internalised these contents. In doing so, it does not matter at all what his or her age is.
2. The learning zone presents appropriate challenges for the individual and, as mentioned above, is an encounter with a new educational situation. The authors further add that the so-to-speak, necessary transfer from the comfort zone to the learning zone has a stimulating, disruptive and proactive effect on the pupil. At this stage, the learner is not convinced of the correctness of his/her reaction, response, behavioural expression or decision. Thus, it is a risk of an unknown outcome. The educator is naturally in a vital position at this stage, because under the influence of his/her challenge, whether it is a question, a problem-solving, a behavioural expression or a logical conclusion, the individual's learning zone expands in the given educational areas. The result is an active learner who thinks, finds solutions, analyses, connects, evaluates and relates prior knowledge to the new stimulus. Last, if the stimulus is interesting for the pupil and the teacher's action is correct, the pupil's intrinsic motivation is awakened.
3. The panic zone is detrimental or even threatening to the individual in any sphere of human life, not excluding the educational process. However, this phase is not the subject of our work, so we will not deal with it in depth.

We consider the knowledge of activating methods and their subsequent correct use in preventive practice to be crucial in the didactic work of the social pedagogue/educator in the effective prevention of risky behaviour.

### **Selected types of activating methods in preventive-educational action**

Activating methods represent an unlimited group of methods in the didactic system. Often, teachers and experts create and design innovative and activating methods themselves based on their own creativity, experience and discovery. The methods thus created become an integral part of quality practice through successful implementation over time. Our aim in this section is to introduce the reader to some activating methods that can be used in the preventive-educational process.

As in the past, **discussion** continues to enjoy its popularity today and is still a widely used activating method. Discussion has an irreplaceable place in the prevention of risky online behaviour. Thanks to it, pupils can express their attitudes, opinions and perceptions of virtual threats but also not express their attitudes or feelings (fear, tightness). For the social pedagogue/educator, discussion is a valuable source of information about the class as a group but also about individuals and possible risks.

**Situational-problem methods**, the essence of which is the triggering process of social-moral learning in which pupils learn to develop evaluative judgement, critical thinking, attitudes and authentic decision-making. Emphasis is placed on selecting actual life situations as authentic as possible to real-life situations (Podmanický, 2012). The above can include, for example, solving moral dilemmas, problem-solving, case-based methods, and conflict resolution (Petlák, 2004). The above methods can equally be part

of the primary prevention of risky online behaviour. They allow the creation of similar situations that pose a potential threat or problem online. This group of methods includes, for example:

- *The case method* (inducing a particular situation that has happened or may happen - helping a friend in need - cyberbullying).
- *Problem-solving* (pupils are researchers looking for answers to various negative factors of online risky behaviour, with the predominant questions being why? how? and what is the cause?).
- *Conflict-solving* (inducing a particular online conflict that pupils have to resolve).

In this context, we particularly highlight the method of solving moral dilemmas. This method is suitable for solving actual life problems, moral dilemmas and situations. Kulišt'ák (2011) states that in education for ethical, non-threatening behaviour and actions, it is necessary to engage also the influences of feelings, ideas, intuitions and experiences. These are subjective emotional experiences that are processed by the right hemisphere. Therefore, pupils should not only hear about rules, morals and ethics but also solve, judge and experience teacher-mediated situations involving both brain hemispheres.

**Experiential methods** build on interactions with others or perceiving different model situations. According to Hahn (in Podmanický, 2012, p. 62), the founder of experiential pedagogy, "the desired educational effects are fulfilled when the educator organises and directs educational situations for his/her pupils in such a way that, symbolically speaking, he/she brings together the head (cognitive abilities), the heart (axiological and emotional side) and the hands (practical doing of good, cooperation)". The situation thus handled affects the whole personality, and the knowledge gained is thus validated by the personal experience of the individual, who then perceives it as his or her own and credible.

Experiential methods include the pupils' experience of practising various model situations, which they then reflect upon and transfer to real-life situations. We divide experiential methods into short-term methods, which include skits, role-playing, modelling situations, and didactic games, and long-term methods, which include, for example, social-ecological projects (Podmanický, 2012).

Unlike skits, which have a pre-prepared scenario, **role-playing and modelling situations** are accompanied by spontaneous speech. A role play is given on the spot and requires unprepared, quick reactions from pupils. It is essentially an open-ended experiment that most closely resembles a life situation. Their great advantage is that they develop pupils' decision-making processes and moral judgement. At the same time, pupils learn to manage and solve problems and conflicts and eliminate prejudices and discrimination. The given methods in the hands of an educator are effective tools in practising various situations, such as a model of assertive or aggressive behaviour or in solving moral dilemmas (Podmanický, 2012). In the same way, in the primary prevention of risky online behaviour, we add that they represent an effective method in practising how to cope with various models of risky online situations.

**Play** as a didactic method represents emotional satisfaction with a robust mobilising charge. Although the method is mainly recommended for younger school-age pupils, it is not harmful in higher grades. A well-chosen didactic game for the pupils we know has many advantages: it develops manual and social skills, promotes creativity and spontaneity, a friendly atmosphere, joy and good group relations (Podmanický, 2012). We add that didactic play that is not focused on competitiveness can be very helpful, for

example, in preventing cyberbullying and developing a positive social climate in the group.

**Project-based methods** allow pupils to use the skills and knowledge they have acquired and, at the same time, to test them in practical experience. Also, their advantage is that pupils learn to perceive the current problems of society and nature and thus develop their pro-social attitude towards the outside world (Podmanický, 2012). In preventive-educational action, the given method can be used, for example, with older pupils, who can independently, in groups or under the guidance of a social pedagogue/educator, implement and present a variety of posters, projects and presentations of online risky behaviour within the school, thus contributing to the overall awareness of risky online behaviour.

## Conclusion

The increase in risky online behaviour among children and young people is now a serious problem. Ideas for effectively preventing risky behaviour, not only online, are now a global consensus. The current expert community emphasises the importance of implementing activating methods in the educational and preventive process. At the same time, these methods are attributed important characteristics that make pupils the subjects of their own active learning and education process. In parallel with the pupil's active activity, other important skills, abilities, and personal variables are developed and considered beneficial predictors for preventing risky online behaviour. Potential activation methods in preventive action can be implemented in school prevention programmes and projects and in media education, ethics education, and civics classes.

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**Author:**

Mgr. Zuzana Hrabovská

Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica

Faculty of Education, Department of Pedagogy and Andragogy

The Slovak Republic

[zuzana.hrabovska@umb.sk](mailto:zuzana.hrabovska@umb.sk)

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-0817-8633>

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