The Great Leap Forward

Facing the unfamiliar can be very traumatic and damaging to a child’s academic performance. Mark Bowles, Director of The Training Effect, outlines a new approach.

Graduating from primary school is a challenge for most children, but Risk-Avert Primary is a new approach to educating Year 6 pupils about risk-taking and coping with the transition from primary school to secondary school. It is an extension of the existing Risk-Avert programme, developed by The Training Effect.
Transitioning from primary school to secondary school is a huge step for any child and often this experience will stay with them for life – whether positive or negative.

Most children cope and feel comfortable in their new environment, adjusting well within the first couple of terms. However, others need more time to adapt and feel at ease with the pressures of a new timetable, teachers and peer groups.

The broad age range and vastly different behaviours observed within secondary school populations can also be problematic. An 11 year old child in Year 7 obviously has very different life experience and behavioural drivers to a 16 year old in Year 11. These differences can also mean that young people may be introduced to risk-taking behaviours such as smoking, alcohol and drugs for the first time by their older peers.

Whilst most children will have received PSHE lessons related to these behaviours whilst in primary school, many may still be unprepared for the transition from childhood to adolescence and the inevitable challenges this brings.

If the correct foundations are laid before transition from primary to secondary school takes place to prepare the child, they’ll be more likely to employ coping mechanisms and develop resilience to deal with difficult situations that they may face.

In most primary schools, and indeed secondary schools, risk-taking is often tackled using the ‘information deficit’ approach; namely that the reason why children and young people engage in behaviours which are potentially harmful to their health and well-being is due to them not having enough knowledge about the behaviour, its effects and risks. This supposition is flawed, however, as most children have good (albeit basic) knowledge that certain behaviours are dangerous or harmful. The reasons they may still engage are not due to a lack of information, but rather other drivers and factors that motivate them, such as family, peers or societal influences.

It is clear that the majority of primary aged pupils aren’t engaging in risk-taking behaviours. Rates of smoking, alcohol and drug use in primary schools have been widely reported in the UK but the reality behind the headlines is that many children leave primary school without participating in any of these activities.
However early risk-taking seems to be focused on social media and the use of the internet rather than the ‘traditional’ behaviours of the past. Whilst children in primary school receive a decent level of education about internet safety, these lessons don’t always focus on the additional reasons why, even when a young person may know the risks, they may engage in the behaviour anyway. Clearly the information deficit model is itself deficient as a means to explaining young people’s continued risk-taking behaviour in spite of the evidence they are presented with.

It is these types of situations which led to the development of the Risk-Avert Primary programme.

What is Risk-Avert Primary?
Risk-Avert Primary is an early intervention programme aimed at primary school pupils in Year 6. Indeed, Year 6 was selected as the right primary age group to target as it allows a focus on pupils’ transition to secondary school. It also reflects their increased likelihood of access to social media and wider, unrestricted use of the internet. We found that 61 per cent of pupils in this age range reported they had used the internet without an adult present and 76 per cent of children in Year 6 reported having a mobile phone.

Risk-Avert Primary addresses early risk-taking and provides the first stage in a spiral curriculum which develops alongside the child throughout their school careers.

The programme provides the following to participating schools:

- Anonymous survey completed by Year 6 pupils – this survey focuses on the children’s experiences of using the Internet and their opinions on the behaviours of Year 8 pupils in schools.
- Life Skills Sessions – a four-session programme is delivered to young people in Year 6. This is focused on practical life skills acquisition that can help children navigate risky situations and make positive choices.
- PSHE Resources – schools are also provided with a range of PSHE resources which can help supplement their existing provision. All of these sessions share the common ethos and approach of the Risk-Avert Primary programme.

TTE’s survey enables us to not just collect data related to the behaviour of the participating children but also promote positive social norms. Our survey consistently demonstrates a discrepancy between the beliefs of Year 6 pupils related to the behaviour of Year 8 pupils. Put simply, Year 6 pupils believe their older peers are engaging in risk-taking at far higher rates than they actually are. A key outcome of the project is to provide normative data to students, which they can relate to in order to help prepare them for their transition to secondary school.

Like the original programme, Risk-Avert Primary provides practical steps for children in primary school which will help them identify and manage risky scenarios
they may find themselves in as they grow up, as well as know how to recognise personal ‘safe’ and ‘unsafe’ feelings. Topics that form part of the scheme include bullying, smoking, road safety, social media presence and sharing information online.

The outcomes of the programme for primary school pupils include:

- Increasing resilience by giving skills and strategies to children to make them more able to face life’s challenges.
- Helping young people to recognise and understand risky situations and behaviour and improve decision-making.
- Enabling pupils to stay safe and recognise their personal ‘unsafe’ feelings and teaching them strategies on how to deal with them.

The success of the Risk-Avert programme has shown us a great deal about how much young people value learning about managing risk. Targeting a younger age group allows pupils who participate in the programme to become much more confident and encourages them to consider risk with a greater knowledge and understanding of the potential consequences.

Results from the participating pilot schools were encouraging with the anticipated discrepancies between belief and actual behaviour observed in the participating children.

We found that whilst 97 per cent of primary school pupils reported they knew how to stay safe online, 79 per cent of them gave out personal information over the internet when requested. This personal information question was chosen by the school, with options including the name of the road they lived on, their shoe size or their favourite food.

This finding was crucial as it demonstrates the underlying approach and ethos of Risk-Avert. Even when pupils have the required information they may still engage in risky behaviours due to other factors.

It is clear from the pilot that primary aged children are already using the internet without adult supervision and whilst most understand that they should not share personal information online, the reality is that many still do regardless.

Work in schools should be focused on what additional factors may influence the decision-making of children, moving the emphasis away from the risks and outcomes of the behaviour. Instead, strategies should explore the underlying factors of pressures that may lead pupils to take risks, in spite of their knowledge and understanding of the potential harmful outcomes.

Following the successful pilot, the programme is now available in primary schools nationwide. For more information please visit www.risk-avert-primary.org

Mark Bowles is the Director of The Training Effect. He has worked extensively in the public sector as a practitioner, manager and commissioner. Mark’s work focuses on drugs, alcohol, risktaking behaviour, families with complex needs, emotional health and well-being.