

**KEYNOTE SPEECH FOR THE KNOWLEDGE ROUNDTABLE**  
**FORUM ON CYBERSAFETY OF FILIPINO LEARNERS**

May 27, 2019

SEAMEO INNOTECH, Diliman, Quezon City

**BUILD DEFENSES, NOT FENCES:**  
**Upholding the Rights of the Child in the Cyber World**

**Atty. Josephine G. Maribojoc**

*Assistant Secretary*

*Officer-in-Charge, Office of the Undersecretary for Legal Affairs*

To Dr. Ramon C. Bacani, Center Director of SEAMEO INNOTECH; Undersecretary Alain del B. Pascua, DepEd Undersecretary for Administration; Atty. Erlaine Lumanog of the National Anti-Poverty Commission; Mr. Lars Jorgenssen, Executive Director of Stairway Foundation; other colleagues in government, friends from non-government organizations and the academe, ladies and gentlemen, a warm and child-friendly good morning to all.

Let me first thank Dr. Bacani and his team for organizing this Forum and inviting DepEd to participate. I understand that this activity is the start of a series of learning activities that SEAMEO has organized for its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. Congratulations are in order for this milestone celebration of the commendable work the SEAMEO has done in education in half a century.

It is not only SEAMEO that is celebrating a milestone in its history. Significantly, this year also marks the 30<sup>th</sup> year of the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by the United Nations General Assembly. The Convention promotes the best interest of the child not as a tiny half person but as a whole person with dignity and rights that we ought to respect, protect and promote, including the right to be safe and secure against all forms of violence and abuse, whether in the physical or cyber world.

In the early years of SEAMEO and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, when children played *piko* or *patintero* or *tumbang preso* in the streets, families may have felt that children were safe when, by dusk, they were within the secure confines of their home and away from harmless elements prowling the streets at night. But today, children may be physically home and safe, but may nevertheless be somewhere else, wandering about in the borderless cyber world, which may be fraught with dangers from which they should be protected.

DepEd promotes the right of the child against all forms of violence and abuse through its Child Protection Policy, which aims to nurture learners in a safe environment not only in the physical sphere, but also the cyber space. In this digital

age when children socialize and spend considerable time online, DepEd recognizes that their right to protection against violence and abuse should also be realized online.

Cybersafety as a program had been incubating in the DepEd for several years. As many of you probably know, in 2012, the DepEd issued DepEd Order No. 40, s. 2012 or the “DepEd Child Protection Policy”, a commitment of the DepEd to promote the best interest of the child and embrace zero tolerance to all forms of abuse, violence, exploitation, neglect, and discrimination against our learners. In this policy, there is explicit recognition of violence taking place in the cyber world with the inclusion of the definition of cyber-bullying as bullying done through electronic means or other technology.

In 2013, trainings were conducted to capacitate DepEd personnel as trainers on the Child Protection Policy so that the policy will find reality in all schools. In these trainings, it was reported that online child protection concerns were increasingly becoming a big concern, and it was acknowledged that there was a need to appropriately respond to this different kind of violence in the cyber world. In the same year, Republic Act No. 10627 or the “Anti-Bullying Act of 2013” was enacted, and forthwith its Implementing Rules and Regulations were issued through DepEd Order No. 55, s. 2013. Again, cyber-bullying is recognized in that DepEd Order. It must be emphasized that both D.O. 40, s. 2012 and D.O. No. 55, s. 2013 apply to all basic education schools - public and private.

In August of 2018, in the first National Child Protection Summit of the DepEd with the theme, “*Bata, bata, ating kinakalinga*: Strengthening Implementation of the Child Protection Policy,” it was again articulated by child protection advocates and supporters that there is a need to address concerns about the online safety of our learners, our children, through capacity-building interventions. Undeniably, news stories abound of children who have been harmed, even killed, by acquaintances made online, or who have been made objects of the pornography business, or who have fallen victim to circulation of their compromising images or videos online or being bullied online.

Indeed, the challenges we confront in promoting the child’s right to protection online are different from those in the physical world. In the cyber world, we are oftentimes fighting a battle against predators and abusers who are faceless and nameless. It is very easy in the cyber space for a person to assume a different name or person, hide behind anonymity, and launch an attack against the child.

The challenge is exacerbated by the fact that the child can also be faceless in the cyber space, assuming a different name or person, or simply being anonymous. Even if the child presents himself or herself online as a child, the absence of physical interaction with the innocent face or miniature physique of a child, makes it easy for

a person to forget, that a child moving about and communicating in the cyber world, is still a child.

The billions of other citizens in this cyber world are also faceless, but watching, and can at any time make their presence felt to the child, safely or harmfully through online commenting, liking and sharing of information.

Should we then build walls or **fences** around children to protect them from the risks and harms of the cyber world? The problem with fences is that they do not just keep people within its confines safe from the dangers outside the fence, they also shut people out from the beauty of what lies outside the fence.

As I had pointed out in one of DepEd's cyber-related events, the cyber space is a fascinating universe. The constellations of information and knowledge that children can discover and learn in it are vast. In this universe, the capability to shrink our planet Earth into one tiny global village is astounding – a child can speak with a parent or a friend, thousands of miles across the seas as if they were just sitting next to each other. The entertainment that this universe offers – in movies, games, applications – are so numerous; they number the stars.

But just like in the physical world where we encounter the good and the bad, citizens entering the cyber world also confront the good and the bad that it offers. And so the child, whose discernment and capacity are still evolving, needs protection not only in the physical sphere, but also the cyberspace where the dangers of cyberbullying, online child abuse and pornography, and online gaming addiction lurk.

Thus, instead of building **fences** around our children, which can hardly be done in the cyberworld anyway, what we need to build are **defenses** in and with our children. In the physical world, we do not keep children from going out, playing with other children and exploring the world and growing, just to avoid germs, bacteria, viruses or pathogens from harming their bodies and inflicting diseases. Their bodies, like ours, have a natural immune system or defense mechanism to fight off these harmful invaders; and we can strengthen this immune system through a healthy **lifestyle** of good diet, exercise, and adequate sleep.

How do we build and strengthen a similar immune system for and with our children in the cyber world, which is very much a part of their lives, so that they can live and move about in this world and reap its benefits while staying safe? We teach our children **cyber life skills**. We teach them to discern who to talk to and befriend online. We teach them to be respectful of others online. We teach them to discipline their use of the internet. We empower them to be responsible and equipped citizens of the cyber world, especially since oftentimes, they enter this world on their own or

unsupervised. That is the best tool to promote the **best interest of the child online**.

To provide us a handle on this teaching of cyber life skills, let me borrow literature that maps the risks faced by children online using three Cs: **content** or what the child sees in the online world, **contact** or the individuals, whether real or automated, that the child interacts with, and **conduct** or the behavior of the child in the Internet.

**Content** risks refer to children being exposed to pornographic materials, seeing violent and abusive images, and being “added” to social media groups or pages that promote sexual exploitation and abuse of children. In this risk classification, children are consumers and recipients of online content. Thus, protection from content risks means that we should provide blocking and filtering software so that pornographic and other inappropriate content are not accessed by children. We should also check the kind of online groups in which they become members or participants, and ensure they are age-appropriate and child-friendly.

**Contact** risks are measured by the level of threat a person interacting with the child poses. Pedophiles, predators, and perverts belong to this category. Although not of the same level as the former, cyber bullies, scammers, and online trolls are also contact risks whose interaction with children is damaging and detrimental to their safety, mental health and development. To mitigate this risk, we go back to the basic rule: “*Don’t talk to strangers.*” We need to converse with our children about the quality of their online interactions and the credibility of the people that they are talking to. We should teach our children the safest ways to communicate with others and detect red flags in their conversations.

(To bring home the point, I would like to show you this video that the Department of Education produced in collaboration with Stairway Foundation and the Internet and Mobile Marketing Association of the Philippines. *(Video plays)* The objective of the video is to raise awareness on the dangers of ‘friending’ strangers online, thus encapsulating what contact risk means.)

Finally, **conduct** risks pertain to the risky behaviors that children exhibit and perform online such as bullying other children, sharing personal information to strangers when prompted, and generating child sexual abuse materials themselves. The Internet has a very good memory and can be quite unforgiving: once a damaging and compromising photo or video surfaces online, it will almost always be there forever.

To help address these various online risks and build the cyber world immune system of children by teaching them life skills, the DepEd, in collaboration with its partners developed the Cybersafe Lesson Plans for Grades 5 to 6 and Junior High

School in 2016. These tools facilitate understanding a child’s behavior online and educating them on how they can protect themselves from online risks. These Lesson Plans were uploaded in the Learning Resources Management and Development System of DepEd and in the website – [www.cybersafe.asia](http://www.cybersafe.asia). Moreover, DepEd Memorandum No. 94, s. 2014 was issued for the “Promotion of Online Child Protection and Prevention of Cyberbullying”. These Lesson Plans aim to cultivate online protective behavior of our learners such as recognizing red flags, avoiding inappropriate content, valuing their privacy, and facilitate reporting of cyber violence they experience. In January 2018, the lesson plans were expanded to include learners in Grades 1 to 4.

To help effectively implement these Lesson Plans, DepEd, in cooperation with Stairway Foundation and the Internet and Mobile Marketing Association of the Philippines, launched in November 2018 the BeCyberSafe series of advocacy and awareness materials on the online safety of our learners. These materials aim to teach our learners themselves, and their teachers, parents and other adults inside or outside school, how to empower children to be safe online. Together with our partners, DepEd developed a range of powerful, creative and engaging materials on cybersafety issues that closely affect our children. I understand that these materials will be shown later by Stairway Foundation.

Following the launch of these materials, DepEd, with its partners, designed and organized the first and nationwide Cybersafety in Schools Training. The training consolidates and integrates all cybersafety-related efforts undertaken, and materials developed, by DepEd with its dedicated partners and stakeholders in the past few years: from the issuance of the Child Protection Policy in 2012 and the Implementing Rules and Regulations of the Anti-Bullying Act of 2013, training of trainers, and development of Cyber Safety Lesson Plans, to the conduct of the National Child Protection Summit and launch of the BeCyberSafe materials in 2018.

This cybersafety training package for our school personnel aims to help them: (1) understand child protection concerns and educate children on how they can safely navigate the online world with the proper orientation, attitude and protective skills and behavior; and (2) capacitate other teachers and school personnel on how to address and respond to the online safety concerns of our learners, our children.

This training saw its pilot implementation in the Schools Division of Las Piñas last November 2018 with 120 teachers and school personnel as participants. This 2019, we have so far covered seven regions, National Capital Region, Region 3, CALABARZON, Region 7, Region 9 and Region 11, and trained almost 350 DepEd personnel. The training is continuing this year to cover all regions and engage teachers, master teachers, and non-teaching personnel to take on the responsibility and challenge of promoting the safety of children in the online world.

But we need everybody, including and especially children, to work together to ensure the safety of children in the cyber world as much as in the physical world, as they navigate both these worlds and grow while enjoying their right to be free from harm and abuse. We need a whole-of-society approach, and not just school interventions, to effectively and consistently overcome the attacks to the dignity of the child in the cyber world.

To end, allow me to go back to my parting words in the National Summit for Child Protection and the launch of the BeCyberSafe materials last year: “At bottom, we are all human beings possessed of dignity. While children’s capacities and maturity are still evolving, they are nevertheless human beings deserving of equal respect like all of us. That is what “all human beings are born free and equal” means... *(B)ata pa man sila, sila ay tao na – taong may dangal na karapat-dapat galangin tulad din ng bawat isa sa atin.*” A child in the cyber world is a whole person with dignity as much as a child in the physical world. Let us respect and protect each one of them, wherever they may be.

*Maraming salamat po at magandang umaga sa ating lahat.*