

Ep #454: Protecting Students in the Digital Age: A Conversation with Laura Parker



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Angela Kelly: Hello, Empowered Principals. Welcome to episode 454.

Welcome to *The Empowered Principal® Podcast*, a not-so-typical educational resource that will teach you how to gain control of your career and get emotionally fit to lead your school and your life with joy by refining your most powerful tool, your mind. Here's your host, certified life coach Angela Kelly.

Hey there, Empowered Principals. You know what time of year it is. We're going into the fall. And that means the fall dip is coming. Look, you're not going to prevent the fall dip from happening. That's not what flipping the fall dip is all about. I invite you to join us in Flip the Fall Dip 2026. We are hosting the Fall Dip throughout the month of September. So, September 16th, 22nd, and 29th, we are hosting the Fall Dip Series.

Listen up school leaders, there's no school that stays in complete flow 100% of the time. There's no school culture that doesn't have its ups and downs. And there's no one leader out there who is preventing the fall dip and the energy in other people from shifting. It's about navigating it. Leading through it and staying in alignment with your own leadership identity and integrity. Join us for the Fall Dip this coming September 16th. We'll see you there.

Hello, Empowered Principals. Welcome to today's episode. I have an incredible human on the podcast for an interview. Her name is Laura Parker. I am so thrilled to have her on today. This is a topic we have never broached on this podcast, and it's something so relevant, so critical, so important.

When I met Laura in our meet and greet, I knew instantly that we needed to have this conversation. So I'm going to preface this story by saying, the work that Laura does in the world, it's intense. And so this is a podcast episode that you may want to like sit down for and listen or be with your headphones on so that you can process this information in your own way

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on your own time. I wouldn't have it around kids. I just want to give that heads-up because I want us to be able to speak as honestly and openly and candidly as possible.

Laura works with an organization called The Exodus Road. And I am going to just pass it over to her and let her use her language and her company's language to discuss the work that they provide and the services that they provide for students and families.

Laura Parker: Thank you, Angela. Thanks for having me on *The Empowered Principal*® today. And yes, I'm just really excited about this conversation because I feel like it's so so critical for our educators. So The Exodus Road, which is the non-profit that I am the CEO and co-founder of, is a global anti-human trafficking organization.

So we primarily work both internationally and in the United States. We're headquartered in Colorado. We work with law enforcement to find those that are currently trapped in trafficking. And we've done that for about 15 years. We provide them technology and intelligence to remove those victims and then arrest their traffickers. And we've been able to do that with law enforcement for almost 6,500 individuals over 15 years. And then we also have aftercare programs where we really walk with survivors in their journeys towards healing.

And we've been able to serve about 2,500 survivors that are coming out of trafficking scenarios globally. And then we also do prevention education work where we go into communities and we look at, okay, what are the vulnerabilities to exploitation and how do we come alongside and equip communities to help protect themselves? And we've been able to do that to over 65,000 individuals worldwide, including the United States. And I think that's the part of our conversation that will really have the most relevance, which I'm excited to talk about.

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Angela Kelly: Yes. So can you tell us briefly how you entered into this work? I love the story and I think it gives such a beautiful context to what brought you to the work you're currently doing now.

Laura Parker: Yes, yeah, thanks for asking. So my husband and I actually moved to Thailand when our kids were three, five, and seven. So it was nearly 20 years ago now. We were taking a two-year contract in Northern Thailand and we were running a children's home that served girls. We had about 45 girls in our care that did not have access to education. And so we were delivering them shelter and access to education along with staff for a private family foundation.

And in that process, we started hearing from the village elders of these girls that we were caring for. We started hearing this phrase that there were no pretty girls in the village. And we thought that is a terrible thing to say. Why are people saying this? And we learned that they were saying that because there was this very common practice of men coming into these very remote villages in Northern Thailand and offering fake jobs to the girls 14, 15, 16 years old, and then taking them away from the villages and then those girls disappearing into the red light districts in Bangkok and in Pattaya and Southern Thailand.

And we were just horrified by that. Like we had seen the movie *Taken* so we knew a little bit about trafficking, but beyond that, we didn't know about it. And it just started us down this rabbit hole of learning about exploitation in that part of the world. And eventually my husband got deputized by the Thai police as an undercover informant. And so he actually started going into some of these places that were catering to Western tourists, sex tourists, and trying to identify minors who were being sold there. And that's what started our work, specifically working with law enforcement was providing human intelligence to identify minors that were being sold in foreign red light districts.

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Angela Kelly: And what comes up for me as I'm hearing this story is, okay, you were in another country. It feels like a little movie, even the story that you're telling us feels like it's a make-believe movie. But number one, yes, it was happening in Thailand, but I just want us to be 100% truthful with ourselves as educators that this is a situation happening globally, including in our nation, in our communities, and large cities, small, rural, these things do happen everywhere. So it is important for us as school leaders to at least have the awareness and the information we need.

And I'm sure you're going to share some tips and strategies for people to understand what they can do, what they need to be looking for, and then what they can do. But I know that this might feel like a topic you want to shut down and not think about, or that doesn't happen, I'm from a small town or this is a healthy community. It can be all of that. Would you say that's true, Laura?

Laura Parker: Yes, absolutely. Yeah. I think the reality is that trafficking and exploitation, it does happen in every country. And there's an estimated over a million victims of human trafficking specifically in the United States today. And I think the intersection particularly with educators is the real mass wave that we've seen exploitation go online. And those numbers are the numbers that are the most alarming to me, you know, from my seat.

You know, I've been in this work for 15 years and I'm a former educator myself. I'm a teacher and I think when I look at the train of exploitation that's coming to our kids via the online world, that's what's very alarming and should be sounding the alarms for all of us, even though you're right, Angela, it's an uncomfortable topic to talk about.

Angela Kelly: Yes. And I just wanted to put that on the table because I think back when I was teaching, and I was an elementary teacher, but to me, I can't fathom somebody thinking like that about children because I love

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children. I went into teaching because I love children. And it's like, no, people don't really do these things. And those are just movies.

But I wouldn't have been able to fathom even thinking like something like that happening in my school as a teacher, let alone as a principal. But yet, when I became a principal and then eventually up into the district, your lens, your perspective, it widens so much because you are now privy to information around families and community situations that maybe you were not listening to or you weren't privy to as a classroom teacher.

And I was shocked, actually, Laura, at the types of incidents going on in our families, in our communities. And that really opened my eyes to wanting to be an advocate, not just somebody who, if a situation came by, I would handle it, but to be aware and informed enough to be on the lookout for certain types of behaviors or the ways that kids might communicate this and then what to even do, where to take it and where to go with it. Can you walk us through that?

And I love that you were in education so you can understand the feelings of fear that we have as a teacher, being afraid to speak up because we fear for the child, we fear for their family, or we fear for ourselves, but also needing to be that advocate for a child who doesn't have the power or the voice to protect themselves.

Laura Parker: Yeah, yeah, it's really important. I think one of the things we're really seeing is that kids are handling this type of online exploitation and dangerous relationships online largely by themselves because a lot of the adults in their lives aren't pressing in and having conversations around digital safety, especially. And we have seen kids in elementary school, we've seen kids in middle school and in high school, all across the gamut, really feel trapped because they don't know if this is a safe relationship or they don't know if they should send that picture.

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And all of this is happening really under our, you know, the parents' noses and under the teachers' noses. And so often, I think as educators, we stand in a reactive stance. And I think that's really normal, right? Let's wait until a problem arises and then we'll handle and we'll react and we'll respond. And it's important obviously to know how to respond appropriately when things happen. But what we're seeing is that prevention and starting conversations preemptively is such an important tool for teachers to have in their tool belt when it comes to protecting kids online.

We talk a lot about this reality that if kids are not consistently talking about digital safety with trusted adults in their lives, then when something happens that is really scary, they're likely not going to think that's a safe conversation because they've never talked about it before, you know, with a safe person in their lives. And so, yeah, so being an advocate is really important even though it might feel intimidating.

And we encourage people, you know, two things, I think, in the education space, especially, is that what does it look like to have these informal micro conversations with students about their online worlds? You know, it doesn't necessarily have to be that you block out a whole health class for six weeks and talk about online safety, but you can have these micro conversations with students. Hey, you know, what are you watching on YouTube lately and do you play Roblox? You can have these informal conversations again, just building trust with students.

And that is something you can do every day. And then it is important, I think that educators really look at what does it look like to have curriculum and more formalized structured training where you're really giving kids, you know, structured safety skills and how to navigate the online world because I mean when you look at the statistics around online exploitation of kids, the numbers have just absolutely skyrocketed.

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You know, here in Colorado, we have a program called Influenced, which does prevention education around digital safety. And we work with parents and teachers and students. And just in our towns here in Colorado, we have seen that over 56% of kids have reported an online danger or an online harm that has been done to them in their last year.

And we had one class of ninth graders, we had 50 students, they were in ninth grade health class and they did one of our courses with Influenced and they reported 105 instances of online predation. And that was just 50 students reporting 105 different instances. You know, whether the adults in the room like to talk about it or not, it is something that the kids are dealing with that are right in our classrooms and we have to be the ones that start the conversation.

Angela Kelly: Yes. And I was just thinking as you were speaking, how it's very easy for educators to be like, "Oh my gosh, I'm hearing this. I care. This matters to me. And it's one more thing." You know, where my brain was going is, yes, but we in education are learning that how we're spending our time now may not be the most effective way and what we need to be spending our time in. Like when I think about this, I love that there is actually curriculum out there for both students, teachers, but also parents.

So we can share that responsibility and having these conversations, normalizing these conversations so they become more comfortable. So kids feel safe to report them and they know what to look out for because we can't be hovering and there's only so many parental controls you can put on your computer or on the phones. But kids need to have an awareness and need to know who to go to in the event something feels off or seems off. If we don't have these conversations, we're going to have bigger problems in our schools than reading, writing, and math, right?

We need to incorporate, yes, we need the academic intellect, we need rigorous programming in our schools, but this is a form of rigor. It's a form

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of self-protection, self-awareness, relationships, understanding, how to navigate the world in a way that keeps people alive, that keeps people safe. And I can think of no more important curriculum than what it is that you're doing.

Laura Parker: Thank you. Yeah, I totally agree, Angela. I just think there is this truth that kids on average are spending between eight and nine hours a day in recreational screen time every day. And so if they're spending eight to nine hours a day in recreational screen time anyway, the impact of that is huge, obviously on their mental health and their relationships. But I think you take kids that are, obviously, we all know their brains are not fully developed even through high school. And you take these kids that are consuming eight to nine hours online and talking to strangers in private chat rooms.

And you add that formula to these underdeveloped brains, and then you add that to this lack of basic safety skills online, this lack of basic understanding of how to recognize a potential online predator or how not to give private information out or how not to send an inappropriate picture, all of that. And you add all of that that formula together, and then you add this other element of the fact that the spike of professional predators for our kids has just skyrocketed.

And we're unfortunately, we're serving our kids up to them because we, you know, the adults aren't talking about it. We don't really understand how online exploitation works. We're a little nervous to press into it. We have too much to do, like you said, as educators, and so it feels like something that should just be handled at home.

But the reality is that so much, you know, it impacts so much for the student and then for the school culture. And the, you know, what you pay for in terms of police reports and child impact and mental health in the long term, if something does happen, is really obviously a lot more costly than what it

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takes to press in and have a prevention education curriculum or program going in your school that really tries to cut some of this off at the head.

Angela Kelly: Yeah. No, prevention is always a better cure than the reaction after the fact and the cost associated with it. I mean, this really is a conversation of life and death and we want to honor that and really respect the nature of the conversation. So I can imagine, and I guess my question is like, what is the timing? So as an elementary principal, I can see getting a lot of pushback because kids are young and is this conversation developmentally appropriate and how can we have conversations around keeping kids safe?

And then when do we start to integrate these conversations in? You know, I'm thinking elementary, then we've got middle, and then we've got high school where they are developmentally engaging in social media in different ways or being online in different ways as they age. So can you tell us a little bit about like how you guide schools at each of those levels to have these conversations?

Laura Parker: Yeah, you know, I think the most important thing to try to get into our minds is that if we're going to allow a child to play an online game like Roblox, then if they're old enough to do that, then they are old enough to learn about some basic safety tips. I think so often, we will say, "Oh, play the online games, even get on social media, consume YouTube, etc.," and we'll talk about safety when they get to ninth grade. But unfortunately, the reality is that these kids are being exposed at second and third grade, especially if they're in these Discord chat rooms that they're private and there are adults that are engaging with them in these private chat rooms.

And so, yes, obviously there is a flow on what conversations you can have. I would say for elementary school kids, there needs to be definitely conversations with the parents as early as possible around what is coming. I think because as much as you can encourage parents to delay their

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child's access to the internet, to a smartphone, to some of these online games with private chat rooms, the better. So I think parent education is really, really critical in elementary school and offering that to parents.

But I do think even for children, you know, there are some basic frameworks. Hey, we never when we're online, we never ever talk to someone that we don't know in person. We never ever give our address or our age to someone. I mean, there are some basic things that you can teach people just like you would teach a third grader, don't get in a van at the park, even if someone is, a stranger is offering you candy. You know, we teach kids that.

So we have to be teaching them the same kind of basic safety skills even in elementary school, especially if they have access to these online gaming platforms and the online world. And then definitely when you get into middle school and high school, you have to just be honest about what these kids are seeing and what they're experiencing. And that just increases in extremity as the kids get older. Obviously, sexting is huge for high schoolers. We're seeing that flow into the middle school as well.

AI-generated child sexual abuse material is also unfortunately really increasing. And so that means that in fact, it increased over 6,000% in the last year. And so that means whereas before in middle school and high school particularly, sextortion, which is essentially a minor or a child or an even an 18-year-old, you know, someone sends an inappropriate or a nude image to someone else. And then that person extorts them for money or blackmails them for money. So that's sextortion.

And sextortion is the fastest growing crime according to the FBI against kids today in the United States. And the target for sextortion is actually boys ages 14 through 17. So that's interesting. A lot of people assume that it's just for girls, but sextortion, a real target is boys. But we have that going and that's happening in middle school and high school kids and oftentimes

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they're just paying the crypto or paying the Venmo quietly and mortified because they don't want this picture to be released.

But then there's now there's the AI generated CSAM, which essentially means that predators are just taking, you know, the face of a seventh grader and nudifying that, and then reaching out to that seventh grader and saying, "Oh, I'm going to put this on your Snapchat. I'm going to put this all over. I'm going to DM this to all of your friends if you don't give me \$100 on Venmo by tomorrow." And so these little seventh graders are horrified and think, "Oh my gosh, well, I just have to pay the \$100."

And so that's how that, you know, you really have to have the courage to start talking about that because that is going to start happening to them even in middle school and high school. But, you know, obviously you're not having that conversation with a third grader or a second grader yet.

Angela Kelly: Right. Yes. No, and I think a lot of this conversation is around our discomfort as adults. It is uncomfortable to think about a student being exposed to that, a child being exposed to that. And yet they are. So it does not behoove anyone for us to put our head in the sand because we are uncomfortable. That's where I come in as a leadership coach, right? I help you navigate the feelings of discomfort around these topics so that you can come up with an approach, a plan that works for you and your school.

But a lot of this, I do feel like parents are embarrassed or ashamed to talk about it or the kids are worried their parents will be mad. And then teachers, that's an uncomfortable conversation to have with children that aren't your own children. They are students. And so I'm assuming your services help educators navigate how to have those conversations, how to communicate with families so that there is a collaborative approach to this conversation, to education, to awareness, and to safety for all of our kids.

Laura Parker: Yeah, yeah, we do. We talk to teachers a lot about, okay, what, how do we respond in the first five minutes? And how do we have

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relationships in the classroom and with the parents because it is a collaborative approach. And I do think you're totally right, Angela, it's the adult discomfort. Our kids are way down the track on what the realities are in their online and their eight hours that they're spending a day. And we are back here just kind of inching along because we still can't reconcile the fact that this is the world.

Angela Kelly: Yes.

Laura Parker: But the fact that we cannot reconcile that this is the world doesn't change the world. The world that is for our kids is the world that is for our kids. And they could very easily be accepting a DM profile request from a stranger that they think is, you know, another fifth grade student. And actually is, you know, a online predator in another country that is reaching out to hundreds of kids every day. And so our discomfort should not be the thing that keeps us from keeping our kids safe.

And, you know, we can put our heads in the sand about it, or we could just burn it all down and just say, "Forget it, no technology ever." But I think the real invitation is how do we as teachers and as educators become trusted guides to children in this scary online world?

Angela Kelly: Because that's what I was saying, there's only so many protections you can put in place and you can, you can have a child abstain for so long, but eventually technology will get into their hands, right? Like it's right here. And because it's also so enticing, they will seek it out. And I think like I wouldn't want, you know, I have a son who's 27 now, but I wouldn't want him to have been 14 to 18 years old.

So in high school with no knowledge of what's going on in the world and then be exposed to all of it at once at the age of 18 and be overwhelmed and either shut down or get completely sucked into something because there wasn't information, there wasn't awareness or any kind of experience with it until much later. So I agree. I think this is a conversation that is just

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essential because it is the world they live in. And as educators, our job is to help empower students for the world in which they live. And this is the world in which they're living.

So it feels like there's really no other option but to have this and then to manage our own discomfort as the adults, the more comfortable we get, meaning like the more we're willing to feel the discomfort and expand it into normalcy, the easier it will get for us. But children will see it as a normal conversation and they'll see you as, I'm assuming, like when you're talking about, oh, it's safe to talk with them about it. They care. They want to know. And that opens the child up to say, "Hey, someone just asked me for \$100 on Venmo and took a photo that really isn't even me, but, you know, or whatever happened." But they need somewhere to go with it. And that should be us.

Laura Parker: Yeah. And you think about any difficult conversation with kids that we have, whether it be drugs or sex or anything that feels, you know, like those kind of taboo conversations.

Angela Kelly: Like coming of age conversations.

Laura Parker: Coming of age conversations. Yeah. And and this reality that when they when it becomes something that is silent and that's not talked about, then right? That is prime targets for for secrets to grow and for shame to grow and for kids to feel really like they're on their own as they try to handle something.

Angela Kelly: Yeah. Because if we think it's taboo and we treat it as taboo, then it must be taboo. So they will do everything in their power to, especially if they're embarrassed that they got kind of sucked into something and they thought it was legitimate, even if they had a little bit of awareness, like it can feel embarrassing or shameful to to see like you got, you know, duped or or something like that. But can you tell us a little bit, as educators, that's primarily who's listening to this, what are some things we

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should be looking for? Like how can we expand our awareness and then what's maybe the first step we should take in supporting a student?

Laura Parker: I think the biggest thing to be aware of is in your classrooms or in your relationships with your students. I think, and this would go for any kind of abuse, but just watch for sudden changes of behavior. You know, if a child is normally outgoing and engaging and all of a sudden they are depressed or isolated or like they're pulling back from others. I think that's a sign that something is wrong and it might not be anything to do with online exploitation, but it might be. I think the other thing to watch for is if kids, and this is a little bit difficult as educators, but it could be a flag.

You know, if kids start to get very secretive about their phones or about their iPads or about their technology. You know, there's some time in the classroom and people have phones out and they're checking, etcetera. And then you have one kid that you just can tell is really hiding... They don't want anybody else to see that screen. I think that would be a pretty significant red flag. And then obviously, if they tell you that anything is going on or is happening.

And I think if a student does come to you and shows you anything, whether it's criminal cyberbullying, even from their peers, or it's, I sent this image and it got sent around to the ninth grade. I sent it to my boyfriend Johnny and Johnny sent it around to the ninth grade or I feel like I'm right now in the middle of a sextortion something, and they won't have the language for that, but someone's threatening me or anything like that. The most important thing is really to watch yourself and how you respond in the first five minutes.

You know, those first five minutes of a response either is going to allow the kid to keep talking to you or is going to shut them down. So we always tell people just take a deep breath and keep your face neutral and don't

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immediately rapid-fire with a billion questions of who is this? And where did you meet them? And what are they saying? Let me see your phone.

Just let them tell their story as much as they're willing to tell and make sure that the first words coming out of your mouth are, "Hey, thank you for telling me. This is not your fault." I think that's really important too because a lot of times we direct our anger towards the vulnerable 13-year-old and not the online predator that tricked them. And so it's really important for us to just really create the safe, emotionally safe place for a student.

But then, you know, you need to immediately encourage the student. After you see something, you need to immediately encourage the student to block that account that is harassing them or bullying them. If it is a threatening message as a teacher, you can screenshot that, but you do want to be careful if it is a nude image of a minor, you do not want to screenshot that because you don't want to be capturing any images of, you know, a sexually explicit image of a minor.

So you're going to be tempted to take the phone and scroll back and see the whole conversation and try to kind of flip into investigator mode, but you really need to immediately look, encourage the child to block the account immediately and stop engaging. If it is a threatening message that is harm, then you can you're welcome to screenshot that, but if it's a, you know, sexually explicit image, do not screenshot that. It still needs to be blocked.

And then you need to ask the child if you can take the phone and then you need to report that. So if it's something that you think could be a crime, then there are a couple resources. Obviously, the local police is one source. There's also the CyberTipline, is an excellent source. They have a phone line and then also you can access them online. And then obviously you would need to engage parents and...

Angela Kelly: Yeah, the district would have to be informed.

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Laura Parker: All of the things, yeah, all of the things that happen within the school would need to happen too. But it is really important to involve the local police, especially if it is any kind of, obviously, child sex trafficking or criminal cyber bullying or...

Angela Kelly: Well, we're mandatory reporters, yes.

Laura Parker: ...harassment. All of that. Yes, yeah. So you have to follow your same mandated reported line even for, you know, an online crime or harm as you would any other.

Angela Kelly: So the question that came up for me was if we're, let's say, you were saying there are certain things you don't screenshot or you're telling them to block it right away for their own safety. The thought that came up for me was, well, wouldn't that then eliminate evidence? But I'm assuming that the powers that be have a way to extract that information. So you don't need to be the personal investigator as the educator. I guess that's what I'm trying to say.

Laura Parker: Yeah. And that's a great clarifier, Angela. When you block an account, it's important that you don't erase or delete past messages. So when you're blocking an account, that just is meaning that account is not going to be able to keep messaging you, but the child should still be able to look on their phone and see the past messages.

Angela Kelly: Prior. Okay.

Laura Parker: So yeah, so it won't delete that. But that is an important thing. You need to make, don't go through and just automatically, you know the kid's embarrassed, he's crying, and you're automatically...

Angela Kelly: Deleting.

Laura Parker: ...going through and just, let me just delete, because then that is deleting evidence. So yeah, that's an important...

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Angela Kelly: But blocking it just means no longer able to receive future messages from them, but then also letting the phone be as it is so that there is evidence, but you don't need to be, I think the educator needs to hear. You as the principal, you as the teacher, you as even the district level, you don't need to be the investigator. That's where we turn it over to the authorities, but our job is to report it and communicate it, report it, keep the kid safe.

And then whatever documentation is required from us in whatever protocols your district has, you can follow those in terms of documentation. But when it comes to the actual phone, the actual evidence, that burden is not on your shoulders, but the reporting of it is as a mandatory reporter.

Laura Parker: Yes, absolutely. Yeah, that's really, that is really important because it's very complicated in this space. It is a new field that people are just catching up with. How to combat? What are the terms? What's a crime? What's not a crime? How do we catch them? I think the important thing from an educator's perspective is just to recognize, yes, you're a mandated reporter, you need to report that.

But then also just to really, I think sometimes there's a tendency for us to minimize online exploitation as not as harming as other forms of abuse or exploitation to a child. And it's really important just to recognize the impacts of, you know, having your picture stolen or feeling like someone is threatening you constantly online. I think the real thing that's hard to explain is that, you know, when a child is being bullied, let's take bullying for example, if a child is being bullied in person at the gym class, they have to deal with that for one 45-minute session of a day.

And it's horrible and it's one 45-minute session of a day. But if they are cyberbullied, especially if there's criminal harassment involved online, and that's coming to them through all their social media channels, all their gaming platforms, anytime they open their phone with their text, all of their

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iMessages, then they don't get away from that at all. So the harm on a child from a mental health capacity is really significant. So it's important too that educators not minimize how big of a deal it is in a child's life.

Angela Kelly: Yes. Yes, and I think like how upset I would be if a student of mine came and said this to me. Imagine how you're feeling and it's our job to manage our own emotions, which is literally what I do. I help educators manage themselves so that they can help students do the same. But imagine how you're feeling now, think about what the child's feeling. That's why it's important for us to have those emotional regulation skills to be able to stay neutral, to stay open, to not make comments or to not even get in defensive mode, a protective mode in loving your student and wanting to support them, but staying neutral because you're holding space for their emotional experience and helping them see you as a safe space.

And if you aren't able to regulate, that will not feel safe to the children and they're not going to come and tell you. They will be like, "Whoa, I totally upset her. She's feeling her feelings and there's no space for mine." So I think it's really important as triggering as this is to have a child share this with you or to show you something that's going on and to want to protect and defend them right there on the spot. It's important for us to maintain that space and that regulation long enough to have the child tell you what they need to tell you.

If they can let go of that phone and give it to you in order for the authorities to check it, you can have your emotional processing of your own separate and away from the student. So that and that's hard to do. I understand, I'm recognizing how hard that is, but you can feel those feelings, but keep in mind as a child sharing, it's really important that they have the floor, they have the space for you to be a safe person, and then you can process separately once they're done sharing.

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Laura Parker: Yeah, absolutely. We were actually chatting with a family here in Colorado and his son, and we have a video on this that I can maybe share in the show notes because they were able to share their story. But his son was 16 years old and accepted a friend request on Instagram from someone he thought was a peer, a attractive other, you know, ninth grader, 10th grader. And he started chatting with her and she eventually sent him inappropriate pictures and asked for some back and so he sent them to her.

And, well, to the account, and the second he sent those photos, it flipped and this account started harassing him for these gift cards. They wanted these gift cards. And so this kid was just horrified and had three days of just panic and sick to his stomach, trapped feeling. Eventually he was able to tell his mom, they had a really good relationship and the parents got involved and they were able to handle it really, really well. And one of the things that the dad said in his interview was he just talked about how his immediate sense was to rise up and to fight and to lop off heads, you know.

But just was able to stay calm in that moment and really think about, okay, this what is this like for my child and how do we get him to feel like he's in a safe place and he can talk about his experience as the center show, you know? And then eventually they were able to go to the FBI and report it and followed up all the right protocols. But I think it's such a good example because so often, you're right, Angela, we bring our own anger and responses to the situation, which just really, especially in a situation where the child, in a lot of instances feels like they had something to do to be blamed for it. Like they had some part in the interaction.

Angela Kelly: Yes. That you're angry with them, right.

Laura Parker: That you're angry with them. And so, yeah, that emotional regulation. Oh my goodness, is so important, especially in those first

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moments where someone, when a child comes and is courageous enough and desperate enough maybe to tell you what's really going on.

Angela Kelly: Yeah. If educators are interested in learning more, creating awareness, where can they go? What do you offer for maybe school leaders or for educators, teachers and programming for students? Can you just let the listeners know where they could go to get more information on this very important topic?

Laura Parker: Yeah, thank you. Yes, we have a federally funded program called Influenced and you can find it at influenced.org. And it's also it's connected to our organization, which is theexodusroad.com, so you can also go there and find Influenced. And influenced, we offer parent academies. So we have that online. We also do parent workshops. If you'd like us to come and do either a virtual training or an in-person training depending on where you're located, to parents around what they should be watching out for. Those are going like crazy.

And then we also have student programming for kids ages, or grade 6 through 12th. And we have a student curriculum. We're developing an elementary appropriate curriculum as well right now. And then we also have teacher training. So we have certification programs and then also teacher education and a lot of resources. So over at influenced.org. And I'd love to give you a specific email as well that I'll include in my show notes that you can email in and we can, our team will be able to direct you.

Angela Kelly: In the right way. Okay, fabulous.

Laura Parker: Yeah, in the right way. So yeah.

Angela Kelly: Wonderful. Any final thoughts, words of wisdom, words of encouragement for our educators out there because they're entering into a brand new school year, so this may be on their mind, especially given the political climate of all that's going on, the conversations that are happening

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just nationally. What are some words you'd like to share with our school leaders out there as they're joining in for that new year and they're kicking off a new school year with the kids?

Laura Parker: Yeah, well, first off, I just want to say thank you for what you're doing.

Angela Kelly: Aw, thank you.

Laura Parker: I feel like teachers and educators are some of the most valuable members in any society and it is a profession that doesn't get thanked enough. I'm from a family of educators. My mom is a teacher, my sister is a special ed teacher, and the work that they do, that you all do is so valuable. So I just want to say honestly and so sincerely thank you for what you're doing in the lives of kids and especially vulnerable kids that you come in contact with every day.

And then I think the second encouragement would just be that I would encourage you just to really consider what does it look like to continue to step in to what it means to really look at the holistic care of a child and the holistic safety of a child. And if the people under your purview in your influence in your school, if those kids are under the umbrella of your care and you're not talking about digital safety, which is the biggest public health threat towards kids today in America. If you're not talking about that topic, then you're not actually, you're missing a big part of what it means to care for them.

There's a lot of different ways that you can address that, but I would just really sincerely encourage you and challenge you to think about what does it look like for you to take a step into the conversation because whether we talk about it or not as adults, kids are dealing with it right now. And they'll deal with it this school year and the next year and the next year after that. And so I would just encourage you to step into the conversation and think

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about, okay, what can I do to bring this front and center in my school, in my classroom, and with my colleagues.

Angela Kelly: Yes. And the way that I, when I heard you say that, you know, caring for them holistically, this is holistic education because it is we are simply educating kids on how to stay safe, informing them, giving them information just like we give information on science and math and history and social studies and physical education and taking good care of their bodies and, you know, learning how to handle big emotions.

This is another form of education. And it's our job to get more comfortable with it. It's our job to be informed, which is what you're doing. You're helping teachers feel like they feel confident enough and competent enough to be having these conversations. And once you're there, it becomes just another aspect of teaching and learning.

Laura Parker: Yeah, absolutely. And that's the beauty of normalizing it, right? Like when we can normalize it, then it becomes something that kids feel a lot more safe to come and talk to us about.

Angela Kelly: Right. Yes. And then it just becomes like, this is something we learned like learning to tie our shoes and how to go to the bathroom by ourselves and what to do if you spill your chocolate milk on the floor in the cafeteria, right? And this is, here's what to do if you feel unsafe while you're playing your game or online or depending on the age level, like the appropriateness of the conversation, but then it just becomes like, this is yet another thing to learn and another way to be safe.

So Laura, I'm so grateful that you and your team reached out. I was not aware of your services and again, meeting and greeting with you, just it was a no-brainer to have this conversation. And if we need to have further conversations or further stories need to be shared with educators, feel free to come back to the podcast at any time. And I would love to be in touch with the work that you're doing and share it with all educators.

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Laura Parker: So thank you. Yes, we'll definitely get you all the links and I just appreciate the conversation and I appreciate your leadership in this space, Angela, just to keep bringing important relevant topics to the forefront.

Angela Kelly: Thank you. Yes, this is wonderful. So that's it, folks. That's what we've got for you today. Have a beautiful week. Have a safe week. I invite you to look into all of the work that Laura and her team are doing. And it was at influenced.org. We'll put that all on the show notes, so take a look at that. And we wish you a wonderful week. Take good care. Bye-bye.

Thanks for listening to this episode of *The Empowered Principal® Podcast*. If you enjoyed this episode and want to learn more, please visit AngelaKellyCoaching.com where you can sign up for weekly updates and learn more about the tools that will help you become an emotionally fit school leader.