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How to ensure the safe use of ICT in schools

Why do I need to consider health and safety issues using ICT?

Health and safety regulations require schools using ICT to assess and reduce risk, to make sure that work is planned to allow breaks or changes of activity, to offer information and training, and to provide eye tests on request.

Employers have the legal responsibility for these health and safety requirements in schools. In practice, however, it is teachers who do much of the day-to-day work to ensure that ICT equipment is used correctly and safely.

What do I need to consider to ensure safe use of ICT equipment?

Comfort

Users should be comfortably positioned, with easy access to all equipment. Whilst sitting, it is essential that the user can adjust his or her position in relation to the equipment as appropriate. Users should take frequent short breaks from computer work.

Space

There should be enough space around a workstation for paper, books and any other materials, including special educational needs equipment such as concept keyboards.

There should also be space for more than one pupil at a time, and for the teacher to gain access. It is important to ensure that gangways and emergency exits are kept clear.

Also bear in mind that a major cause of accidents in computer suites is baggage left lying around which can cause pupils to trip.

Seating

The height of the chair should be adjustable, as should the tilt of the back of the chair. The lower arms should be roughly horizontal when working, and knees should fit comfortably under the desk, with thighs roughly horizontal.

Users should change posture frequently and take 10-minute breaks away from the computer to stretch their limbs.

Monitors

These should tilt and swivel to suit the requirements of individual users. Screens should be positioned to reduce reflections and glare from lights and windows. The top of the screen should be roughly at eye level.

There may be screen distortion if speakers are situated too close to the monitor. It is advisable, therefore, to position speakers about 30cm away from the computer.

Keyboards

Users should have the option to have the keyboard flat or tilted. It is important to develop a good keyboard technique. Repetitive strain injury (RSI) presents a potential risk for anyone typing with only one or two fingers, usually their index fingers.

RSI is a painful condition affecting the fingers, wrists and elbows, with the potential to cause irreversible problems. For children with years of typing ahead of them, using the keyboard with index fingers only is highly risky. RSI is easier to

prevent than cure.

Software

Using defective CD-ROMs or DVDs in high-speed drives can cause them to shatter and lead to pieces of disk escaping from the drive. To ensure that disks are in perfect condition, hold them up to the light to check for cracks, scratches or defects near the inner rim.

Noise

Almost all ICT equipment emits background noise if the power is switched on, even when not in use. Many software packages also feature sound as part of their operation.

Other users can be noisy or distracting, especially those working in groups. Headphones will help to reduce distractions and aid concentration.

Heat and light

Ideally, the temperature of an ICT suite should be between 18° and 24° degrees, with humidity between 40 per cent and 60 per cent. Almost all ICT equipment gives off heat which can build up during the day and be quite oppressive for users, as well as detrimental to the equipment.

Ensure that the room is well ventilated by using air conditioning if available. Ideally, blinds should be provided to ensure that users do not suffer from glare. Screens should be regularly cleaned.

Personal safety

When using equipment such as photocopiers, remember that clothing, jewellery and hair can become trapped in fast-moving parts. Photocopiers should be located in well-ventilated areas, and pupils should not be allowed to handle toners and inks or attempt to repair any faults.

Electrical safety

Under the Electricity at Work Regulations Act 1989, all electrical equipment should be maintained regularly. Always leave technical repairs to the experts.

Ensure that you have the necessary carbon dioxide fire extinguishers positioned near any ICT equipment.

The location of electrical equipment depends on the length of cables and the availability of sockets for telephones, TV aerials and power. It is essential that the location of the equipment does not increase the risk of danger to equipment or users. The school should ensure that there is a system in place for regular visual checks of plugs, leads and other electrical equipment.

Mobile equipment

ICT equipment is often heavy or bulky. You will need to assess the risk of lifting heavy or awkward equipment and use trolleys where appropriate.

Hazardous substances

The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations cover this area. Risk assessment is necessary when using toners, printing inks and cleaning materials. Fluids used for cleaning and in some reprographic processes are flammable. They should not be used in confined spaces; adequate ventilation should be maintained.