



eSafety – Information Sheet

Introduction

The internet can provide children and young people amazing opportunities to learn through exploration, play and social interaction. With the opportunities that are provided by internet use, there also come inherent risks. Apart from the primarily physical effects of internet over-use (sleeplessness, obesity or addiction) there are other risks, the effects of which may not be so immediately obvious.

With so much of our daily lives now being facilitated by the internet, it is almost impossible to control content that children are exposed to. Content on the internet is not broken into age or developmentally appropriate areas. Without supervision and guidance, a young child can either unintentionally or purposely find content that is disturbing, explicit or inappropriate. Most internet users will at some stage come across confronting content online and in the majority of cases this will not cause long-term harm. Problems can arise when this exposure is constant and is not discussed with an adult who can provide a balanced view.

This information sheet supports you to understand the risks associated with youth internet use, what signs you should be looking for to identify issues and what measures you can take to minimise the risks for a child or young person in your care.

Digital Reputation/Permanence

From the first photo that a parent or family member posts online of a child, that child has a digital reputation. The permanent nature of information on the internet can make changing or deleting information after sharing relatively pointless. It is common for information to be saved and shared almost instantly meaning that anything posted in a public forum can quickly become public property. For example, young people may think they are having a private conversation with someone over the internet, but it is relatively common practice for screenshots to be taken and for photos of messages to be shared.

This information can have an impact on how the child is perceived both online and offline, now and into the future. It is important for children and young people to understand the permanent nature of information on the internet and to consider this every time they share something online. A poor digital reputation can affect relationships and even job prospects later in life.

For more information around confidentiality, digital reputation and children in care see:

<https://www.dcp.wa.gov.au/FosteringandAdoption/CurrentFosterCarers/Documents/Confidentiality%20Information%20Sheet.pdf>

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/education-resources/iparent/staying-safe/digital-reputation>

Social Networking

Social interaction through social media, online gaming, sharing and blogging is a vital aspect of children and young people's social and creative lives. Social media is used to have fun, make and maintain relationships with friends and family, share interests and explore identity. Contrary to common opinion, social networking is not a replacement for offline and face-to-face interactions but an extension of them.

The effects of social media use are wide-ranging and dependant on the type of media, the type of use, the amount and extent of use, and the characteristics of the individual child. Children today are growing up in an era of highly personalised media use experiences, so carers should develop personalised Media Use Plans for the children they care for. These plans need to consider the child's age, health, behaviour and developmental stage.

It is important that children understand all the features and terms of use for social networking sites, in particular, how to set their profile to 'private' and change their sharing controls. Remember, even if their profile is set to private, they cannot control what their friends will do with the information that they post.

For more information on privacy settings for popular platforms, visit:

<https://www.thinkuknow.org.au/resources/guides/social-media-and-reputation-management-guide>

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/education-resources/iparent/staying-safe/privacy>

Minimum sign-up ages for popular Social Media platforms

To minimise these risks for younger users, the majority of popular social media platforms have minimum sign-up ages.

Platform	Minimum Sign-up Age
Facebook	13
Twitter	13 (not asked but stated in terms)
Instagram	13
Snapchat	13
Youtube	18 (13 -17 with parents' permission)
Tumblr/Reddit/Pinterest/Vine	13
Steam / Fortnite / WoW	13

Considerations for online safety

It is important to teach children and young people to:

- be careful of requests – only accept 'friend' requests from people known in real life. This reduces the chance of getting into an unsafe situation;
- block anyone who is negative or unsafe, this stops them from having contact and seeing profile information;
- think before photos are uploaded and shared. Once it's uploaded, it's no longer private and could be viewed by friends, family, teachers and strangers;

- consider setting social media accounts to 'private' so that information is only shared with friends and family. Constantly check privacy settings to make sure the account is secure;
- be mindful of what is posted to others, consider the impact the post will have on other people;
- think carefully about sharing links to other sites, the content could be embarrassing, upsetting or hurtful to others;
- always think about privacy, avoid sharing personal information online that could be misused by someone in real life. Be careful about unwittingly providing information through photos and 'check-ins'; and
- protect their identity, they should pick a username that isn't their real name and a profile picture that doesn't show any of their unique information.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is the use of information and communication technologies to support deliberate, repeated and hostile behaviour. These actions can be performed with the intent to hurt another person socially, psychologically or physically. Although cyberbullying can occur to people of all ages, it can be especially harmful to children and young adults experiencing self-esteem and identity issues common during this age period. Cyberbullying has much in common with bullying but there are marked differences which can make its effect more harmful:

- Cyberbullying can be incredibly invasive as it can occur at any time, even in the home (statistically, it is more likely to happen when the child is home).
- Cyberbullying can involve a massive audience and the evidence of it can remain on the internet for the rest of the child's life.
- People who cyberbully can do so anonymously which separates the behaviour from immediate consequences or punishment.

Examples include:

- abusive texts and emails, including threats of violence;
- public posting of hurtful or humiliating messages, images or videos;
- imitating others online through the creation of fake profiles and identities;
- actively excluding others online; and/or
- unwanted sharing of personal information.

Children as Victims of Cyberbullying

It is often more difficult to identify the effects of cyberbullying than it is for traditional 'face-to-face' bullying. Appropriate actions to take if the child has been a victim of cyberbullying include:

- Blocking or unfriending the person who is bullying the child. This is an immediate but generally short-term response as most cyberbullies can find other avenues by which to intimidate and cause hurt.
- Asking the school to provide mediation if the bully is at the same school. Most education providers have clear guidelines about dealing with cyberbullying.
- Collecting evidence of bullying. It is worth taking screenshots or printed copies of conversations and offending material. This will facilitate further action should the bullying continue.

- Reporting the cyberbullying material to the service it occurred on. Most social media providers and Australian internet providers have to remove offensive material, sometimes it can simply be a matter of bringing it to their attention.
- Reporting cyberbullying to the Office of the eSafety Commissioner. If the site or social media service does not remove material within 48 hours of you reporting it you can lodge a complaint with the eSafety Commissioner.

Visit the eSafety website for further information:

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/complaints-and-reporting/cyberbullying-complaints>

Children as Cyberbullies

Children will often try to justify their behaviour, so a carer's role is to help them develop empathy for others. This requires ongoing discussions and encouraging the child to reflect on how their behaviour makes others feel. It is unhelpful for the child to be shamed or to ban access to technology; this kind of response prevents the child from opportunities to learn responsible online behaviour. It is more constructive for carers to take charge in setting the conditions of access to technology in order to encourage responsible use.

All children and young people are capable of bullying. A study over seven years¹ showed a majority of children bully others at some point during their time at school. Many stop as they grow older, however just as many continue. Those who consistently bully their peers long-term are learning to use their power to control and harm others. This pattern of behaviour can continue into adulthood. It is common for those who bully to also be victims of bullying. Young people who have been both a victim and a bully are at the greatest risk of future mental health issues.

For more information on what you can do to help prevent and respond to cyberbullying, visit:

<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/parental-involvement-preventing-and-responding-cyberbullying>
<https://www.esafety.gov.au/education-resources/iparent/online-risks/cyberbullying>
<https://headsapce.org.au/young-people/what-is-bullying-and-the-effects-on-mental-health/>

Other Issues to Consider

Grooming

Online grooming is a serious criminal offence and a process used by people with a sexual interest in children to prepare a child for sexual abuse. This occurs by building relationships to create emotional connection, to try to lower a child's inhibitions, or to heighten their curiosity regarding sex, with the aim of eventually meeting them in person for the purposes of sexual activity.

Grooming can take place via all forms of digital technology; social media, gaming sites, email, instant messaging programs, forums and chat rooms. Grooming is a private and secretive exchange and offenders will often warn the child against talking to anyone about what is occurring by claiming that no one will believe them or that they will get into trouble by 'telling'.

¹ Pepler, D. Jiang, D. Craig, W. Connolly, J. 2008. *Developmental trajectories of bullying and associated factors*.

Understanding and alerting children to the risks and signs of online grooming is one of the most effective means of prevention. Children can be kept safe by supervising their online activities or by limiting their access to sites that can facilitate online interaction with people they do not know and trust in real life.

If you are concerned that your child is being subject to online grooming contact the police immediately. If you are concerned about any sexual activity online involving a child, contact the Australian Federal Police.

For more information on grooming, including ways to educate a child in your care, visit:

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/education-resources/iparent/resources/iparent-online-grooming>

Early Sexualisation

Young people are naturally curious and interested in exploring sexuality. They are also exposed to a wide range of sexual imagery; in songs, video clips, movies, advertising and online. This can normalise sexualisation and cause children and young people to seek it out before they possess the maturity to fully understand it. This is especially frequent in the technology age as children and young people not only have the knowledge to find material online but also the ability to access it almost anywhere.

Sexting

'Sexting' means sharing sexually explicit photos or videos via the internet, mobile phones or other forms of social media. With modern technology this can be done instantly, but it can have serious and lasting consequences.

The child must be made to understand that anything sent digitally is transferred to the public domain and can continue to exist long past the sender's intent. Even applications which use auto-delete functions can be misused and data can be forwarded without the victim's knowledge.

For more information visit:

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/education-resources/iparent/online-risks/sexting>

<https://headspace.org.au/friends-and-family/understanding-sexting-and-image-based-abuse-for-family-and-friends/>

Image Based Abuse (IBA)

Image-based abuse is also commonly referred to as 'revenge porn', 'non-consensual sharing of intimate images', or 'intimate image abuse'. 'Revenge porn' is the term most commonly used in the media, but in many cases IBA is not about 'revenge', nor is it restricted to 'porn'. IBA can occur for a range of motives and can include many kinds of images and video.

For more information visit:

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/image-based-abuse/>

Pornography

While pornography is not new, the volume and range available as well as the way people are accessing it has changed. Research indicates that children and young people are accessing pornography at increasing rates, with boys aged 14 -17 years being the most frequent underage consumers of pornographic material.

Access and exposure to pornography can have a profound effect on children and young people's sexual beliefs. Exposure to pornography has been linked to unrealistic attitudes about sex, harmful attitudes about relationships and more sexually permissive attitudes. Viewing pornography can have an impact on attitudes about gender roles and has been linked to the objectification of women and the belief that men should be sexually dominant and women submissive. These beliefs and attitudes can be carried with them into adulthood and be the foundation of strange, perverse or even violent sexual behaviours.

For more information visit:

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/education-resources/iparent/online-risks/online-pornography>

Inappropriate Content

Aside from sexually explicit material, there is other content available on the internet that is inappropriate and potentially misleading for young people. For example, there are sites that encourage eating disorders or self-harm and even glorify the behaviour. For young people with mental health issues such as depression or dysmorphia, these sites can be damaging as they create an environment where users may normalise behaviour which is harmful, this can also impact a young person's self-body image and self-worth.

It is important to teach young people the difference between the real world and the 'Photoshop' world and the ways in which people present themselves online compared to how they actually act or appear. More information on avoiding inappropriate material can be found on the eSafety Commissioners website:

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/education-resources/iparent/online-risks/inappropriate-offensive-or-illegal-content>

Providing a Safe Environment

Online activity and safety should be discussed often. Communication is the key to protecting children from online exploitation. Monitor the child or young person's internet use; ask them what sites they visit or who they've been talking to and make sure children add their parents and carers as 'friends' to check any profiles they have created online.

Although it is important to have an awareness of a child's activity online, it is important not to violate their trust or privacy, or to overreact to news of them doing something unexpected online. It is important to have open lines of communication between you and the child so as to not force the child into being secretive about their activities online. The Office of the eSafety Commissioner's website has more information on measures that can be taken to minimise risk for youth with access to the internet:

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/education-resources/iparent/staying-safe/online-basics>

There are filters and controls that you can install on a home computer that will limit the content available on that system but it is harder to control what a young person has access to on their own device. Many of the dangers with youth internet use can easily occur on platforms which present themselves as 'safe'. With the anonymity afforded by online interaction, it is impossible for any online system to be truly 'safe'. For information on making your devices safe, visit:

<https://www.staysmartonline.gov.au/>

It may be more worthwhile creating an Acceptable Use Agreement or Media Use Agreement, a contract with clear rules and boundaries about online behaviour and expectations. A template for such a contract can be found on the ThinkUKnow website:

<https://www.thinkuknow.org.au/parents-portal>

Further Information

The Office of the eSafety Commissioner's website (<https://www.esafety.gov.au/>) contains multiple resources (both child and adult friendly) covering a range of internet-based risks and good strategies to mitigate them. Apart from information sheets for parents and carers, they have online quizzes to complete if you are worried that the child you are caring for might be the subject of online abuse or mistreatment as well as youth-friendly resources designed to teach the pitfalls of navigating the internet for children and young people.