Enhancing online safety for children
Response to the public consultation on key election commitments

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1 Introduction

The landscape of adolescent development has been significantly altered in recent years by the introduction of the Internet and the wealth of information and opportunities it offers. Internet use has become virtually universal among Australian adolescents in only a few decades (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2009). Young people are exposed to an open and collaborative online social culture, which enables increasing access to information and opportunities to maintain critical connections with friends and family. There are also substantial educational and social benefits associated with engagement in online activities, such as creative content production, dissemination and consumption (Collin, Rahilly, Richardson, & Third, 2011).

Young people are, however, at a dynamic stage of development in which risk-taking behaviours and immature decision-making capacities can lead to negative outcomes (Viner, 2005). This is evident in the growing recognition and consequences of cyberbullying and other negative online activities.

A thoughtful approach to enhancing online safety for children and young people is needed. Educational, regulative and legislative approaches can help to address negative behaviours online and protect the most vulnerable young people. Ideally, however, this is done within the context of the developmental complexity of adolescence, and while recognising young people's significant agency in understanding, shaping and moderating their own online lives.

This submission outlines a general response to the issues raised in the public consultation document *Enhancing Online Safety for Children.* The Australian Institute of Family Studies takes a broad view of the causes of negative online behaviours within a child, youth, family and community context, and the value of framing responses that relate specifically to this context.

2 Online games and cyberbullying

The online games industry itself is undergoing a major shift in realising the importance of addressing harassing behaviour. This industry response has been linked to the rise in female gamers coming forward about the sexual harassment they have experienced online (via blogs such as *Not in the Kitchen Anymore*), as well as many gamers of both sexes supporting changes to the online environment (including gameplay, forums to games and online gaming communities) to make it a more inclusive and safer environment for all players. Due to the publicity that cyberbullying in online gaming has received in the past year, steps have been

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taken by the largest firms to prevent and shut down harassing behaviour quickly, and with minimal disruption to other gamers.

An example of an industry response to cyberbullying is the Microsoft Xbox Live service.[2] As part of the Xbox Live service's terms and conditions, if a player is found to be engaging in bullying or harassing behaviour, Xbox services can:

> Take action against you including (without limitation) removing your content from the Services, suspending or cancelling your access to the Services, asking you to refrain from certain activities, blocking your console or device from accessing the Services, and/or referring such activity to appropriate authorities. In the event we take action against you for a violation of this Agreement, we may permanently delete, and you may permanently lose, some or all of the information or content associated with your Microsoft account and/or we may cancel your Services in their entirety. Content that is deleted may be irretrievable (Section 3.1, Xbox Live Terms of Use).

As part of a raft of changes aimed at tackling online harassment, Microsoft have introduced a "reputation system" that will enable gamers to police the online space they are inhabiting. According to early information this "coralling" system is: "Not simply a reporting system, this reputation rating will learn and judge on a variety of factors. The goal is that gamers will be grouped with other people who share similar social norms and values".[3] Therefore players who harass others will be put into the same online space, away from players who have been marked as having an excellent online reputation.

To further pressure behaviour change from gamers with a poor reputation, gamers' reputation scores will be visible to all gamers, and a player can quickly lose their good reputation if they continue to harass others who are attempting to play an online game. Players will be motivated to report bullying behaviour through incentives such as in-game credit (e.g., an upgrade to a game), better reputation, being promoted to become a game ambassador (someone who can promote the game in the game's community) or credit to buy things from an online store.

This example of change from within the industry and with the support of gamers indicates that:
- the concerns of those being victimised are being taken seriously;
- bystanders are willing to intervene and help police the online environment to make it safer; and
- gaming services are seeing the importance of tackling online bullying and are developing policies and actions that will:
  – change the behaviour of gamers;
  – ensure concerns are dealt with quickly and to prevent further disruption to the victim; and
  – ensure players are educated about appropriate online behaviour.

Massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG's) like *World of Warcraft* have focused on how gaming environments and game forums have been used for grooming and sexually abusing children and are updating their policies to prevent young users from being exploited.

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[2] Xbox Live is the online community for Xbox owners and users.

[3] <www.lazygamer.net/general-news/microsoft-coralling-the-trolls-together/>

It would be time- and cost-intensive for an independent commissioner to attempt to deal with concerns of bullying within online game environments. Conditions already exist where victims can contact services to have offending players banned and offensive material removed. Gamers themselves are involved in policing harassment, and understanding and monitoring this self-regulation is an important avenue of inquiry. The industry itself is tackling the issue and is far more likely to be aware of changes in online gaming technology and the movement of players than an independent agency.

Efforts to encourage cybersafety need to find a balance between monitoring behaviour and allowing young people to independently and age-appropriately negotiate their own boundaries. Most young people have a wealth of experience in using technology and are more adept at handling situations online than is often assumed by adults (Third, Richardson, Collin, Rahilly, & Bolzan, 2011).

3 Changing face of social media and interconnectedness

While social media and online interconnectedness have grown exponentially in the past 10–15 years, the technology is currently undergoing a shift in who is using social media and for what purposes. As an example, Facebook is the largest social media platform currently available on the Internet. Facebook has an estimated 1.23 billion users worldwide, of which 9 million are Australians who use Facebook on a daily basis.

However, there has been a considerable demographic trend away from young people using the most prominent types of social media. Data show that there has been a 25% drop in young people using Facebook, while at the same time the number of over-55-year-old users has increased (Ross, 2014). Youth who are moving away from Facebook are choosing to remain connected to friends via apps such as Snapchat, Tumblr or Whatsapp. These apps are used primarily on smart mobile devices (particularly phones) and do not require a user to have a profile or page, but can allow them to connect with friends and contacts via text messaging and photo sharing. Snapchat, for instance, allows users not only to share a photo but also a short message (similar to a text message). Both the photo and the message are deleted within ten seconds after they are opened. Bullying and harassment is happening increasingly on these platforms; however there is little that police can do (if someone is sent an explicit image for instance) because the photo is deleted and cannot be recovered once the message is opened. Using a platform like Whatsapp also means that users are not anonymous, as they can only contact each other if they have one another's phone numbers.

"Revenge porn"—a term given to sexually explicit materials, such as photos or video, being uploaded onto the Internet without the permission of one of the parties—is a new form of cyberbullying and harassment. Typically, material is posted to traditional websites, which host the sexually explicit materials, or traditional pornography websites. Young women aged 16–25 years, but in many cases women into their 40s, are affected when images or videos are published post-breakup with boyfriends or partners.

Currently there is no legislation to effectively deal with these websites, which often demand a monetary fee be paid in order for the material to be removed. Users who post the images and videos often add identifying and other contact details of the women, which has led to cases of online and real life harassment and stalking. It is not clear from the consultation document whether the commissioner and agency would be involved in tackling this phenomenon of revenge porn, which constitutes a serious form of cyberbullying, often perpetrated against young females.

The above examples of the changing face of communication between children and adolescents appear at present to be beyond the bounds of the commissioner and agency. If young people are moving away from social media sites, the new agency could very soon be circumscribed in where it can have influence. There are inherent difficulties in lodging complaints related to the use of apps where data are not stored long term but cyberbullying can take place. Additionally, there are issues related to requesting that service providers remove offensive material, as the material is not stored for more than a few seconds. There are ways to save offensive materials and on-circulate them, but this is often done from an individual's device between contacts via text or MMS services, and not from a social media network or a website and therefore is out of the control of the service provider.

All of these issues indicate the importance of adopting a balanced approach of providing developmentally appropriate education related to respectful relationships and encouraging responsible online use for children, young people and parents. In particular, such education programs need to be evidence-informed and evaluated as being effective in behaviour change, along with any legislative or punitive approaches.

4   Developmental considerations in offensive online behaviours[4]

For children and young people, the online and offline worlds are "seamless" in providing a holistic arena for communication, socialisation, play, research and learning (Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety [JSCCS], 2011; Willard, 2011). Consequently, children and young people don't necessarily see any difference between online and offline bullying (JSCCS, 2011). In one study, young people described cyberbullying simply as "bullying via the Internet" or "bullying using technology" (Vandebosch, & van Cleemput, 2008). This is further supported by the idea that many young people who perpetrate cyberbullying also engage in offline bullying, and many young people who have experienced cyberbullying have also experienced offline bullying (Pearce, Cross, Monks, Waters, & Falconer, 2011; Smith et al., 2008).

Cyberbullying is not a single behaviour that requires a single response. Respondents in the JSCCS (2011) survey indicated that they had differing reactions to cyberbullying—some were deeply affected, some were able to shrug it off, and others did not interpret certain acts as cyberbullying. Smith et al. (2008) found that the *type* of cyberbullying may influence the way in which young people perceived the effects, with the misuse of photographs and bullying using a mobile phone being perceived as having the greatest effect, and chat room and email incidents having the least.

Young people may not be aware of the harm they cause through cyberbullying (O'Brien & Moules, 2010). A message or email that may be considered by the sender to be a joke or idle remark may be taken extremely seriously by a young person who feels they are being cyberbullied (Cross et al., 2009). This again reflects the importance of considering a developmental framework when addressing online behaviours.

It is important to point out that, from a developmental perspective, exposure to online risk does not automatically translate to exposure to online harm. Risk-taking, rebellion and experimentation are all characteristics of adolescent development, and risky experiences can help to develop coping strategies and resilience (Green, Brady, Olafsson, Hartley, & Lumby, 2011). It has been argued that young people with limited access to the Internet and less

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[4] The content of sections 4–6 have been adapted from Robinson (2012).

experience of usage may in fact be more, rather than less, vulnerable in terms of online safety (Cross et al., 2009). If young people are disengaged from offline groups they may move online to engage with others, but they may lack the skills to disengage if confronted by an inappropriate situation (JSCCS, 2011). Their skill and knowledge level regarding technology is often low and therefore their need for information around cybersafety can be greater than that of other young people (JSCCS, 2011). The vulnerability of these young people is an under-researched area.

It is important to approach negative online behaviours such as cyberbullying by considering a broader developmental and societal context. Addressing online behaviours in isolation ignores the fundamental basis of these and other behaviours and how they are inextricably linked to the broader reality of young people's lives.

5   Parents' role in cybersafety

Parents' involvement in their children's safe use of technology should start from a child's first use. In later years, parents are a critical part of ensuring their teenage children use online services responsibly and safely, as part of a whole-of-community response to cyberbullying.

Parents have a critical role to play in detecting and responding appropriately and in a developmentally informed manner to negative online behaviours. The greater their own understanding of and engagement in online activities, the more likely they will be able to engage in meaningful conversations with teenage children about their own behaviours.

Children and young people's perceptions of their parents' knowledge about new technology influences the level of acceptance and value that they place on the advice offered by parents regarding online safety. In one US study of almost 800 12–17 year olds, teenage children whose parents were Internet users considered their parents as a greater influence in online behaviours than those with parents who did not go online (Lenhart et al., 2011). There was, however, a prevailing attitude among children and young people in the JSCCS (2011) survey that parents don't have a comprehensive awareness of "what happens" on the Internet. As such, children and young people thought that parents overstated the dangers and risks of Internet use.

Monitoring the Internet usage of their teenage children is a strategy that is often suggested for parents, and the literature indicates that the majority of parents do engage in monitoring behaviours at least some of the time. Monitoring behaviours include checking that sites are appropriate for their child's use, and keeping an eye on the screen, with checks more likely to occur at younger ages (81% of 8–15 year olds compared to 51% of 17 year olds) (Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2007).

Excessive monitoring by parents of Internet use, however, may limit a child's development of understanding about using technologies responsibly in other contexts. An analogy is children who holds their parents' hand every time they cross the road—without the opportunity to cross it alone they may not learn to do so independently (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, 2010). In one study, most children and adolescents agreed that the amount of parental interest in their online activities was appropriate and should remain the same (71%). Interestingly, 9–10 year olds were more likely to express a desire for parents to show more interest in their Internet use than older children (Green et al., 2011), possibly indicating that parents should become involved in monitoring behaviours at an age younger than they expect. In this respect, it seems important to note that parents who provide their children with access to mobile phones and computers, have a responsibility to ensure they themselves understand, role-model and communicate the fundamentals of good digital citizenship.

Parents can:

- Set boundaries around online activities in ways similar to establishing boundaries for other behaviours. This can include taking an active role in discussing with their children the benefits of online engagement, and how to respond to cyberbullying and other negative online behaviours, framed in a discussion about good cyber-citizenship (O'Keeffe, Clarke-Pearson & Council on Communications and Media, 2011).

- Increase their knowledge and become more adept at the use of technologies being used by their children (Mishna, Cook, Saini, Wu, & McFadden, 2009; O'Keeffe et al., 2011; Spears, Slee, Owens, & Johnson, 2008). Learning alongside children and young people can be an effective way to achieve this—parents can be encouraged to let their children be the "experts" and help them understand the tools that they are using online. An example of a program that has adopted this strategy is the Young and Well Co-operative Research Centre's Living Lab project.[5]

- Build a contextualised understanding of the importance of technology in children and young peoples' lives (Mishna et al., 2009), including contemporary online friendships and peer groups (Spears et al., 2008). It is important for parents and other adults to understand that if victims avoid online activities as a result of cyberbullying, they can exclude themselves from other helpful social relationships and interactions engaged in by their peer group as a result (Cassidy, Faucher & Jackson, 2013).

- Develop an online use plan, in partnership with other family members, which includes details of appropriate online topics, privacy setting checks and any inappropriate posts that have occurred on online profiles (O'Keeffe et al., 2011). Children and young people need the same moral and ethical guidance and clear, appropriate boundaries online as they do offline (Spears et al., 2008).

- Be aware of the strategies undertaken by their children's school to prevent and address cyberbullying, and support these strategies at home. This includes informing themselves of the details of responsible use policies and the rights and responsibilities of the school to take action if behaviour occurs outside of school hours. Children and parents should be actively involved in cyberbullying policy development (JSCCS, 2011a).

- Engage in open discussion and communication about online monitoring, as opposed to relying solely on filtering tools (O'Keeffe et al., 2011).

- Proactively and regularly access cybersafety resources designed for parents, to help them become familiar with emerging technologies and online trends.

6 Communication channels

Two important factors in addressing cyberbullying once it has occurred are the willingness for a child or young person to tell a parent about cyberbullying incidents and the parent's capacity to respond appropriately. A recent summary of the cyberbullying literature indicates that most victims of cyberbullying do not alert adults (Cassidy et al., 2013). In the JSCCS (2011) survey of children aged 9–15 years old, the proportion of respondents who had told an adult or family member about being cyberbullied ranged from 25% of 15 year old males to 64% of 11 year old females. Similarly, Green et al. (2011) found that one in three parents were unaware that their children identified as having been cyberbullied.

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[5] For further information, see: <apo.org.au/research/intergenerational-attitudes-towards-social-networking-and-cybersafety>.

There is a strong indication that young people are less likely to tell an adult about cyberbullying if they think that their access to technology could consequently be limited (Cross et al., 2009; JSCCS, 2011). Furthermore, many children and young people will not report behaviours for fear of retribution or punishment, and these children and young people may be most at risk of self-harm and suicidal behaviours related to cyberbullying. Research further indicates that young people may be less likely to tell someone that they had experienced bullying online than if they had been bullied offline (McGrath, 2009).

This indicates that responses to negative online behaviours needs to be more sophisticated than a complaints system that is open to parents, other adults and children themselves. Cassidy et al. (2013) indicated that victims often tell their friends, and that social support, including emotional and instrumental support, is likely to be an effective coping strategy. Empowering bystanders, support networks and friends may have the greatest likelihood of success in combating the negative effects of cyberbullying (Cassidy et al., 2013). In addition, young people themselves are willing to be involved and are crucial partners in promoting online safety.

7 Conclusion

The community as a whole is grappling with the issues related to the safety of children and young people online, not least within the context of stories related to very serious outcomes of cyberbullying, such as suicidal behaviours. A developmental approach to these issues is critical. Children and young people are growing up in an environment that seamlessly integrates the offline and online worlds. Parents and other adults may fail to bring a comprehensive understanding of growing up in this dual environment due to the extremely rapid changes in technology over the past few years.

Responses to the dangers of an online environment do not necessarily need to be comprehensively different from those in an offline environment. Learning to be a responsible citizen and to behave in a respectful manner in relationships and friendships are skills that are transferable across both environments. A renewed focus on effective education and behaviour change, with a focus on evidence-informed and evaluated programs, is likely to benefit children and young people in both the online and offline environments.

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