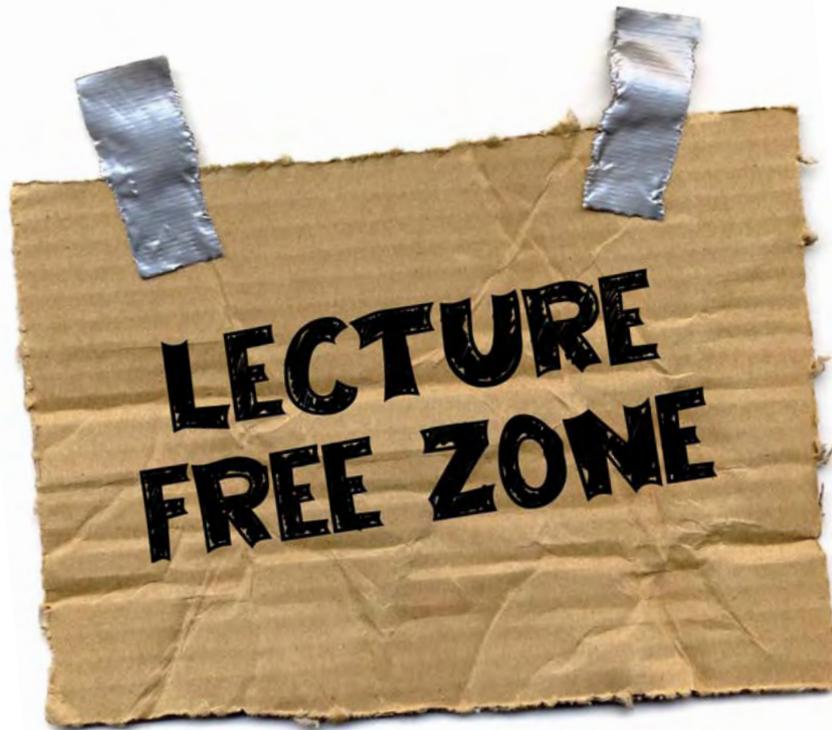


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LOGGING OFF: Teens tired of cyber-safety lectures



The ideas and opinions of more than 30,000 young Australians are at the centre of a new parliamentary report into cyber-safety.

Story: Georgie Oakeshott

If there's one loud and clear message from young people when it comes to teaching ways to stay safe online it's this: no more lectures.

Tired of being told what and what not to do, young Australians have responded to a parliamentary online survey with very definite views about what works, and what doesn't.

One of the biggest turn-offs, according to respondents, is continual repetitive warnings from adults about the dangers lurking 'out there'. As one 17-year-old female responded in the survey: "Talking about it all the time just makes me annoyed, the more paranoia of your parents and teachers that gets shoved down your throat the less you actually care."

There is a deep suspicion among young people that parents and teachers may be overstating the dangers and misrepresenting the risks because they don't actually understand the online environment.

Survey respondents expressed frustration that parents don't know the difference between popular websites like Facebook and You Tube, yet are full of advice about what is acceptable and what isn't.

In the words of one 14-year-old: "There are many ignorant parents out there, I would know as my dad is one of them."

It's not that young people don't recognise the safety issues – far from it – the vast majority of

young people aged 13 and over who took part in the Cyber-Safety Committee's survey agreed more can be done to make the internet safer. In fact, 63 per cent said yes, more can be done and only 15 per cent said no.

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But when it comes to the next question of what can be done to make the internet safer, the response is mixed: 24 per cent of respondents were in favour of learning more at school, while 21 per cent thought families should talk about it more. Only 12 per cent thought tougher filtering of content was important.

So while no single solution emerges in the quest to make cyberspace a safe place, there is an underlying desire to be trusted and involved in the solutions.

For evidence of this, look no further than the overwhelming response to the parliamentary committee's online survey. A total of 33,751 young

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Australians participated in the survey, willingly providing a valuable insight into the internet habits of 5 to 18-year-olds.

The responses have been closely examined by the Cyber-Safety Committee and helped shape the committee's 32 recommendations in its report *High-wire act: Cyber-safety and the young* tabled in parliament in June.

Recognising the need to turn the tables on traditional hierarchies of teaching when it comes to cyber-safety messages, the report recommends the development of youth leadership courses which enable students to mentor their school communities about cyber-safety issues. It also calls for new courses for parents and carers developed in consultation with young people and delivered by young people.

“Social networking sites need to make account and privacy settings more user-friendly.”

The report identifies the importance of giving young people the opportunity to take the lead on cyber-safety because they are the digital natives, it's their world and no one understands it like they do. For example, when a young person suspects that something is wrong online, they will quickly warn their friends but not necessarily tell a parent or teacher. There is little hope an outsider could ever penetrate this kind of peer group interaction with a cyber-safety message.

Unless of course they have a real-life story to tell, as identified by one female aged 15 who said part of the solution may be educating people of incidents that have occurred with other people, so they know what has happened and can happen to them.

Sonya Ryan is one example of someone with a real-life story making an impact. In 2006 her daughter Carly Ryan was murdered by a man she met online and since then Sonya Ryan has been tirelessly working to talk to as many young people as possible, visiting schools, music festivals and sporting events.

From her experience, she believes young people respond to the story of Carly because they relate to her as another teenager innocently using social networking websites in much the same way as they do, and they suddenly realise how vulnerable they are.

As Sonya Ryan told the committee, once they've heard how Carly took the next step to meet the man she had befriended online and then was murdered, “they are keen to let all their friends know, to pass the information on, to talk to others about it, to talk to siblings about it and to talk to parents about it”.

This raises the whole issue of privacy settings and whether they are adequate or not. Respondents to the survey were generally supportive of increased privacy settings, with some suggesting the highest level of privacy should be automatic for the youngest social networkers. There was also some



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criticism that privacy settings are hard to find and difficult to understand.

As one male, aged 15, suggested: “Social networking sites need to make account and privacy settings more user-friendly as well as maybe giving recommended settings according to one's age.”

Despite the concerns about privacy settings, the survey found young people are actually very cautious about divulging personal information. The majority of respondents aged over 13 are comfortable about sharing their name online, but not their birthday and definitely not their address. In fact, 93 per cent of participants said they would not divulge their address online.



But despite the awareness of risk, many young people could be exposing themselves to danger by accepting friend requests, on Facebook for instance, from people they don't know.

Survey respondents indicated that young people will mitigate risks if they fully understand the nature of that risk. For example, when asked about the content they share online one female, aged 15, said: "When I realised that literally almost everyone could see what I post on the internet I then went through all my friends on Facebook and realised that there were people I didn't even know, and that really freaked me out, knowing that they could see everything I posted up, as they were on my friends list."

It's a question of balance, according to survey respondents, who told the inquiry it's more useful and fun

TRUST ME: *Sharing information can be fun but risky*

to share more details on the internet, even though they realise it's also more risky.

"You can share absolutely none of your details on the internet whatsoever, but that will probably detract from your enjoyment of the internet and you won't be able to use it to your full potential. Or, you could share all your details, which is highly risky, but will probably be more useful to you and your friends. I try to find a balance between these extremes," a 17-year-old female said.

If there's one other thing the survey revealed it's that young people want to be trusted to make good decisions. They want responsibility and leadership and not, as one 16-year-old female said, "another boring lecture". •

The report on **cyber-safety and the young** is available at www.aph.gov.au/jscc or for more information email jscc@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 4202.