A Submission to the

Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety
Parliament of Australia

Inquiry Into Cyber-Safety

Prepared by BoysTown

Authorised By:

Ms Tracy Adams
Chief Executive Officer
BoysTown

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Overview

This submission responds to four (4) of the seven (7) Terms of Reference for the Inquiry Into Cyber-Safety by the Australian Parliament's Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety. In preparing this submission, an analysis of cyberbullying concerns among children and young people has been undertaken. An extensive review of the literature related to 'sexting' and online help-seeking behaviour was also conducted in order to provide information on these two emerging online phenomena involving young people. Furthermore, the potential for existing and future partnerships between various stakeholders was investigated. Based on the data, BoysTown has developed seven key recommendations for the Committee's consideration which we believe will significantly improve the current responses and support being afforded to children and young people in relation to cyber-safety and other online concerns.

The recommendations are:

Recommendation 1:

That the Australian Government work with existing providers of online counselling services to develop an Industry Plan that includes a sustainable funding strategy for the expansion of online counselling services to children and young people.

Recommendation 2:

That the Australian Government work in collaboration with community services to develop an awareness raising strategy that targets children and young people to:

a) Encourage them to speak out about cyberbullying and other cybersafety concerns to trusted adults and;

b) Informs them about available services that can assist in ameliorating the impacts of cyberbullying and other cybersafety issues and in particular, in view of their effectiveness, telephone and online counselling resources.

Recommendation 3:

That the Australian Government fund a nationally-representative study on 'sexting' in relation to Australian children and young people with the purpose of identifying effective prevention strategies.

Recommendation 4:

That the Australian Government instigates the development of a national accreditation scheme for online information and self help resources relating to health and psychological issues.

Recommendation 5:

That following the introduction of a National Accreditation Scheme, the Australian Government instigates a communication and marketing campaign to promote awareness of accredited online services among young people and their parents/carers.

Recommendation 6:

That the Australian Government enter into discussions with Parentlines to develop strategies that will increase their capacity to support parents and carers in relation to online risks that impact children and young people.

Recommendation 7:

That the Australian Government increase it's funding for research into the use of new communication technologies and online help-seeking amongst young people to provide an evidence base for the engagement of youth in relation to health and other issues of concern.

About BoysTown

BoysTown is a national organisation and registered charity which specialises in helping disadvantaged young people and families who are at risk of social exclusion. Established in 1961, BoysTown's mission *is to enable young people, especially those who are marginalised and without voice, to improve their quality of life.* BoysTown believes that all young people in Australia should be able to lead hope-filled lives, and have the capacity to participate fully in the society in which they live.

BoysTown currently provides a range of services to young people and families seeking one-off and more intensive support including:

- Kids Helpline, a national 24/7 telephone and on-line counselling and support service for five to 25 year olds with special capacity for young people with mental health issues;
- Accommodation responses to homeless families and women and children seeking refuge from Domestic/Family Violence;
- Parenting Programs offering case work, individual and group work support and child development programs for young parents and their children;
- Parentline, a telephone counselling service for parents and carers in Queensland and the Northern Territory;
- Paid employment to more than 300 young people each year in supported enterprises as they transition to the mainstream workforce;
- Training and employment programs that skill approximately 6,000 young people each year, allowing them to re-engage with education and/or employment, and
- Response to the needs of the peoples of the remote Indigenous communities of the Tjurabalan in Western Australia.

BoysTown has identified the importance of preventative interventions that facilitate trust and consequently engender disclosures about hidden and complex issues impacting on the well being of service users. Some of the most serious issues facing young people who access BoysTown's services are mental health, self-injury and thoughts of suicide. BoysTown is able to support these young people through our mix of early intervention and crisis services that can be tailored to best suit each individual's needs.

Kids Helpline

Kids Helpline is Australia's only national 24/7, confidential support and counselling service specifically for children and young people aged 5 to 25 years. Since March 1991, young Australians have been contacting Kids Helpline about a wide range of issues: from everyday topics such as family, friends and school to more serious issues of child abuse, bullying, mental health issues, drug and alcohol use, self-injury and suicide.

Children and young people have direct access to a counsellor and can choose to speak with either a male or female counsellor. They are also able to arrange to speak again with the same counsellor to work through their issues. No other organisation speaks with as many young Australians.

Kids Helpline has a unique capacity to act as a safety net for vulnerable children and young people at risk of suicide. These young people often reach out when other services are closed or when suicidal thoughts become too much for them during the isolation of the midnight 'til dawn hours. For this reason, other

agencies often include Kids Helpline in their safety plans for their young clients experiencing thoughts of suicide.

Professionally trained counsellors respond to these types of contacts by building trusting relationships, conducting risk assessments, identifying existing supports, discussing possible referrals with the young person and liaising with those referral agencies, offering ongoing counselling relationships with the same counsellor and conducting "wrap-around care" in conjunction with other agencies in the young person's life. Often, extensive advocacy is carried out on behalf of young clients to ensure specialist mental health services become/remain involved when it is clear either a mental illness exists or symptoms are emerging.

An organisational policy change in 2003 extended the target client age range from 18 to 25 years as an acknowledgement that people in this age group still struggle with the challenges of maturation and require services tailored to their special needs.

Kids Helpline has an extensive referral database of more than 8,000 support services such as suicide prevention, self help resources and mental health information, as well as a variety of programs specific to the needs of local communities. This database is used to assist children and young people to connect with local support services.

Real-time web counselling was developed and launched by Kids Helpline in 2000 in response to the growing the usage of the internet of children and young people. This was the world's first publically assessable web counselling service for children and young people. Since its launch, more than 70,000 web sessions have been conducted and counsellors have responded to over 100,000 emails.

In recognition of our organisation's work with children and young people BoysTown was awarded in 2009 a Life Award by Suicide Prevention Australia.

Term of Reference (i)

The online environment of Australian children and young people

Modern technology has changed lives and society as a whole. Its exponential growth has greatly enhanced the way we communicate, study, play and work. It has provided access to a myriad of information; thereby enhancing our knowledge and understanding of things. Technological advancements such as the Internet, mobile phones, social networking media and other information and communication technologies (ICTs) have become a part of life for many people of various ages.

Due to the rapid incorporation of modern technology[a] into our society, it is inevitable that children and young people will begin to make use of the Internet and other Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) at some point in their lives. For most children and young people, modern technology has and will become crucial to learning, playing and socialising, with many of them using computers and the Internet from an increasingly early age[1]. Research suggests that more and more young people have access to these ICTs from their homes, schools and public places (e.g. public libraries, places with wifi access points, etc.).

The online environment at home

In a study commissioned by the Australian Media and Communications Authority (ACMA) in 2007,[2] it was found that the majority of Australian families with young people aged 8-17 years had the Internet at home (91%), and three in four (76%) had broadband.

A large proportion of the activities conducted at home are dependent on computers and the Internet. Children witness their parents transact business, do their banking and purchase products and services online. Movies can be downloaded anytime through Internet-connected entertainment systems such as TiVo. Gaming systems such as the Wii, Playstation and Xbox can be connected to the Internet to allow for users' interconnectivity, commonly referred to as 'online gaming'. Online participation was the second most time-consuming media activity of young people behind television viewing, reflecting the high levels of Internet and broadband access among Australian families.

With the click of a button, a young person can connect to the world without leaving home.

With government and industry support, schools strive to develop technological standards aimed at enhancing students' technological literacy. Because of these predisposing factors, young people today have quickly adapted ICTs into their lives and have become members of what may be called the 'digital generation'.[3] Characteristics of this generation, often referred to as Generation Z, include being highly connected and having a lifelong use of ICTs.

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[a] Throughout this submission, 'modern technology' was used interchangeably with 'new technologies' and 'Information and Communication Technologies' (ICTs); 'online threats' was used interchangeably with 'threats to cyber safety' or 'risks'.

Online help-seeking among young people

In view of these trends in the communicative behaviours of contemporary youth, it has been necessary for organisations committed to supporting children and young people to review and redesign their communication and service delivery strategies.

For example, interactive websites that provide information and self-help resources for children and young people are critical in responding to help seeking behaviour. Research undertaken by Neal, Campbell, Liu & Nussbaumer (2009) has found that young people will access the internet for information and advice if their families and friends are not in a position to assist them. To respond to this emerging help seeking behaviour, BoysTown has conducted a review of local and international websites. The general finding from this review is that children and young people are attracted to websites that are interactive and provide space for young people to connect with the experiences of their peers on common issues of concern.

The redevelopment of the Kids Helpline website was informed by these findings. The new website features three micro sites; kids (5-12 years), teens and young adults (13-25 years) and grown-ups. It has interactive resources such as games, forums and poll questions. Information and self help resources are provided on common issues confronting children and young people as identified through the counselling service. Children and young people are encouraged to post their stories about their own experiences on to the website. This website also provides a portal to online counselling and presents information on telephone counselling options.

From its launch on 24 June 2009 to 31 December 2009, over 190,000 visits were recorded to the new Kids Helpline website. There were almost 50,000 views on the range of information papers and more than 11,000 visits to the games and entertainment areas. BoysTown research on the safe use of social networking sites to engage young people who are help-seeking, has also commenced in line with the launch of the new website.

Young people also use the internet to access counselling services. Evidence suggests that online help-seeking for counselling has been an ever-growing phenomenon since the introduction of the Internet. BoysTown through its Kids Helpline service has long recognised the high level of engagement in the online environment by young people as evidenced by the introduction of web counselling by Kids Helpline.

Kids Helpline data indicates that online counselling appears to provide a greater degree of comfort to young people when disclosing sensitive issues. In the 10 years since Kids Helpline launched its online counselling service, a greater proportion of children and young people have consistently sought help online for some of their more severe concerns such as mental health issues, child abuse, sexual assault, suicidality and self-harm. This is outlined in the Table below:

Table1. Main online concerns among Kids Helpline clients

Main Online Concerns	Online	Telephone
Emotional and/or behavioural management	18.3%	13.8%
Mental health issues	16.3%	9.7%
Peer relationships	9.8%	8.7%

Child abuse	6.1%	5.0%
Suicide-related issues	4.6%	4.1%
Grief and loss	3.2%	2.5%
Self-image	2.4%	1.1%
Eating behaviours and/or weight issues	1.9%	1.0%

Note: Kids Helpline provided 14, 076 online counselling sessions to children and young people in 2009. Table above shows issues where there was a significant higher proportion of clients seeking online counselling.

Table2. Self-injurious behaviours among Kids Helpline clients

Medium		
Online	**Phone**	**All**
19.3%	14.0%	15.4%

Note: The table above shows self-harming behaviour is more likely to be presented online.

(See 2009 Kids Helpline Overview for further information: *http://www.kidshelpline.com.au/grownups/news-research/research-reports/).*

However this trend in help seeking behaviour places significant financial pressure on services such as Kids Helpline. Online counselling is a more time consuming activity than telephone counselling as it is text based. An average time for a telephone counselling contact in 2009 was 29 minutes. However the average duration for a web counselling contact was 54 minutes. This duration time for web counselling is increasing due to the growing complexity of needs being presented by children and young people through online mediums. For example, the number of child abuse, mental health and self injury concerns being presented to online counselling modalities provided by Kids Helpline, increased in 2009 compared to 2008. Consequently to maintain existing service levels and to respond to these severe concerns additional resources are required.

Kids Helpline Case 1

> *A 17 year old contacted Kids Helpline concerned that he may have a mental illness. He said his symptoms closely matched those of schizophrenia, possibly due to his cannabis and LSD use. He was worried about experiencing hallucinations. He said that he had decided to call Kids Helpline for support after looking for mental health information online and that he often used the Internet to look for health information as he was frequently concerned about his health. The counsellor recommended he consult a doctor who would be able to provide a proper diagnosis. The counsellor also recommended that he avoid using online resources to self-diagnose and that he should consider the credibility of sources when seeking information.*

Recommendation 1:

That the Australian Government work with existing providers of online counselling services to develop an Industry Plan that includes a sustainable funding strategy for the expansion of online counselling services to children and young people.

Term of Reference (ii)

The Nature, Prevalence and Implications of Risks Associated with Cyber - Safety Threats

Based on our work with young people, BoysTown would like to highlight three significant risks arising from the integration of ICT into contemporary youth communicative behaviour.

1. Cyberbullying

Definition of cyberbullying

'Cyberbullying' is the collective label used to define forms of bullying that use electronic means such as the Internet and mobile phones to aggressively and intentionally harm someone. Like "traditional" bullying, cyberbullying typically involves repeated behaviour and a power imbalance between the aggressor and the victim. It extends beyond hurtful messages sent via email or text messaging to include forms such as threats, social exclusion tactics, spreading rumours and circulating defamatory images of the victim.

Nature and prevalence of cyberbullying

Research into cyberbullying is still at an early stage but suggests aspects of online communication encourages people to act aggressively, prompting them to do things they would not do outside the virtual world. The ability to reach more people and the 'always-on' culture of the Internet means cyberbullying can have an even more negative effect on the victim than the conventional form of bullying.[4] Common means for cyberbullying include sending of text messages via mobile phones, email, online chat rooms, social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, MySpace, Twitter) and instant messenger programs (e.g. Yahoo, MSN, Skype).

A recent BoysTown study[5] revealed that cyberbullying is a group phenomenon that can occur at multiple stages of a young person's life, but is most prevalent during the transitional ages between primary and secondary school. It takes on many forms and shows an overlap in roles between 'bully' and 'victim'. The study involving young people across Australia shows that regardless of gender, more than half of the participants were between the ages of 10 to 14 years and almost one in three of those aged 15 to 16 years revealed having been cyber bullied.

Figure 1 shows that the most prevalent forms of cyberbullying were name calling (80%), abusive comments (67%) and spreading rumours (66%). While name calling showed little difference by age or gender, abusive comments were found to be significantly more common among victims aged 15-16 years. Figure 2 shows the frequency of different forms of cyberbullying across age groups.
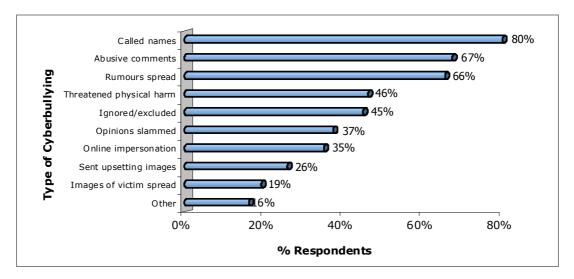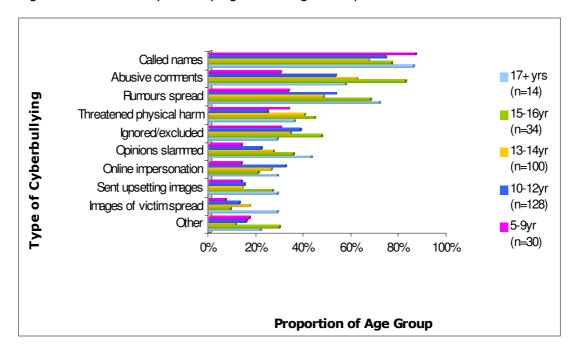
Figure 1. Forms of Cyberbullying

Figure 2. Forms of Cyberbullying Across Age Groups

Impacts of Cyberbullying

The same study by BoysTown shows that the negative impacts of cyberbullying include diminished self-confidence, low self-esteem, interpersonal conflicts, below-average school performance, extreme sadness and anger, self-harming behaviour, suicidal ideation, and in some notable cases, death by suicide. A number of researchers have also proposed that the impacts of cyberbullying may in fact be more severe compared to those from traditional forms of bullying[6]. This underpins the need for immediate and effective prevention and intervention strategies for those impacted by cyberbullying.

Kids Helpline Case 2

> *A 15 year old boy contacted Kids Helpline because he wanted to talk about a boy from his school who had taken a picture of him and had put the picture on the boy's Facebook page without his permission. Other people had posted mean comments about the picture. The young client stated that he asked the boy to take the picture down but the boy had not responded. Because of this, he had taken time off school because the incident had caused him a high level of distress. He also said that he intended to be talking to his school about the incident in the near future. He told his counsellor that he gets bullied at school everyday and that because of this, he wants to change schools but his mother won't let him.*

Kids Helpline Case 3

> *A 14 y/o female client had her Facebook hacked and messages that were bad were sent to others under her 'user name'. She thinks one of the girls she knows did it. What hurts is that her two others friends may have been involved too, making her feel betrayed and isolated. She is unsure whether to tell her parents or her teacher.*

How young people responded to cyberbullying

Figure 3 shows that young people used a number of offline and online strategies to address cyberbullying. The majority of cyberbullied young people blocked the bully (71%); many of them also decided to remove the bully as a friend (46%) and to confront the bully (44%); almost 40% decided to tell a friend; 32% opted to stay offline or stopped looking at the offending messages or images; and 44% decided to tell an adult[b] (based on individual responses).

What might have exacerbated the problem is that despite the serious emotional impacts of cyberbullying, over a quarter of victims did not seek support from others nor did they take any action to address the issue. This particular finding by BoysTown is supported by related literature showing that young people are rarely proactive in informing adults about being cyberbullied. In fact, one study[7] found that as many as 90% of victims claimed to have not told an adult. Other studies have yielded similar findings, attributing the inhibition to fears of humiliation and embarrassment; not being believed; concerns about the incident being trivialised; and/or access to technology devices being restricted. [8] [9]

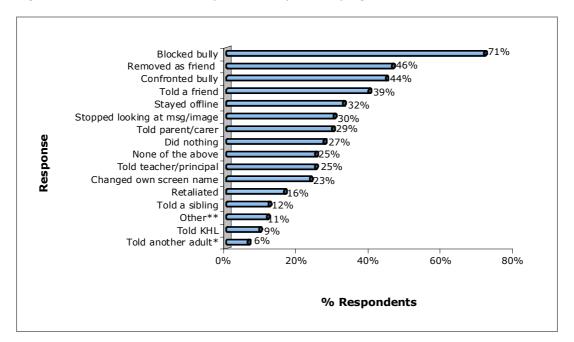[b] Adult = parents, carers, teachers, principals

Figure 3. Action Taken in Response to Cyberbullying

Kids Helpline Case 4

> *A 17 y/o female client called Kids Helpline because she had been contacted by two strangers on MSN. While talking to them, they became sexually aggressive and demanded that she "talks dirty" to them or they would send a virus to her computer and all her friends on MSN. She contacted a number of government agencies including the police to report the incident and provided them with the men's MSN addresses. However, she felt that none of the services were taking her seriously when she reported it as they were not taking any action. The incident had left her feeling dirty, upset and alone and was feeling frustrated at how her friends and authorities were not taking the incident seriously.*

Effective prevention and intervention strategies for cyberbullying

Although a ubiquitous phenomenon, there is still a high level of underreporting of cyberbullying, which highlights the need for active information dissemination on the issue and the provision of integrated support for young people to encourage them to speak out.

From a Kids Helpline perspective, there are three critical responses found to be effective in addressing cyberbullying and other forms of bullying:

- Enhancing help-seeking behaviour of children and young people experiencing bullying through implementing a communication strategy that encourages them to speak out and informs them about available support options;

- Ensuring access by all children and young people to school-based anti-bullying programs. Many young people are unaware that cyberbullying can be reported to schools like other forms of bullying. Schools must ensure that young people and their parents are properly informed of all relevant school-based resources and services available.

- Schools, key youth agencies and parents must work together to develop local integrated strategies to support children and young people being bullied as well as implementing prevention strategies.

> **Recommendation 2:**
>
> **That the Australian Government work in collaboration with community services to develop an awareness raising strategy that targets children and young people to:**
>
> a) **Encourage them to speak out about cyberbullying and other cybersafety concerns to trusted adults and;**
>
> b) **Informs them about available services that can assist in ameliorating the impacts of cyberbullying and other cybersafety issues and in particular, in view of their effectiveness, telephone and online counselling resources.**

2. 'Sexting'

Definition of 'sexting'

'Sexting' is a new technological trend among young people in the developed world. It is described as the practice of creating, sharing and sending or posting sexually-suggestive or explicit messages or images via mobile phones and the Internet.[c] Often, this sexually-suggestive material portrays the individual who is sending the 'sext' message. Once the suggestive message has been sent, it is usually stored on the recipient's mobile phone, e-mail inbox, or on a social networking site such as Facebook, MySpace or YouTube. 'Sexting' is not a term that young people may use to describe their actions, but this is a term that is largely accepted and used by politicians, legislators, legal practitioners and the mass media.

Nature of 'sexting'

The issue of 'sexting' was first reported as early as 2005 in the U.K. media[d] and has since been described as taking place worldwide, particularly in developed countries such as the U.S., Australia, New Zealand and Canada. It is largely an issue among young people engaging in a seemingly harmless activity of creating and exchanging sexually-suggestive images that may or may not result in criminal charges being brought against those involved. Due to their developmental limitations children and young people are unable to anticipate and consider the potential ramifications of their actions[10]. Coupled with the disinhibition that a mobile phone provides, it has become easy for youth to act unwisely and participate in this phenomenon.

Research[11] shows that there are three main scenarios for sexting:

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[c] s*ee Miller v. Skumanick*, No. 3:09cv540, 2009 WL 838233, at *1 (M.D. Pa. Mar. 30, 2009) (quoting from the petitioner's complaint).
[d] The earliest known use of the term "sexting" is in 2005. *See* Yvonne Roberts, *The One And Only*, Sunday Telegraph, July 31, 2005, At 22 ("Following a string of extramarital affairs and several lurid "sexting" episodes, Warne has found himself home alone, with Simone Warne taking their three children and flying the conjugal coop.").

1. Exchange of images solely between two romantic partners in lieu of, as a prelude to, or as a part of sexual activity;
2. Exchanges between partners that are shared with others outside the relationship, with or without the subject's knowledge; and
3. Exchanges between people who are not yet in a relationship, but where at least one person hopes to be.

The same study has identified a wide variation in young people's attitudes towards 'sexting'; from those who do not believe that it is a major issue to those who think it is inappropriate, illegal and potentially damaging. Some consider 'sexting' as an accepted part of an experimental or exploratory phase for young people who are not yet sexually active. To them the act of sending sexually-suggestive images or messages is a safer alternative to real life sexual activity, as the latter may lead to unplanned pregnancies or contacting sexually-transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV.

Prevalence of 'sexting'

According to a US National study, a significant percentage of teenagers have used technology to participate in sexual behaviour, specifically through the use of text messages and images.[e] Of the 653 teens surveyed, 20% claimed to have electronically sent or posted online nude or semi-nude pictures or videos of themselves. Furthermore, of the teens surveyed, an even greater proportion (39%) claimed to have sent sexually-suggestive messages (text, email, instant messages).   These numbers continue to increase once teenagers reach adulthood. According to the same study, 33% of young adults (aged 20-26) also claimed to have sent nude or semi-nude pictures or videos of themselves.

The exact prevalence of 'sexting' among young people in Australia is currently unknown. There have been several media reports relating to 'sexting' recently but due to its rising social stigmatisation, young people may not willingly admit that they engage in this behaviour.

Kids Helpline Data on 'Sexting'

A 2009 poll survey on 'sexting' was part of a Kids Helpline initiative to examine the prevalence of the said issue among young people who access the Kids Helpline website. The results show that 40% of those who participated in the online survey have engaged in 'sexting'. There was also a recorded 4,991 page views on the 'Hot Topic- Sexting' in 2009, proving that 'sexting' is a topic of interest among young people, ranking second to 'depression'.

Counsellors have encountered young people who presented behavioural concerns akin to 'sexting' while not actually referring to it in that manner; rather, they used descriptive phrases such as 'fooling around online', 'using webcam to show body parts', 'sending nude photos to a boyfriend/girlfriend', 'posing nude', and so on.

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[e] The National Campaign, Sex And Tech: Results From A Survey Of Teens And Young Adults 1, Sourced from:
http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/sextech/PDF/SexTech_Summary.pdf (summarizing statistical data).

Kids Helpline Case 5

> *A 16 year old male told Kids Helpline that he had been contacted by an 18 year old female on MSN (instant messaging program) and had turned on his webcam so that she could see him. She did not have her webcam on so he could not see her. The girl told him that he was really attractive and asked him to take his clothes off for her. He did this and she then asked him to 'play' on webcam for her and that if he didn't, she would post the webcam footage of him on the Internet and so the boy complied. The boy said he was seeking assistance as he didn't know what he should do about the incident and also whether he should report it to his mother. He stated that he had contacted the MSN support service who had offered to help the authorities if he wanted to make an official complaint. The counsellor discussed various options with the boy and he decided that he would tell his mother and also contact Crime Stoppers.*

Kids Helpline Case 6

> *A 15 year old girl contacted Kids Helpline because she was worried that naked photos of herself that she sent to a male friend over the Internet may become publicly available. Men in their 20's on the Internet had also been requesting that she send them naked images of herself. She was worried that she could be given a criminal conviction due to sending the naked photos to people. She said she has been supported by her school counsellor and that her best friend was also supportive. She told the counsellor that she was working on building up her confidence and self-esteem.*

Some young clients cited fears of being 'cut-off' or disconnected from the recipient as a reason for not telling their parents. Others disclosed fears of being banned from using their mobile phones and other ICTs altogether. Caution must be observed in reporting the prevalence and incidence of these behaviours as there is a high likelihood of underreporting by those involved.

Impacts of 'sexting'

The aforementioned data suggests that 'sexting' is not a rare phenomenon and must be approached delicately, especially with respect to children and young people. For a young person impacted by 'sexting', the damage can be as severe as other forms of bullying and sexual harassment. Consequences include poor self-esteem and self-image, isolating behaviours, school avoidance, eating disorders, self-harm and suicidal ideation and behaviours.

Like cyberbullying, the impacts of 'sexting' can also be permanent as it is almost impossible to withdraw inappropriate images or messages created and shared through mobile and internet technologies once they are sent and/or posted. This means that these images and messages could be circulating as young people start applying for universities or jobs which may impact on the individual's reputation and life opportunities.

Many young people are unaware that 'sexting' may be considered a criminal offence.[11] Taking a sexual image of a minor and then texting or posting it online is creating, holding and distributing child pornography, even if the person committing the offence is also a minor. A young person found to have a naked or

semi-naked photo of someone under 18 on their phone or computer, even if they delete it, can be charged with a criminal offence. They can also be charged even if it is a photo of them and they agreed to the photo being sent. Ignorance among young people when it comes to this behaviour can affect their future, which highlights the need to educate young people about the complex ramifications of 'sexting'.

Addressing the issue of 'sexting'

In the U.S., both legislation and law enforcement practices around 'sexting' are emerging to deal with the issue. Some law enforcement officers and district attorneys have begun prosecuting teens who created and shared inappropriate images under laws generally reserved for producers and distributors of child pornography. One notable incident in Florida resulted in an 18 year old man becoming a registered sex offender for the next 25 years after being convicted of sending nude images of his 16 year old girlfriend to family and friends.[12] In Australia, 32 Victorian teenagers were charged with child pornography offences resulting from 'sexting'.[13]

The experience in the U.S. was that many opposed the above enforcements and started advocating for cases involving minors (aged below 18 years) to be treated differently, citing young people's lack of awareness and maturity as a cause for consideration. In answer to this, legislatures in a number of states have considered drafting laws that downgrade the charges for creating and sending off sexually-suggestive images of minors from felonies to misdemeanours.

Research on 'sexting' is still in its infancy in Australia. Since it has been identified as an emerging concern among young people at an international level, only a handful of reliable studies have been conducted, and none on Australian youth. In order to fully comprehend and tackle the issue domestically, there is a need for an in-depth, possibly long-term and nationally-representative study involving Australian children and young people.

> **Recommendation 3:**
>
> **That the Australian Government fund a nationally-representative study on 'sexting' in relation to Australian children and young people with the purpose of identifying effective prevention strategies.**

3. Risks of Online Help-Seeking

The Internet has provided young people with choice and services aimed at meeting their health and wellbeing needs. As stated outside of friends and family the internet is the most frequently used source for information and advice by young people. However there are a range of risks for young people accessing the net for self help resources about health and psychological issues. The internet is an international phenomenon that is largely unregulated. Consequently there is the risk that the information being accessed by the young person may not be evidenced based or credible. Furthermore there is an over-abundance of information available on the web. Different search engines such as Yahoo!, Google, and 'bing beta' can provide results of up to tens of millions of websites on topics such as "self-injury" (67,200,000), "suicide" (32,900,000), "child abuse" (48,300,000), and "mental health problems" (52,000,000). These results[f] include

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[f] Based on bing beta results on 10 June 2010

a whole range of sites from informative websites providing basic information on these topics to potentially harmful sites with interactive features including message boards, unmoderated chat rooms or live discussion forums where anyone can join in under any identity. Young people do not know what information is trustworthy and they are overwhelmed with the extent of information available[6].

The Australian Government could assist young people to identify credible online information by introducing a national accreditation scheme. Australian websites providing information on health and social issues impacting on children and young people could voluntarily seek accreditation with a National Board. Accredited organisations would be recognised by a logo similar to that used by the Heart Foundation and similar organisations. Children and young people accessing the internet for health and self help resources could be assured that information sourced from websites displaying the accreditation logo was credible.

Recommendation 4:

That the Australian Government instigates the development of a national accreditation scheme for online information and self help resources relating to health and psychological issues.

Recommendation 5:

That following the introduction of a National Accreditation Scheme, the Australian Government instigates a communication and marketing campaign to promote awareness of accredited online services among young people and their parents/carers.

Term of Reference (iv)

Opportunities for cooperation across Australian and/or international stakeholders in dealing with cyber-safety issues

Government and Community Services

<u>*1. Cyber-safety Online Kids Helpline*</u>

A case study of an effective partnership between a Government agency and a not for profit organisation to promote cybersafety is the current partnership between the Australian Communications Media Authority (ACMA) and BoysTown (Kids Helpline). Young people who access the ACMA Cyber-Safety website about cybersafety concerns can choose to access Kids Helpline online counselling. The service, called 'Cyber-safety Online Kids Helpline' addresses (but is not limited to) the following issues:

- Cyberbullying (from the perspective of the bullied, the bully and the bystanders);
- Balancing online and offline lives;
- Dealing with witnessing harmful or offensive content;
- Young people's relationships with parents and parental perceptions of what happens online;
- The nature of online relationships, including those with unknown people;

- Dealing with being scammed, i.e. with deceptive behaviours/loss of trust; and
- Dealing with concerns around contact by strangers, including possible attempts by adults to form sexual relationships.

2. Parentlines

Parents and carers of children and young people generally have a lower level of technological awareness than that of their children.[14] [15] Parents need to be empowered to guide the online behaviour of children and young people by increasing their own familiarity with modern ICT and the web. All Australian states and Territories have Parentline services. The scope of these services varies however they are a unique resource used by Australian parents and carers in supporting their care of children and young people. Consequently State and Territory Parentlines could be resourced to promote awareness amongst parents and carers concerning cybersafety issues.

Recommendation 6:

That the Australian Government enter into discussions with Parentlines to develop strategies that will increase their capacity to support parents and carers in relation to online risks that impact children and young people.

Term of Reference (v)

Examining the need to ensure that the opportunities presented by new technologies are maximised

1. Developing the next generation of online resources to engage Australian youth in seeking help for mental health problems

This submission has consistently stated that children's and young people's help seeking behaviour is in flux and is undergoing significant change due to the adaptation of modern ICT and online technologies. Research needs to be undertaken in relation to e-health strategies to assist Government and service providers to identify the most effective ways by which children and young people can be engaged and supported in relation to their issues of concern. For example, BoysTown is in a partnership with the University of Sydney and the New South Wales Centre for Advancement of Adolescent Health to research how e-health strategies can be used to engage young people at an early stage in regard to mental health concerns. To support the emerging research agenda in this area it is imperative that the Australian Government provide increased funding to support these initiatives.

Recommendation 7:

That the Australian Government increase it's funding for research into the use of new communication technologies and online help-seeking amongst young people to provide an evidence base for the engagement of youth in relation to health and other issues of concern.

Endnotes

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BoysTown