

Are we doing enough to support young Australians to have positive interactions online?



Optus is committed to empowering the next generation to reach their full potential in the digital age.

That's why, in support of [Safer Internet Day 2019](#), we are sharing our insights into how parents, teachers and youth advocates can help young Australians thrive in the face of rapid technological advancements.

Our insights are drawn from the latest research into digital citizenship, contributions from subject matter experts, and our experience running the [Digital Thumbprint](#) program: a series of award winning workshops that have been delivered free of charge to over 250,000 primary and secondary students, teachers and principals nationwide.

We are passionate about the idea that we can be better together. This is why, in 2018, we invited 24 participants from different parts of the digital citizenship landscape to gather around a table and discuss these insights. Participants included representatives from the education sector, non-for-profits, government, faith-based organisations and social media companies. There were four major themes that were consistently expressed in our discussions:

1. The critical role of young people in "co-designing" their digital future.
2. The importance of facilitating quality conversations between adults and young people.
3. The need for deeper conversations about social norms and values online.
4. The importance of players from different sectors coming together to tackle digital challenges.

This [Digital Citizenship Blog Series](#) is our way of sharing our learnings so that parents, caregivers, and educators can better support young people to thrive in the digital world.

Are we doing enough to support young Australians to have positive interactions online?

The wellbeing of young people in physical and online spaces is an aspiration held by many parents, educators and youth advocates alike. So it's understandable if this question provokes anxiety, especially given the influx of sensationalist headlines hitting our screens every morning.

Nowadays, it's not unusual to open your web browser to see warnings that technology could destroy the human race, or that we've even found ourselves among "the digital pandemic!"

It may be comforting to note that innovation and fear often go hand-in-hand. Some of the greatest technological advancements of our time have been met with hesitation. Throughout history, many worried that train rides would cause insanity, street lighting would spark a rebellion and telephones might be used to communicate with ghosts.

Thankfully, there are many reasons to stay optimistic when it comes to young people and their online interactions. Global research suggests that human beings are resilient when it comes to advances in technology. A recent study notes that while our youth still face many digital risks, the percentage of young people experiencing harm from being online is decreasing. This may be due to an overall improvement in digital awareness programs and interventions. This optimism is reflected by thought leaders, futurists and subject matter experts, who are moving towards a growth mindset in matters of digital citizenship. We are being encouraged to progress from a state of panic to potential, and focus our attention on supporting young people to thrive in the face of technological advancements.

In this spirit of empowerment, we would like to challenge three limiting beliefs that could be holding us back from the positive digital future available for young Australians:

Limiting belief #1:

We're not doing enough to protect young people against digital dangers

The list of potential consequences of digital technologies may make us feel defeated. Concerns about cyberbullying, sexting, predatory behaviour/stranger danger, identity theft, the emergence of artificial intelligence and 'fake news' could keep even the best of us awake at night. Perhaps some of these concerns ring true for you:

- How can parents keep their children safe in a world where bullies and predators can always access their victims?
- How do we teach our children behaviours, morals and values that are appropriate in both 'online' and 'offline' spaces?
- Will new technologies and virtual communities stop my child from forming relationships with people in the real world?
- Between Instagram filters and fake news, will my child learn the difference between real and false information?

Notwithstanding the challenges, it's comforting to know that there are digital citizenship experts and organisations in Australia committed to addressing these big questions. Programs and initiatives such as Digital Thumbprint, the #NoFilter Forum from the Behavioural Insights Team, #DQEEveryChild by the DQ Institute and the The YeS Project by the eSafety Commissioner are examples of the many nationwide efforts to proactively equip and empower young people for the digital future.

What sets these initiatives apart is that they move beyond simply raising awareness of digital challenges. They also help young people in Australia build the skills and attributes necessary to navigate digital interactions with confidence. It is promising to see the development of these skills will continue to be the focus of many internet safety initiatives running in 2019.

Limiting belief #2:

The digital divide between adults and young people is insurmountable

This common limiting belief posits children as 'digital natives' and their parents and educators as 'digital immigrants'. Adults are often painted as tech novices and critics, who are unable to support the next generation on the digital journey. The research tells a different story.

Preliminary findings from a three-year research project run by the London School of Economics and Political Science indicate that parents are increasingly optimistic about digital media. This research draws on similar findings from the Family Online Safety Institute (FOSI) in the US, showing that:

- 78% of parents thought a child's technology use has a positive impact on their future.
- Two thirds of parents are highly confident in their ability to manage their child's use of technology.
- A majority of parents reported that the benefits of children using technology outweighed the risks.

Closer to home, Australian adults reported that social media is an overall positive addition to their lives, providing both entertainment and increased connection with loved ones.

Adults seem ready and willing to support and assist their children, students and loved ones in their digital lives. What may be missing, however, is the opportunity to talk openly about the trials and triumphs of digital technologies. Thought leader Sherry Turkle points out that while both adults and young people are eager to talk with each other, the path to starting a conversation can be a difficult one.

This could be because these conversations may not simply be about digital proficiency or skill. Rather, they might raise deeper and more complex questions about morality, and touch on issues such as sexuality, peer pressure or even harassment.

It's never too late for adults to have rich and constructive conversations with the young people they care about. With the right tools we can create pathways for conversations that could deepen the understanding between generations, and empower young Australians to contribute to the digital future in fresh and exciting ways.

Limiting belief #3:

Existing digital citizenship initiatives are outdated

Digital technologies are evolving at an ever-increasing rate. Because of this, there may be concern that the digital curriculum content created today will be redundant tomorrow. This is particularly true when we consider the long lead time from content design to integration in Australian schools. If lesson plans will be dated before they are even rolled out, is it foolish to rely on the education system?

Thankfully, our research suggests that integrating character education into digital citizenship programs could help to resolve these concerns.

Online bullying, sexting and privacy are not technology problems per se. Rather, they are deeper issues of human behaviour and culture that have been accepted. Because of this, 'soft skills' such as respect, responsibility, reasoning and resilience have been built into digital citizenship initiatives.

This 'soft stuff' is really the hard stuff, and moving towards positive humanity and culture in digital spaces may at times feel like a long and uphill challenge. Nonetheless, it is of utmost importance that we continue to build on positive foundations that encourage good character and ethics, because arguably, these human qualities will never become outdated.

By incorporating and reinforcing these skills into digital citizenship education, we are preparing young people for both the world of today and the future. We have much to discuss to on this front, and look forward to sharing further insights with you.

Resources for parents, caregivers and educators

Optus supports digital citizenship education in Australian schools so that young people can be safe, responsible and positive online. Digital Thumbprint with Kids Helpline is an early intervention and awareness program for primary school students. Within secondary schools, our Digital Thumbprint program focuses on positive behavioural change.

Additional resources and information:

- The Digital Thumbprint Parent Resources were designed to help parents have structured conversations with their children about digital topics. You can access these free discussion guides [here](#).
- The Kids Helpline Cyberbullying Guide for Parents is available [here](#).
- The eSafety Commissioner also has a range of information to encourage safer, more positive experiences for young Australians online. You can access this information [here](#).

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