

Venturing beyond citizenship, to “digital leadership”



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](#), our [Digital Citizenship Blog Series](#) will share insights into how parents, teachers and youth advocates can help young Australians to 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.

In support of global [2019 Safer Internet Day](#), there are many questions that we – as parents, teachers and advocates for young people – may be prompted to consider:

- Does the internet make it easier for young people to become victims of bullying and exploitation?
- How can we equip the next generation to be safe and resilient online citizens?

These are challenging questions, and it can often be tempting to shield young people from digital risks by limiting their access to the internet. Yet, given technology is now inextricably linked with our day-to-day lives, and the pace of digital change will only accelerate, this strategy is simply not feasible.

Teaching young people to become “good digital citizens” may not be the most effective strategy either. Our kids are already digital citizens by birthright, and often have more advanced technical skills than we do.

Recent research from [Australia](#) and [abroad](#) suggests that being born into a world of technology can have positive effects for our wellbeing – if we learn to harness its strengths. In line with these insights, leading thinkers in education are encouraging us to enhance *digital leadership* capabilities in the next generation, to enable them to leverage technology for the greater good of society.

What is "Digital Leadership"?

According to experts on the topic (e.g. [Matthew Lynch](#), [Dr. Josie Ahlquist](#) and [George Couros](#)), digital leadership encompasses three core aims:

1. A sense of community mindedness:

Digital leaders proactively advocate for the wellbeing of their peers. Beyond taking personal responsibility for their online behaviour, digital leaders purposefully seek out causes to support. They re-shape online communities for the betterment of others, and empower digital users who cannot empower themselves.

2. A proactive approach to knowledge and information:

Digital leaders treat knowledge obtained via digital sources with discernment and purpose. Beyond gathering information, digital leaders know how to analyse and use information. They differentiate fact from fiction, and seek to combat bias inherent in digital spaces.

3. Learning to embrace change:

Digital leaders are inspired by the possibilities of new technology. Beyond taking measures to mitigate risk, digital leaders embrace the ways technology can improve their social, work and study experiences. They consider how the internet and social media could evolve to make a difference in the world.

If digital spaces have the potential to be harnessed for the greater good, how can we facilitate the shift towards digital leadership for the next generation?

Balancing protection with empowerment

The first challenge is to strike a balance between protecting and empowering digital users.

Educating young Australians about online dangers and their personal responsibilities is an absolute necessity. Yet, if we are too heavily focused on risk-aversion, controlling behaviour and restricting access, we may be preventing young Australians from cultivating the leadership qualities that will help them become resilient digital citizens.

Development psychologist Dr. Shannon Wanless (2016) suggests that it is not a choice of either/or. According to her research into *The Role of Psychological Safety in Human Development*, [safety and empowerment go hand-in-hand](#).

It seems that young people may need to first feel comfortable within the boundaries of the digital world before they feel safe to push against them. By informing individuals of both the [positives and negatives of digital spaces](#), we can equip them to tackle digital challenges, and in doing so, develop their confidence to take positive risks.

The case of [Honor Eastly](#) is a prime example of how feeling safe in online spaces can spark a young person to make positive changes for one's self and the broader community. After finding respite from her mental illness through the support of her digital peers, Honor founded [The Big Feels Club](#); an online community dedicated to creating spaces for people to talk about their "big, scary feeling feelings" with one another.

Shifting from by-standing to "up-standing"

When it comes to advocating for the rights of others, perhaps it's also time to shift our focus from blaming tech creators and towards supporting tech users.

While social media platforms have made significant investments in shutting down cyberbullying, digital users are the ones who hold the ultimate power [to bring moral awareness](#) into online spaces.

An article from [The Behavioural Insights](#) team suggests it's a matter of teaching young people to be up-standing, rather than by-standing, online citizens. Rather than watching helplessly from the bench, up-standing citizens are empowered to use their voices to stand up for their peers when they see cyberbullying occur. [The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge](#) are among a number of high-profile advocates for this cause.

When we dig a little deeper, some fantastic examples can be found of socially conscious digital users who leverage the power of virtual platforms to fight injustice. Movements such as [Black Lives Matter](#) and [#MeToo](#) show the potential of social media to promote connection, justice and empathy.

Can adults let go of leadership?

It's interesting to note that, in our efforts to enhance digital citizenship, we are often drawn to instruct and lecture young people as though they are victims of technology. Yet this style of education may be counterproductive towards developing digital leadership, especially since each new generation is better equipped to navigate the virtual world than many adults may realise.

A helpful way to invite young people to be leaders of their digital future is to encourage them to take an active role in their education. This means taking off our instructor's hat, and supporting them to **identify their own digital role models**. It is important to note that the digital citizenship 'experts' recognised by adults are rarely the influencers that our youth follow. For example, while we, the adults, may be distrusting of Twitter or Instagram personalities, these platforms are proving to be powerful forces for [social justice](#), activism and positive change.

The story of Australian polar explorer [Jade Hameister](#) is a great example of this. In 2016, Jade gave a [TEDx talk](#) about her experience as the [youngest person in history](#) to ski to the North Pole. Her talk attracted several internet trolls, who told this high achieving young woman to '[make a sandwich](#)'. Jade used social media to respond to these

sexist remarks, posting a photo of her [serving up a ham and cheese sandwich](#) after completing a record-breaking trek to the South Pole. "I made you a sandwich (ham & cheese)," Jade wrote, "now ski 37 days and 600 kilometers to the South Pole and you can eat it." This post soon became viral, and Jade is now using her platform to encourage young women to focus on abilities rather than appearance, and advocate for other important issues such as climate change.

But isn't it our job to keep young people from harm?

It is natural to be hesitant of what might happen if we lean into these shifts. For example, you might be worried that young people will be led astray by social media influencers, or that they won't have enough support when issues arise online.

To address some of these challenges, we need to find ways of opening up the communication lines with young people to help them safely and confidently step into their leadership potential.

3 conversations you can have with young people today

1.

What online communities (i.e. chat forums, gaming sites, interest groups) have you joined that make you feel empowered, resilient and safe? What sort of communities or causes would you like to be a part of?

2.

What skills do you wish you had or could improve on that would help you to stand up to bullies in the online world? How can you stand up for your friends and fellow students?

3.

Who are the digital leaders and social media influencers that inspire you? How do you decide whether or not they are good role models?

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 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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