

In conversation with:

Julie Inman Grant eSafety Commissioner

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

This Digital Citizenship Blog Series shares insights into how parents, teachers and youth advocates can help young Australians thrive in the face of rapid technological advancements. These insights are drawn from the latest research into digital citizenship, contribution from subject matter experts and industry partners, and our award winning Digital Thumbprint program.

To mark Safer Internet Day 2019, Helen Maisano, Director of Group Sustainability, Optus, sat down with Julie Inman Grant, eSafety Commissioner, to talk about this global event. Here Julie speaks about how we can encourage young Australians to create a better internet by developing four, critical skills: Respect, Responsibility, Reasoning and Resilience (the 4Rs). You can learn more about Julie and her two decades of experience in senior public policy and safety roles in the tech industry here.

What does the Safer Internet Day theme “Together for a Better Internet” and developing four, critical skills: Respect, Responsibility, Reasoning and Resilience mean to you?

‘Together for a better internet’ recognises the role each and every one of us can play in making the online world a safer and more positive environment. A great way to do this is by everyone actively encouraging and modelling the 4 Rs online.

People used to refer to the education fundamentals as the ‘three Rs’: reading, (w)riting and (a)rithmetic. But in today’s rapidly changing tech-enabled learning environment we at the eSafety Office believe we need to build on those fundamentals by promoting a new set of ‘Rs’. Respectful communication, responsible use of technology, the resilience to withstand harmful conduct or contact online, and the ability to reason and critically evaluate online content—these are the behaviours and skills that will help us all thrive in a connected world. We’ve integrated them into our eSafety classroom resources, used by teachers to help tens of thousands of school children develop their digital skills each year. But they’re also a great way for adults to remember how they can model these behaviours for their children and contribute themselves to a better, more civil internet.

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We notice that educators and others, including yourself, are talking about “Resilience”:

What is meant by resilience in the digital world and why is it an important skill?

The digital world offers fantastic opportunities for interaction, but the reality is that there are risks too. Unfortunately, it’s not a matter of ‘if’ but ‘when’ a young person will experience something negative online, like unwanted contact or cyberbullying. So, what we want to do here is prepare them for these eventualities, build their psychological armour and give them the tools they need to be able to withstand any form of online harm. And, one of the best things we can do for them is let them know that we as parents or carers will be there to help them enjoy and discover all the opportunities the online world has to offer, but will also be there to support them through any harmful online encounter too..Just as young people need to understand and develop the ability to bounce back from challenging situations in the ‘real’ world, we need to empower them to be able to get back up from tough situations online too.

What role can parents and caregivers play in supporting young people to be resilient in the digital world?

Online safety has become one of the most significant parenting challenges of our time – adding a layer of complexity our own parents didn’t have to manage. The eSafety Office conducted some research last year and found that 94% of parents believe online safety is absolutely critical. Many parents do realise they are the frontline of defence when it comes to keeping their kids safe online and that building resilience in our young people is very important, but sometimes they don’t know how to go about it.

With technologies changing rapidly and teens changing their app of choice more often than they change their socks, staying abreast of all of these tech trends can seem overwhelming. So, our goal is to help parents and carers feel empowered with the advice and resources they need to make a positive difference in the online lives of their children. The eSafety Office has a dedicated online hub for Australian parents—iParent—where you can find up-to-date, practical guidance on a very wide range of issues relevant to pre-schoolers through to young adults. We even have a short diagnostic “Screen Smart Parent Tour” to assess digital literacy and point parents to resources and information that is of interest and relevance to them.

My number one piece of advice in seeking to prepare our kids and build that inner grit is to talk early and often to your kids about their online experiences. It’s important to keep the communication lines open and let the young people in your life know that if things do go wrong they can come to you for help.

Sometimes situations online do go too far though. Should a young person find themselves in a situation where a particularly personal image or message (i.e. a sext) be shared, what should they do, and what can parents or caregivers do?

Such is the nature of social media and the internet that when things go wrong, they can go wrong badly. Harassment, abuse and humiliation can be amplified and escalate incredibly quickly, leaving a vulnerable young person feeling powerless. It’s important that they know they aren’t alone, that practical steps can be taken and help is available.

Early intervention is crucial—getting content removed and halting the perpetuation of the abuse. Our website, esafety.gov.au, has practical guidance and reporting options for cyberbullying, image-based abuse like ‘revenge porn’ or other types of online abuse. Our teams work to get harmful content rapidly taken down from social media sites to decrease the trauma and humiliation a child might experience had the cyberbullying content remained online.

Let's turn to ethics and empathy. So closely related to "Respect" and our discussion so far. We've seen some shocking examples of a lack of these skills over the years, but we think there is a shift occurring.

How would you define ethical behaviour online?

The 'Golden Rule' of treating others as you would like to be treated tends to be forgotten in the online spaces that are often anonymous. Ethical online behaviour is defined by treating people you interact with over social media and the internet with the same level of respect and civility you would in the real world. These are definitely values we should seek to reinforce!

Empathy is of course a very human quality. Today's children are growing up with devices, social media, AI in the home, and even the Internet of Toys. Some studies show that they are learning empathy through these interactions. Other studies raise concern.

What's your view? Can empathy skills be gained through interaction with smart toys?

Young people can definitely learn and bolster their empathy skills through interaction with smart toys, apps, social media and online games. Take our new resource, The Lost Summer, as an example. The Lost Summer is a role-playing video game for 11 to 14-year-olds that immerses players in a futuristic environment where they need to use skills such as empathy and the '4 Rs' of online safety to complete challenges and advance through the game. They learn these values by practicing them through game play so that they can apply the same empathetic skills when they encounter similar situations online or in real life.

Apps and smart toys can offer lots of benefits through interactive play, but can also come with security risks. Parents need to do their research before they introduce any new tech toys into the house, so they know how to set them up safely, understand how data collected might be used and can actively guide children in their use.

Is there a formal role in the education system or curriculum for ethics and empathy?

Absolutely. Learning skills like ethics, empathy and digital intelligence is an important part of preparing to live and work successfully in the 21st century, and schools are key to this learning. We support efforts to more consistently and comprehensively teach ethics, respectful relationships and online safety education across our children's pre-K-12 educational journey. More and more employers want to recruit people who understand the '4 Rs' of digital behaviour. But the benefits of digital intelligence do not stop with the workforce. For young people, these skills are directly linked to how they use technology and include the social, emotional, and cognitive abilities essential to digital life.

If yes, should this be focused within digital citizenship education or broader?

I think it's important that skills like ethics and empathy are a part of everything that we do – and these kinds of values should first be discussed and practiced in the home. We know from our research that 81% of pre-school aged Australian children have access to Internet-enabled devices so we need to be mindful that there is a diminishing distinction between the online and offline worlds for young people—and our education system needs to reflect that.

"We ALL have a role to play"

The Australian Curriculum incorporates these skills through the general capabilities embedded in the content of learning areas. So, in every subject, students should be learning them. To the extent we are incorporating STEM and technology throughout the curriculum, we should also be arming our students with the complementary skills they need to successfully navigate both the risks and the rewards of the online world.

It's important to remember that online abuse reflects behavioural issues playing out online rather than technology itself. That said, using ethical frameworks and building safety into technology platforms with the intent of preventing the proliferation of online abuses is something we are encouraging companies to do. We call this "safety by design". Just as cars need to provide brakes, seatbelts and airbags that work to protect consumers from injury in accidents, we are asking technology platforms to assess the risks and build the safety protections into their services before deployment, rather than retrofitting safety after the damage has been done.

So, we are back to our original message that we ALL have a role to play in making the Internet a better, safer and more civil place to interact.

Today's world is fast-paced and digital. We've been discussing some significant trends and shifts in behaviour.

Looking ahead, what trends in behaviour - either human to human in digital spaces or human to AI – do you see?

It's difficult to predict how emerging technologies will influence our behaviour online and the way we interact with each other. What we can be sure about is that there will always be an overlap between technology and human behaviour, a space where unintended consequences and unforeseen risks emerge. This really underscores the importance of the 4 Rs, particularly for young people who will become tomorrow's adults and leaders—these skills will remain relevant whatever the future may hold.

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 online experiences for young Australians online.

- [Take Action](#) can provide advice and support if someone has shared an intimate, nude or sexual image of you without your consent.
- [Cyberbullying Complaints](#) offers guidance for young Australians who have experienced cyber abuse.
- [Offensive and Illegal Content Complaints](#) provides pathways for those wanting to report illegal or offensive online material.
- The [Young & eSafe](#) resource is practical advice by young people, for young people to help challenge the haters and fakers online. Visit their page on [Resilience](#) for tips on how to "get back up" after challenging online situations.

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