

In an age of #filters, are digital ethics still black and white?



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

Our [Digital Citizenship Blog Series](#) shares insights into how parents, teachers and youth advocates can help young Australians to thrive in the face of rapid technological advancements.

Insights are drawn from the latest research into digital citizenship, contributions from subject matter experts, and our experience running the award winning [Digital Thumbprint program](#).

In an age of #filters, are digital ethics still black and white?

You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself any direction you choose... You'll look up and down streets.
Look 'em over with care. About some you will say, "I don't choose to go there". – Dr. Seuss

What can Dr Seuss' wisdom teach us about online ethics?

Use your brain, decide the direction to take, and start walking. Simple... right? In [Oh, the Places You'll Go!](#), Dr. Seuss says that we can choose the path we walk. But the real question when it comes to behaviour online is *which direction we should choose?*

As our 'digital' and 'physical' lives continue to blend, deciding between right and wrong, good and bad, and empowerment and exploitation is not the stuff of children's books. The detachment and anonymity of online spaces can often lead us to forget our values, and overlook the Golden Rule of "treating others as you would like to be treated".

Here is what we know:

- **Sexting:** One study shows that up to 40% of young people from ages 11 to 18 years engage in sharing of self-generated sexual content. Girls are more affected than boys, and peers are more influential at exerting pressure than strangers
- **Pornography:** A study shows that three quarters of Australians aged 16 to 17 have been 'accidentally' exposed to pornographic websites. According to a research review by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, nearly half of all children aged nine to 16 years experience regular exposure to images, with teenage boys viewing pornographic content most frequently.
- **Cyber-bullying:** In 2016-2017, the eSafety Commissioner reported that there was a 63% increase in the number of serious cyberbullying complaints by young Australians – and these are just the reported cases. Confounding matters, young people now have no escape as social media enables bullies to follow them from the playground to their homes.

Undoubtedly, issues of sexting, privacy and cyberbullying are difficult to resolve. While the reasons behind this are complex, one contributing factor may be the differences in worldviews between adults and youth. As parents, teachers and mentors, our perceptions, attitudes and ambitions for the digital world may be very different than those of our kids. By bringing awareness to some of these differences, we can start to break down barriers that may be keeping us from having these important conversations.

Challenge #1

Can adults be anti-role models?

While we as adults are genuinely concerned about how much personal information young people share online, are we unknowingly contributing to the problem? The culture of "sharenting" – where parents share photos of their children on social media – may be unintentionally blurring the line between what content is appropriate for public vs. private spaces. While our intentions may be harmless, by publicly sharing images that include identifying information such as location, school or sports uniform or logos, we are inadvertently modelling the very behaviours we are advising young people against.

Research suggests that rather than telling our kids what *not* to do, it may be more useful to develop ethical media competencies (EMC) in young people. A 2014 experiment by Müller and colleagues showed that when young people were equipped to uphold social and legal norms in online spaces, they were more likely to engage in prosocial behaviour, and less likely to participate in unethical activity such as cyberbullying. By helping our children to identify what ethical behaviour looks like in digital spaces, they will be more empowered to act according to their moral compass when they're online.

Challenge #2

Adults focus on stranger danger, but young people may be more at-risk from their peers

One of the biggest ethical issues to emerge in the digital world is that of sexting; the creation, sharing or storing of sexual images or messages. In recent years, contact from strangers (as opposed to peer-to-peer sharing) has been the main focus for parents and education programs alike. Undoubtedly, there is certainly a need to continue highlighting the risks of stranger danger. Yet, the practice and impact of peer-to-peer sexting continues to grow and requires our attention and support.

According to research by EU Kids Online, within Europe, by the ages of 11 – 12 years, children are sending and receiving sexual messages and that this is prevalent by the time young people enter secondary school. The question of why young people "sext" is complex. Research suggests that sexting may initially develop as a way of sexual exploration, however there are many examples of where sexting has escalated into behavior that is "coercive, linked to harassment, bullying and even violence". This is especially true from age 14 onwards, and girls are particularly vulnerable to being exploited and shamed by power-centric behaviour.

As educators and parents, we can and should support young people in their ethical and moral development. We can help them understand that it is not okay to use power and coercion to make another young person share a sexualised image or message. We can stay engaged in a young person's development, and we can support them if harmful images are shared. Within Australia, the Office of the eSafety Commissioner has practical guidance and reporting options for image-based abuse like 'revenge porn' or other types of online abuse. The Office works to get harmful content rapidly taken down from social media sites.

Challenge #3

Curation creates characters

By their nature, digital identities are heavily curated – they can only exist via a process of cropping, editing and filtering. While adults create a professional brand on networking sites such as LinkedIn, young people also carefully manage their personas, albeit on different social media platforms. The world only sees their witty, creative and most desired selves. The curation culture may explain why people behave differently from behind a screen than they do when face-to-face. Does the glass face of the screen create a barrier that makes it easier to act in ethically ambiguous ways? Could this distance from our 'real' selves be the reason we're struggling to access our authentic values online?

Compounding matters, once our youth "master what is essentially an onstage performance...it can be hard to break character". What happens when these two identities start bleeding into each other – does life start imitating art, or the other way round?

Instagrammer and Australian model is an example of this tension playing out. In 2015, Essena made global headlines by dramatically shutting down her social media accounts with 500,000+ followers, because 'Insta-perfection', left her feeling "lost, "sick" and in need of "serious help"".

There isn't a one size fits all approach to helping young people integrate their online vs. offline values and personas. However, by seeking to understand the experiences of young people through conversation, adults can move towards helping their kids live authentically between the two worlds.

3 conversations you can have with young people today

Below are three questions you can ask your children, students and youth networks today about being responsible digital citizens. There is no right or wrong way to ask these questions – what's important is that you're starting a dialogue:

1.

What do you think the differences are between 'right' and 'wrong' behaviour in the physical vs. digital worlds?

2.

Who do you want to 'be' when you're online, and how do you want to be seen?

3.

How can you encourage and reward authenticity when you see it on social media?

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](#).
- Kids Helpline Guides for Parents are 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](#).

**Digital
Thumbprint**



Digital Thumbprint

**Digital Citizenship
Blog Series
available at
www.digitalthumbprint.com.au**