Submission:

Inquiry into social media and online safety

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Select Committee on Social Media and Online Safety for the *Inquiry into social media and online safety*.

The Centre is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria. For over 100 years we have advocated for the rights of children and young people to be heard, to be safe, to access education and to remain connected to family, community and culture. We represent over 150 community service organisations, students and individuals throughout Victoria working across the continuum of child and family services, from prevention and early intervention to the provision of out-of-home care.

In our submission, we concentrate on the experiences of children and young people in the digital environment, with a particular focus on children living in out-of-home care. The pandemic has seen children's access to the online world increase significantly, heightening their risk of exposure to harm[1] but also their opportunities to develop online resilience and protective skills.[2]

We encourage the Committee, when investigating the online safety of children and developing recommendations, to be guided by *General comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment* developed by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, which states that:

> States parties should ensure that, in all actions regarding the provision, regulation, design, management and use of the digital environment, the best interests of every child is a primary consideration.[3]

Children have a right to access and participate in the online world, alongside the right to protection from harm. Acting in their best interests must balance these rights.

(a) the range of online harms that may be faced by Australians on social media and other online platforms, including harmful content or harmful conduct

While online connectivity is beneficial in many ways, it also presents risks and threats which put children and young people in harm's way. Groups experiencing vulnerability are disproportionately

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[1] Sweeney, TA, Georg, SM & Ben, F 2019, 'Home internet use by eight-year-old children', *Australian Educational Computing*, vol. 34, no. 1, pp. 1-22.

[2] eSafety Commissioner 2021, 'Schools prioritise quality online safety education during the pandemic', 14 October, viewed 11 January 2022, <https://www.esafety.gov.au/newsroom/media-releases/schools-prioritise-quality-online-safety-education-during-pandemic>.

[3] Committee on the Rights of the Child 2021, *General comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment*, United Nations, Geneva, p. 3.

affected by online harms.[4] Chat rooms and social media messaging services enable children and young people to connect virtually with people all over the world, while at the same time creating opportunities for child abusers and groomers to gain easier access to victims.[5] The shift online during the pandemic saw reports of online child sexual abuse materials increase by 90 per cent between 2019 and 2020.[6] In 2020, the Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation received more than 21,000 reports of online child sexual exploitation.[7]

As active consumers and producers of media, children are increasingly likely to come across sexually explicit material, whether deliberately or by accident, and to be confronted by this material at an increasingly young age. In 2016, the Centre prepared a submission to the *Inquiry into the harm being done to Australian children through access to pornography on the internet*. This submission contains a summary of the harms associated with pornography and is included as an attachment to our current submission for consideration by the Select Committee.

The link between social media and mental health problems in young people is well documented, with research indicating that lengthy social media use is associated with decreased, disrupted, and delayed sleep, as well as depression, memory loss, and poor academic performance.[8]

Online harms experienced by children in out-of-home care

Children and young people in out-of-home care are among those children most vulnerable to online harms due to the trauma they have experienced.[9] In August 2021, the Centre consulted with carers about online safety and produced a report that will inform the Association of Children's Welfare Agencies' work to develop and deliver online training resources for children in out-of-home care and their carers under the Online Safety Grants Program.

Throughout the consultations, carers described a range of unsafe and harmful online situations in which the young people in their care had found themselves, including:

- Racial vilification in online chat
- Child sexual exploitation
- Porn exposure to young children
- Online bullying
- Financial scams

[4] Henry, N, Powell, A & Flynn, ALG 2017, Not just 'revenge pornography': Australians' experiences of image-based abuse: a summary report, RMIT University, Melbourne; Schiamberg, LB, Barboza, G, Chee, G & Hsieh, MC 2016, 'The adolescent-parent context and positive youth development in the ecology of cyberbullying', in MF Wright (ed.), *A social-ecological approach to cyberbullying*, Nova Science Publishers, New York, pp. 151-180.

[5] Western Australia Police Force 2020, Internet child safety, viewed 11 January 2022, <https://www.police.wa.gov.au/Your-Safety/Child-abuse/Internet-child-safety>.

[6] Fitzsimmons, C 2021, 'Australia among the worst for online sexual harm to children', *The Sydney Morning Herald,* 19 October.

[7] Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation 2020, ACCCE statistics 2020, viewed 11 January 2022, <https://www.accce.gov.au/resources/research-and-statistics/2020statistics>.

[8] Kelly, Y, Zilanawala, A, Booker, C & Sacker, A 2018, 'Social media use and adolescent mental health: findings from the UK millennium cohort study', *EClinicalMedicine*, vol. 6, pp. 59-68.

[9] United Nations Children's Fund 2017, *The state of the world's children 2017: children in a digital world*, UNICEF, New York.

- Radicalisation and exposure to extremism, including white supremacist forums and misogynistic ideologies.

The carers were concerned about their own ability to support the children in their care to engage safely online and sought easy-to-digest information about risks and strategies. Some gave examples of police involvement in circumstances where predatory behaviour and grooming had been identified by either state or federal police and appreciated this additional layer of protection for their children. However, foster and kinship carers were wanting to know themselves what 'red flags' they should be aware of, and how to talk with their children about these risks. Some of the examples given by carers related to children with low self-esteem or cognitive challenges which left them particularly vulnerable to online predators.

In 2015, the Victorian Commission for Children and Young people conducted an inquiry into sexual abuse or sexual exploitation of Victorian children and young people in residential care. A key finding of the inquiry was that 'social media and the internet play a significant role in enabling the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children in residential care'.[10] Monitoring and supervising a child's use of the internet is challenging for carers and can be even more so in a residential care setting. The report states that:

> there is very little consistent education provided to children and young people in residential care about healthy and safe relationships, sexual health and the safe use of the internet and social media. Based on the information provided during the Inquiry, it would seem that there is presently no education provided to children and young people in residential care that confronts and dispels the influence of pornography.[11]

While a great deal of work has been done by Victoria's service providers and the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing to raise awareness about sexual exploitation among staff and young people in residential care, there remains a gap when it comes to targeted information and education about online pornography.

(g) actions being pursued by the Government to keep Australians safe online

The eSafety Commissioner has played a critically important role in improving digital literacy by providing advice and educating the community about online safety, and by developing mechanisms to improve safety such as *Safety by Design*. The Centre regularly promotes the resources for young people, parents and carers developed by the eSafety Commission. We commend the government for their investment in this crucial role and strongly support its continuation and sustained or increased funding.

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[10] Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) 2015, *"…as a good parent would…" Inquiry into the adequacy of the provision of residential care services to Victorian children and young people who have been subject to sexual abuse or sexual exploitation whilst residing in residential care*, CCYP, Melbourne, p. 57.
[11] Ibid, p. 56.

The Centre strongly welcomes the announcement of an Online Safety Youth Advisory Council which will give young people a direct voice to government on online safety issues and solutions.[12] We recommend that government recruit a diverse group of young people, including a young person with care experience.

(h) any other related matter

The harms outlined above are serious and action must be taken to prevent future harm and to support those who have experienced harm to recover. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the internet and social media platforms can also be used constructively and positively, for example, to amplify the voices of children and young people who seek solutions to problems affecting them and their communities.[13] As such, a balanced approach to preventing harm and facilitating safe engagement is necessary.

Research shows that a multidimensional approach to online safety is emerging, which acknowledges the power and potential of the internet and uses a harm minimisation rather than a protection approach.[14] The recent COVID-19 situation has amplified these discussions and demonstrated the need for building digital literacy and digital resilience.

Given the lack of literature examining the long-term effectiveness of programs and approaches to online safety for children, researchers have developed an approach to better understand the factors that make children and young people vulnerable to risks and to develop strategies accordingly.[15] Such an approach is strengths-based, recognises and respects children's agency, and advocates for digital literacy of all stakeholders to help them navigate through the online world with a focus on protective factors.

Based on the evidence, protective factors can be broadly classified into four domains:

- Individual capabilities that enable children to recognise their agency,[16] and social and emotional competencies that build critical thinking, high self-esteem and empathy[17]
- Technical capabilities of children, parents, caregivers, and educators to understand the risks[18]

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[12] Morrison, S 2021, 'A voice for young people on online safety', 15 December, viewed 11 January 2022, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/voice-young-people-online-safety>.

[13] United Nations Children's Fund 2017, *The state of the world's children 2017: children in a digital world*, UNICEF, New York.

[14] Swist, T, Collin, P, McCormack, J & Third, A 2015, *Social media and the wellbeing of children and young people: a literature review*, Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, Perth.

[15] For example: Global Kids Online 2019, *Global Kids Online: comparative report*, Innocenti: UNICEF Office of Research, Florence.

[16] Global Kids Online 2019; Livingstone, S 2016, *A framework for researching Global Kids Online: understanding children's well-being and rights in the digital age*, London School of Economics and Political Science, London.

[17] Green, A, Wilkins, C & Wyld, G 2019, *Keeping children safe online*, Think, London; Zych, I, Farrington, DP & Ttofi, MM 2019, 'Protective factors against bullying and cyberbullying: a systematic review of meta-analyses', *Aggression and violent behavior*, vol. 45, pp. 4-19.

[18] Schiamberg et al. 2016.

- Positive two-way relational communication with peers and adults, and a healthy school climate where positive peer status, academic performance, and support can act as barriers to online abuse[19]
- Age-appropriate mediation strategies for actively monitoring and supervising technology use.[20]

The literature identifies four types of mediation strategies:

- Enabling/active social (direct and indirect conversations to discuss and evaluate risks and benefits)
- Enabling technical (monitoring digital media and physical movement through surveillance and checking of online activities)
- Restrictive social (conditional, time-based or activity-based)
- Restrictive technical (filtering software, restricting access to some content).[21]

To reduce harm and maximise the benefits of online engagement, a combination of these strategies is recommended.

We can balance risks, harms and benefits by including children in discussions about their online safety. Children must be active participants in decisions relating to their use of online technologies, provided with opportunities not only to voice their concerns, but also to design their own online safety strategies and build their capability to self-regulate their social media and internet use in an age-appropriate way.

Overall, the literature suggests the following elements are important when developing online safety programs and approaches:

1. A child rights perspective, which enables equitable, age-appropriate access and meaningful participation, and inclusion of children and young people in decision-making at the home, school and policy levels
2. A focus on digital resilience, through enhancing the technical skills and critical thinking of all stakeholders
3. Inclusion of evidence-informed, outcomes-focused and context-specific elements
4. Adequate training of teachers, parents, care givers, program delivery consultants and community members about safe internet practices and children and young people's perspectives of the internet
5. A system-response through collaborations between families, school and communities
6. Clear, safe and effective pathways for reporting abuse
7. Consistent approaches and ongoing support for the different stakeholders
8. Appropriate program content, which should be age and culturally appropriate, and focused on respect

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[19] Green, Wilkins & Wyld 2019; Zych et al. 2019.

[20] Sweeney, Georg & Ben 2019.

[21] Sweeney, Georg & Ben 2019.

9. Use of a range of delivery modes, including online safety campaigns, interactive videos, role plays, games, posters, offline and online media
10. In-built data collection strategies to monitor and evaluate the short-term and long-term outcomes of programs.

It is important the Government invests in research to support the development and delivery of a range of evidence-informed programs to equip children, young people, parents and carers with the skills they need to safely navigate the digital world.

Addressing risks for children in out-of-home care

In addition to those elements outlined above, our sector consultations have highlighted the need for a more tailored approach for carers of children and young people in care.

Carers frequently expressed a lack of knowledge as to what is appropriate, how to effectively manage screen time, and how to establish boundaries and come to mutual agreement with their children. 'You don't know what you don't know' was a frequent concern. While many parents may experience these challenges, carers explained that they often face additional issues such as differing opinions and approaches from case workers, respite carers and birth parents in relation to devices and boundaries that make it difficult to maintain a consistent approach with a child; a conflict that could often lead to tantrums and behaviours of concern.

Carers felt that information for them needed to include:

- Step-by-step, basic information about technical aspects of online use – such as the different apps available, parental control, and maintaining privacy
- Information on screen time and strategies to set up positive discussions around online use and boundaries
- Out-of-home care specific scenarios and information to support them in navigating inconsistent approaches among the child's care team, including online safety information in carer handbooks
- Tips on how to regulate children's use of the internet in constructive ways to minimise behavioural management issues.

Carers had a number of suggestions for developing online safety resources, including:

- Providing relevant scenarios and role plays that assist them to navigate out-of-home care specific scenarios
- Using a trauma-informed approach to supporting a child with online safety and ensuring content takes into account trauma-related risks and behaviours
- Recognising and responding to a wide variation in the levels of knowledge and understanding of carers and children
- Providing online safety training to carers, birth parents and case workers to foster consistent understanding and approaches
- Providing a wide variety of resources – some carers will need printed information sheets or even someone to attend their home and help make sure things are set up, while others wanted online resources that were regularly updated and workshops.

Conclusion

Digital spaces allow children and young people to reach out, connect with others with similar interests or experiences, be challenged, share their creativity, and advocate for critical causes. It is therefore important that a balanced approach to online engagement harnesses positive elements while mitigating risks that could result in harm.

Raising awareness of the risks of the online world is a good place to start when seeking to address the range of online harms faced by Australian children. The Centre asks the Select Committee to consider the kind of training and resourcing that will most effectively provide children, young people, parents, carers and the community with the information needed to make safe, constructive choices online. Education in media literacy, digital citizenship, help-seeking, and safe navigation of online spaces – and listening to what children and young people themselves say about online use and risk mitigation strategies – can help empower children, young people and families to use the internet as a force for good.