



28th February 2024

Dear Parents and Carers at Sacred Heart PS,

Thank you to those of you who attended last night's Cybersafety Information Session. The feedback was amazing.

For those unable to attend, I have recorded the presentation for you to access via Zoom. You can click on the attached link or copy and paste it into your web browser for access.

Please note that the recording contains 2 files, totaling 48 minutes\*.

<https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/uL8ZvEHp0-1UJAYRJ-Oyv8uQlvRoD9J6W-ygNyPOVKUSDx4T0Q8HmSSUJ9LwCAmV.xeVvQMHevq8nAo6X>

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As promised I also want to provide a list of resources and reinforce the key messages from the session.

For those of you who were unable to attend, it is my background as a former Victoria Police Detective working for 18 years in the field of Sexual Offences and Child Abuse which has instilled a passion in me to educate parents about the risks associated with their children's online presence. I also hold a Bachelor of Behavioural Science (Psychology), Diploma of Police Studies, Advanced Diploma of Public Safety (Police Investigation) and Cert III in Investigative Services. But more importantly, like each of you, I am also a parent trying to navigate uncharted territory raising two daughters in this digital age.

I informed last night's attendees that I am *not* a cybersecurity expert. In my opinion the 'tech' behind the games and internet are nowhere near as important as discussing the behavioral aspects of children's use of the internet and the inherent risks from that perspective. The reality is that people act in ways that are unpredictable, so while it's great to have multifactor authentication and other security technologies, it only takes one mistake, one response to an email or unsolicited message or friend request to put a child at risk.

Prior to the student sessions for the year 3-6 students, I arranged for a survey to be conducted to determine how students use the internet and to identify any patterns or risks. The survey was completed anonymously and personal details or email addresses were not recorded. The results identified the following key findings:

- **80% of the students in year 3-6 use social media sites that are reserved for children aged 13 and above. This included 63% of the grade 3 students, 87% of the year 4s, 79% of the year 5s and 91% of the year 6 students.**
- **20% of the parents of students using Social Media sites do NOT know their child's password.**
- **Of the students using social media sites regulated for children aged 13 or above, 17% are on Instagram, 26% use snapchat, 50% use Facetime, 40% use TikTok and 81% access content on YouTube.**
- **27% of the students using Social Media had friends or followers they did not know.**

- **44% had been contacted by strangers.**
- **48% reported that someone had been mean to them online.**
- **22%, which is 30 students across all four year levels, were honest and reported that you had been mean to others online.**
- **Only 37% of families set limits to device use.**

In addition:

- **28% of students reported they had experienced sleep problems directly related to their device use.**
- **10% had sent a photo or video to someone they would NOT want their parent to see.**
- **16.5% of students had argued with a parent/ carer about their device use.**

Examples of negative behaviors experiences by students included name calling, being sworn and negative comments about their skin colour, clothing and size. Those who reported that they had been mean to others often stated it was because someone had been mean to them first. Another student admitted they were feeling so tired so they "trash talked" the other person.

Of the children who reported having felt unsafe online or receiving a message from a stranger, only half told someone. The survey also showed that **over 2/3** of the students are allowed to use their device in the bedroom, and of those, the majority were allowed to use it unsupervised with the door closed. A significant number were also allowed to use the device unsupervised in the bathroom. Of those who were allowed to use their device behind closed doors, 8 students admitted that they had spoken to a stranger and 8 students admitted that they had sent a photo or video that they would not want their parent to see. This number was spread evenly across all four year levels and 8 students chose not to answer the question, indicating the number may actually be higher.

I am speaking from years of experience as a Police Detective when I warn you that when you combine unsupervised online gaming with closed bedroom/bathroom doors and playing and communicating with people online that they don't know, the risk of your children becoming engaged in being or exposed to bullying, online grooming or violence increases significantly.

I cannot express how strongly I feel about banning internet enabled devices, especially unsupervised use, in a child's bedroom or the bathroom. As well as the increased risk of experiencing negativity online, there is a wealth of research which supports the assertion that to ensure healthy sleep patterns, bedrooms should be for sleeping and not gaming or social media scrolling.

It would also be easy for me to say, 'don't let your child use that app or play that game', but research shows that restrictive measures don't work as well as education, boundaries, co-playing and supervision in keeping children safe. Finding the right balance between imposing restrictive measures and empowering children to use the internet in age-appropriate ways to enhance their creativity and learning opportunities is not an exact science, and as parents and carers you know your child better than anyone to support and guide them to have safer online experiences.

To help navigate this tightrope, here are my top tips:



**Talk to your child** about what they do online and what they know about staying safe. Cyberbullying, image based abuse, sexting, online grooming, identity theft and other offending has lasting impacts for the victim and their families, and children need to both understand the risks involved but also be armed with strategies to deal with any issues that may arise.

**Encourage nonjudgmental and open communication**, so that in the event that something happens or they are exposed to risks, children don't fear negative consequences by talking to you.

**Consider your child's screen use in the context of their overall health and wellbeing.** It can be easy to focus only on the clock and how long your child is spending in front of the screen, but the quality and nature of what they are doing and your involvement are just as important

**Monitor their behaviour for signs something might be wrong.** From changes in their personality, becoming more withdrawn or sad, changes in their sleep patterns, avoidance of school or becoming secretive about their online activities and/or mobile phone use. These are all signs that it is time to talk to your child. Work out what you want to say and how you want to say it, depending on the issue you want to talk about. It takes courage to share hard stories and as parents sometimes we try to discharge our own discomfort with blame, aggression, disappointment, and at times, trying to minimise or avoid discussing it altogether. Listen and respond with empathy and compassion. Try not to get uprooted and thrown into the storm yourself, it's the quickest way for your child to shut down or retract.

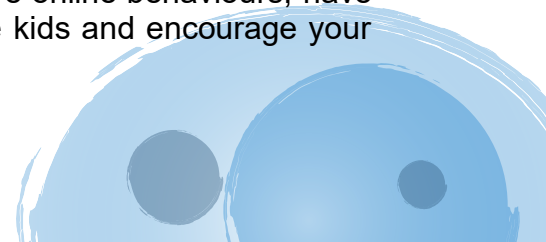
**Educate yourself about what your child is doing online.** Ask them to show you what they are doing and show an interest in learning about it. Remind them of the difference between the online world and creating real relationships and success in the real world. So many young people compare themselves in a negative way to the overly filtered highlight reel of so called 'influencers'.

**Learn how to apply privacy settings, block and report content or users.** I highly you visit recommend [esafety.gov.au/parents](https://esafety.gov.au/parents) for more information and support.

**Consider parental controls and family agreements regarding the use of technology , including screen time limits and boundaries around the use of games and social media.** For example, your family plan could include rules like this:

- no devices in the bedroom
- all screens off at least one hour before planned bedtime
- all family members switch off at dinner time
- devices charged overnight in a place your child cannot access
- and encourage your child to achieve a healthy balance by encouraging offline activities, exercise, and exploring nature.

Remember that it is never too early to instil good habits, and as your child gets older it is useful to keep reminding them of these basic digital intelligence principles: balance, respect, empathy, critical thinking and responsible behaviour. One of the best ways to do this is by demonstrating respectful and safe online practices yourself. Don't engage in negative online behaviours, have digital detox time, put the phone away at dinner, get outside with the kids and encourage your



kids to show themselves and others compassion and kindness in their online interactions by demonstrating these qualities yourself.

So, to finish up, here are details of the online resources I recommended in my presentation:

**esafety.gov.au** and **cyber.gov.au**. These sites promote online safety education for children, educators and parents. They also provide a complaints mechanism for people experiencing cyberbullying, online image abuse and to report illegal or offensive content.

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/key-issues/esafety-guide>

\*\*\* This site contains links to all popular Social Media and gaming sites/ applications and includes instructions on how to protect personal information and key safety links \*\*\*

**Bully Stoppers** is an initiative of the education department and encourages prevention and strategies on how to deal with situations. The website also contains direct links to other support services like Kidshelpline, Lifeline, Parentline and Beyond Blue.

**ThinkUKnow** –provides a number of resources and advice for parents and children on issues such as sexting, general relationship advice and what you can do if an image appears online that you haven't consented to.

**And finally, Kids Helpline** - Australia's only free, private and confidential, telephone and online counselling service specifically for young people aged between 5 and 25. Children can call them on 1800 55 1800 or visit their website at kidshelpline.com.au

I also encourage parents and carers to speak to their child's teacher, wellbeing staff or principal if any incidents arise that involve other students. Don't take matters into your own hands. Australian schools support a nationally consistent approach to preventing and responding to online safety issues. Schools are equipped to manage school related incidents in line with their policies and procedures.

Some cases may be unlawful and activate state reportable offences or mandatory reporting requirements, but for the majority of minor to moderate incidents, the focus is on removing content, resolving conflict and restoring relationships in the best interests of the student/s involved.

As a follow up to this important topic and student and parent presentations, please find attached a mandatory survey for completion and return to your child's classroom teacher.

Thank you so much for your time and I wish you all the very best in your role as a Digital Parent,

**Paula Jarski**

\* The recording will be available until 1 September 2024.



