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## Editorial

In this week's update, I reflect on some of the highlights of the first half of the year. From the launch of, and subsequent work on, *Vision for Instruction* to updates on MACSEYE, and celebrations on the opening of new buildings and other projects at so many of our schools.

### In this edition

How young is too young for social media use? Amid the current debate about regulating a minimum age, Danielle Fitton, Education Officer, Learning Technologies, at MACS writes that, even if the minimum age is not lifted, everyone should consider the readiness of young people to capably manage the complicated space that is social media.

To share stories of innovation or good practice from your school, please email [publications@macs.vic.edu.au](mailto:publications@macs.vic.edu.au). Your stories celebrate the strengths and achievements of Catholic education, and contribute to the strengthening of the system as a whole. They also build collegiality and enrich our sense of being a Catholic education community.

Dr Edward Simons  
Executive Director

## Learning Directions

Phones, social media and teenagers



By Danielle Fitton, Education Officer, Learning Technologies, Education Excellence, at Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools (MACS).

For most parents today, how their teenagers use and are affected by social media is an ongoing concern. Perceived by some as a rite of passage that coincides with birthdays or when moving to secondary school, using phones and social media presents a raft of challenges for parents and schools (Weir 2023).

Making restrictive laws about teenagers using technology is seriously being considered to enforce positive behaviour changes at home and at school, and to protect all students from malicious intentions (Manfield 2024).

Currently, public figures are endorsing changes to minimum age restrictions for using social media, raising the age from 13 to 16 years of age in Australia (Grattan 2024). As of 20 June 2024, a petition on Change.org by [36 Months](#) to raise the minimum age has amassed over 105,000 signatures.

For teenagers using social media, there are real risks that need to be mitigated and managed. MACS supports school communities and families to engage with [eSafety Commissioner](#) advice, training and school response strategies.

### **Risks for teenagers using social media**

In the online world, students need to transfer their knowledge and skills for acceptable behaviours from the real world, and be as cautious about their personal safety as they would when crossing a road (even if it feels like a fun game with mates). If a student is given a phone and access to social media before they are ready and not supported with strategies, this can present serious risks.

Research from the United Kingdom and the United States shows that the number of children aged 8-12 using social media has increased from 31% in 2019 to 38% in 2021 (CSM 2021, p. 5). Parents are helping to create social media accounts for children under 13 without understanding the possible consequences (Schurgin O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson 2011) in order to compete with peer pressure or 'fear of missing out' (FOMO) (Sharma et al. 2023).

Young people report they value using social media for connection, with 70% citing they gain inspiration from others, as well as many using platforms to express themselves creatively (CSM 2024). However, what may appear as a harmless early introduction to social media is actually a contravention to the terms of use and has longer term implications. One study found that, '[g]reater social media use [in 14-year-olds] related to online harassment, poor sleep, low self-esteem and poor body image' (Kelly et al. 2019).

Other research has linked social media use by young people with more exposure to online aggressions, including a correlation in an escalation of cyberbullying as '[r]epeated exposure to online aggression can make the behavior seem more acceptable through role modeling and reinforcement' (Craig et al. 2020, p.s101).

Apart from the significant risks associated with social media use, the considerable distraction and time spent online replaces important in-person protective social activities. According to one study, a young person may experience, on average, more than 200 notifications on their smartphone, with over a quarter of those surveyed receiving in excess of 400 notifications daily (Radesky et al. 2023, p. 6). These distractions can be powerful interruptions to learning.

While young adults are more aware of the negative impacts of social media on their lives and more likely to enact interventions compared to teens (CSM 2024, pp. 30-31), younger students are not equipped developmentally with the appropriate protective factors required to engage safely.

These are just a sample of the strong research and serious evidence base about trends across young people that MACS draws on to inform policies, advice and guidance for eSafety Champions and school leaders.

### **Ways to support students to engage with social media safely**

One of the most important aspects of a teacher's job is to know their students (Standard 1, AITSL n.d.). Empowering and supporting parents, caregivers and teachers to cooperatively determine readiness for social media is paramount (Taylor 2023).

The eSafety Commissioner and the [Trusted eSafety Provider program](#) provides helpful resources for educators, parents and young people in navigating this space.

### **Digital citizenship**

Just like a driver's license grants the holder the permission to drive a car on our roads, a student must learn the rules, their rights and responsibilities of being a member of an online community. They should understand how their behaviours can have a powerful and significant impact on their peers and users in their community.

The role for caregivers in this space may involve establishing clear rules and supervision to scaffold safe and responsible use and this can also be modelled by the adults in the teens' life.

### **Dealing with negative experiences**

*The digital lives of Aussie teens* (eSafety Commissioner 2021) reports 44% of Australian young people had a negative experience in the six-month survey period. Children need a roadmap of what they should do when they encounter problematic behaviour.

It is vital students know who they can speak to and how to filter, block and report in the application, as well as being encouraged to set their profiles to private. Cyberbullying, where there is exposure to harmful content, including violent material, child sexual abuse material and image-based abuse should be reported to the eSafety Commissioner.

### Protecting privacy

Everyone has a right to privacy. Children should understand the importance and justifications for **why** caution should be exercised when sharing online. Information in a photo, such as school uniform, sporting clubs or location can provide personal information that could be used to identify them.

Turning off location services and actively setting privacy controls ensures that content being shared is not publicly viewable. Deselecting tagging in conversations and photos also helps protect from unwanted attention by strangers.

Even if the age limit for social media is not raised, everyone can consider the readiness of young people to capably manage the complicated space that is social media. MACS does not endorse the use of social media or applications outside the permitted age range.

### Further resources

- eSafety Commissioner - [Someone is threatening to share my nudes](#)
- Kids Helpline - [What you need to know about sexting](#)
- headspace - [tips for a healthy headspace](#)
- SWISS - MACS [Student Wellbeing Information Support Service](#)  
Ph: 9367 0419 or email [swb@macs.vic.edu.au](mailto:swb@macs.vic.edu.au)

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