Beyond Cyberbullying:
An Essential Guide for parenting in the digital age

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Extract

Introduction

Unless you have been living in a shoebox, you might note that most young people are now living their lives online. Yep, this is without doubt the most tech-savvy generation ever – completely at ease with an array of mobile technologies that enable them to research, connect, shop and hook up over the internet – much of it via a mobile phone. Gone are the days of the old fixed land- line, with its bulky handset that you had to tuck between your neck and shoulder to free both hands and its lack of privacy that allowed you to pick up the other line and scream at the kids to get off.

The internet has heralded the greatest communication revolution since Gutenberg invented his printing press in the 1440s. (You know the story – all those books and pamphlets ramped up literacy levels, broke the monopoly of the literate elite and challenged the power of the political and religious authorities, changing the world forever.) And it all started with the ability to print just 3000 pages a day. Compare that to the estimated 1 billion pages that are now added to the internet each day – a collaborative effort of millions who inform, help and entertain each other through the gargantuan anthology of knowledge that is Wikipedia, the million-channel people's network we know as YouTube, and the online megalopolises of Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, Flickr and Facebook. The internet is a fundamental part of our economic and social activities, and a massive resource of information, education and entertainment for all Australians, including children.

Technologies have dramatically transformed our kids' relationships with one another, their families and communities. The vast majority of young Australians utilise a desktop computer, laptop, tablet, mobile phone or 'phablet' to access information and to engage, construct and maintain social networks. At no other time in one's life has the desire to be in touch with one's mates been so strong.

But we cannot stick our heads in the digital sand and pretend that it's all bunny rabbits and rainbows in the online world. While it is a place of amazing opportunity, it is also an arena of risk where young people can develop but where they may also become the victims of crime or engage in illegal behaviour themselves. With the increased number of young people using social networking sites, chat rooms and blogs, and texting, the ability to use online tools safely and effectively is now a crucial life skill, and one that should be taken seriously by all Australian public schools. Sadly, the reality is that the standard of cyber citizenship education in Australia is highly variable (more on that in Chapter 3).

The internet is also a world of user-generated content – in other words, the young people using the internet are also actively creating its content. My sons can post and receive pictures, stream video, and read and write things visible to anyone online, anywhere in the world. They can also receive unedited, unfiltered information. It is the job of every parent to help them think critically about what they post, read and see online, and to steer them clear of illegal activity.

The internet is one of the few things parents haven't experienced themselves as teenagers and many haven't kept up to speed with the new technology, or the recent developments – despite the fact that the information superhighway now runs right through their existence and is at the heart of their children's
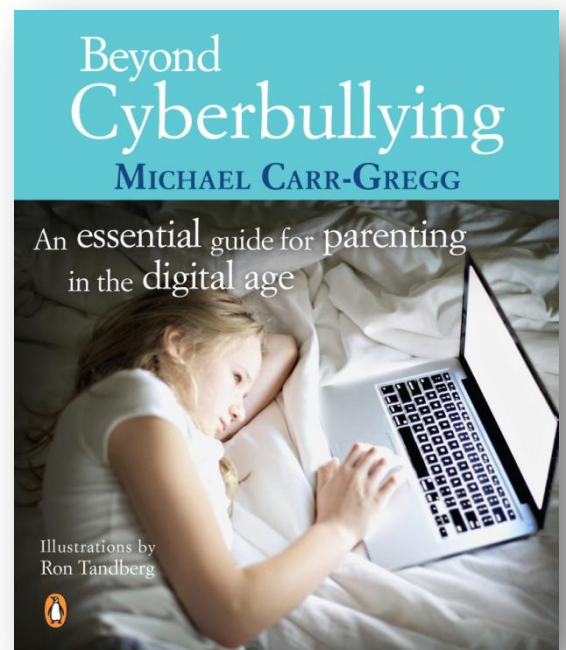
lives. I think some parents have been praying that online social media would be a passing fad, like pet rocks, sea monkeys, waterbeds and hula hoops, but it isn't. In fact, the technology is getting speedier and cleverer and with inevitable improvements in national networks, it means that our young people will – whether we like it or not – be continuously connected.

The fact is that when using text messaging, Instagram or interactive websites, your child will never know for sure whether the dialogue they are engaging in is with the person they imagine. The internet allows your child and the people they communicate with to become virtual chameleons, creating more identities than David Bowie and Lady Gaga combined, and rarely do they have to entertain any notion of responsibility for their actions.

Many parents, particularly those who have come late to the digital revolution, are concerned about their children's potential exposure to cyberbullying and to the vast amounts of inappropriate content available at the click of a mouse. Others are worried about privacy issues (e.g. credit card fraud), predatory behaviour from online strangers (sexual solicitation and online grooming) and the possibility that their otherwise healthy offspring will be lured into an 'addiction' of excessive use where they become alienated from school, overweight, socially isolated and friendless.

While the fourth estate has rather predictably tended to focus on the downside of information technology (bad news sells – if it bleeds, it leads), the great news is that there is a substantial upside to information and communications technologies not only in terms of increasing children's educational opportunities but also in promoting resilience, helping them deal with stress and treating common psychological problems. With 95 per cent of young Australians regularly using the internet, online technologies have great potential to facilitate access to mental health promotion programs.

This is not to suggest that cyberbullying, cybercrime and internet addiction don't exist – they do, but just not in the epidemic proportions the media might have us believe. Moreover, there are simple strategies that parents can use to help their children avoid dodgy online situations. Banning children from online activities is certainly not the answer. What has to be understood and accepted by parents is that social networking sites are here to stay and are causing seismic shifts in conventional social structures. These changes are particularly significant for the most regular users of social media – young people. Aside from the obvious educational and social benefits of the internet, there is a range of evidence, summed up in a 2013 report by the Young and Well CRC, that even video games (in moderation) have a positive impact on young people's wellbeing. It's only excessive gaming that can result in mild increases in problematic behaviours such as anxiety, insomnia and social dysfunction. However, less than 3 per cent of all people (so even fewer children) will develop an 'impulse control disorder', meaning they will be unable to resist the urge to do something detrimental to themselves or others. Impulse control disorders include addictions to alcohol and drugs, food, gambling and gaming. Also, if, like me, you thought that playing video games makes kids pork up, take heart – the research shows that frequency of play is not significantly related to body mass index, or poor grades at school.

Clearly, parents need to be alert, but there's no need to be alarmed. This book is about giving parents the knowledge and skills they need to confidently manage their children's use of this ubiquitous technology.

With this in mind, Chapter 1 is a crash course on the internet for anyone who has been living under a rock for the past two decades. Chapter 2 has the latest stats about what Australian children are actually doing online and gives readers a cook's tour of some of the more popular social media sites and games that our kids are into. In Chapter 3 I discuss cyberbullying – what it means, how to recognise it and what to do about it, and in Chapter 4 I tackle other cyber nasties. Chapter 5 explains some of the laws related to cybercrime and Chapter 6 outlines the key strategies for helping children and young adults use the internet in a safe, smart and responsible way. This is practical, easy-to- follow advice and is as important as teaching them how to swim, how to cross the road and how to ride a bike. Chapter 7 addresses the pros and cons of video games (the very word 'gaming' can cause heart palpitations for some parents), and in Chapter 8, I

talk about how we can harness the power of the internet for good, particularly how smartphone apps and web-based programs can play an important role in promoting wellbeing in young people.

There can be no doubt that this new digital ecosystem poses certain challenges and has some innate risks. However, a central theme of this book is that these challenges and risks have been over-emphasised in recent years both in popular media and social research, blinding parents, educators and many policy makers to the rich resource that is the internet. It is time for parents to turn down the panic dial – to embrace the internet and, if not to actually become a part of its community, then to at least understand it and get involved. How can we protect our children if we don't really understand where they are?