

# Sexts, Texts and Selfies: How to keep your children safe in the digital space

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## Extract

### Introduction

There is nothing easy about being a parent. Babies do not come with instruction manuals and we often rely on our own parents, friends and others to assist us in this wonderful journey we are undertaking. It is filled not only with fear, trepidation and worry, but also exhilaration, love and pride. It is a journey like no other and sometimes we all need help to navigate the highway of parenthood.

Enter the internet and a million different devices, and suddenly there's a whole new world to navigate – complete with delights, challenges and obstacles. Collectively, we don't have generations' worth of knowledge about how to keep our children safe online, but together, today, we can make sure their online experiences are safe ones. As parents, you need to understand your child's digital world, because *their* tech skills, together with *your* maturity, life experiences and knowledge, are going to make this parenting journey into cyberspace as successful and stress-free as possible. After all, technology itself is not the issue; it is the user of the technology who creates the risks and dangers.

This book is for you, right now. It will tell you everything you need to know about the digital world and how it affects your children: what your children are doing online, what they shouldn't be doing, what you can do to help them get the best out of technology and, most importantly, what you can do to keep them safe.

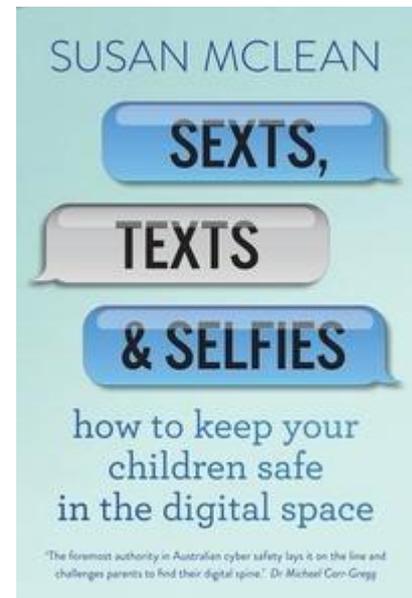
Our children are digital natives, born into a world where they are constantly surrounded by it. They cannot imagine life before mobile phones, iPads or the internet. Smart devices and social media sites have become part of our children's lives and they strongly influence how our children create, share and exchange information with others.

Despite all the great things about cyberspace, the online world does create some problems for children. For example:

- They are tech-savvy but lacking in 'actual knowledge' and cognitive development.
- It is their *primary* form of socialising and communicating.
- They have no fear of technology or cyberspace.
- It is extremely important for them to be connected.
- There is enormous pressure to conform.

While kids today are supremely tech-savvy, we shouldn't confuse this with actual knowledge, an understanding of dangers and risks, cognitive development and maturity. Your children will most probably leave you for dead when it comes to tech use, but what you *can* assist them with is real knowledge about what cyberspace is, what happens there, how to identify and deal with problems, how to stay safe and how to use some basic common sense. Sadly, from what I see on a daily basis, common sense is just not that common.

The reality is that the concept of common sense is foreign to many people, including adults, and when we are dealing with young, vulnerable, impressionable and hormonal adolescents whose brains are still very much a work in progress, it is often impossible for them to think things through the same way an adult would. They do not have the ability to pause and reflect on the consequences of their actions before doing something and because they are young, they do not have the life experience or maturity to understand the consequences even after they have been explained to them. This is why parents are so important in this online journey.



As a parent of three children (young adults now), I have had to deal with this head-on for the past seventeen years, from when my eldest was first introduced to online technology at school. Like most 'old people' I had no idea, was not particularly interested and hadn't really put much thought into how my parenting would change in the digital era.

Our first computer at home did not even connect to the internet; we used it only to type documents or perhaps insert a disk to play a game. We had planned to wait until our eldest was at secondary school before we got a computer at home as we really thought it was unnecessary until then. However, we relented and purchased one when she was in Grade 3, as it was apparent to us that technology was an important tool and we needed to embrace it as our daughter was being taught to do at school. This meant that our first-born was nine years old when technology entered our house. Our youngest had access from the time he was able to click a mouse. I am convinced he was born with an iPhone in one hand and a MacBook in the other. He is never 'not connected'. How times have changed! Although only six years separate my oldest and youngest children (with one in between), they are a generation apart when it comes to technology. The generation gap in this instance is not twenty to twenty-five years; it's around only five years, which makes keeping up with technology – the good and the bad – even harder. What we as parents may have proudly mastered last month is probably on the way out by this month, or in the not-so-distant future.

My career began when I joined Victoria Police on 15 March 1982. Like most young and keen constables, I loved to catch a crook. Any crook would do, but there was a thrill and deep satisfaction when you managed to arrest someone for a more serious crime. In those days crimes happened in the real world, a concrete environment. My early career saw me stationed at Fitzroy, which was a particularly busy inner-suburban Melbourne station. It was renowned for having more pubs per square kilometre of any police area. Cybercrime had not been invented at that point and manual typewriters were the order of the day.

Fast forward to 1994 when I was stationed in the outer northern suburbs of Melbourne, a relatively new and rapidly expanding area. I was part of the Police Schools Involvement Program (PSIP), which put police officers into local schools to provide positive interaction with local kids and to break down the barriers. The aim was also to use education to prevent kids from committing offences, being proactive rather than sitting and waiting for a problem and then trying to fix it. This was something that I was passionate about, and still am.

It was while running the PSIP program at this police station that my journey into cyberspace really began. I took my first report of cyberbullying as a Victoria Police officer in February 1994. I can still remember the phone call from a local Year 8 coordinator asking me to attend the school as he had a group of Year 8 girls who required, in his words, 'the police talk'. I arrived at the school having no idea what these girls had done. The teacher started to discuss the internet and I thought he was just making small talk. In 1994 I did not own a mobile phone; nor did I have the internet at work, and I rarely – if ever – used it at home. Then he said, 'These girls have been mean online.'

What? I remember my response was something like, 'Can you do that?' and 'That's not nice!' This was all I could think of saying. I didn't even know if a crime had been committed. As a police officer I had no idea and, worse still, as a parent, I was thinking, was this ahead for me?

To this day, that first case of cyberbullying is up there with the most serious I have dealt with. The girls had had a falling out and one wanted to get back at the other. The offender (for want of a better title) visited an adult sex chat room and posted an ad: 'If you want free sex, please contact this girl . . .' and included the name, address and phone number of the classmate she no longer liked. She could not have foreseen the consequences for the victim and her family. A stream of men came knocking on the door looking for the thirteen-year-old girl with her very kind offer of free sex. The family had to temporarily move to a motel and I had my cyberbullying baptism by fire. I honestly had no idea how to handle it but muddled through the best I could. I realised I needed to learn, and so I did.

Later in my career, I was called to deal with quite a comical issue involving a deputy principal. This person was tech-savvy and had embraced technology in her role but had chosen not to have a social networking page. On arriving at school one

Monday, several staff commented to her that it was great she was now on Facebook. She replied that she was not and thought nothing of it until recess, when even more staff congratulated her on joining. She called the school's IT person and asked him to investigate why everyone thought she had a Facebook page. It quickly became apparent that one of the students had set up an account in her name, used her picture from the school website, made up a date of birth, then sent friend requests to all the staff, all of whom accepted her invitation, not realising that a student was behind it. This meant that the student had had access to many of the staff's Facebook pages for a whole weekend. What upset the deputy principal most was the fact that the student had put her age at sixty- five, when she was only in her early fifties! No real harm done, but it shows how anyone can be anyone online.

My journey to educate and research has taken me around the world, studying in both the USA and the UK. The more I learned, the more I wanted to learn, and it was clear to me that cybersafety was going to become a significant problem here in Australia, just as it had been in countries with much larger populations.

This book is based on all these years working in cyberspace as a police officer, my experiences as a mother to three highly tech-savvy children, my international study and research, and my current role that sees me in a school somewhere in the world almost every day, dealing with online issues, often providing initial crisis management, advice and solutions through the vast networks I have established with key online organisations.

I hope this book becomes your instruction manual for parenting in the digital space. I don't profess to know it all . . . but I want to share what I do know. We are all in this together. I often use this Donald Rumsfeld quote to explain the concept of cyberspace to others:

*There are known knowns. These are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don't know we don't know.*

Begin the journey with me, and learn what you don't know you don't know. Good luck!