SUBMISSION TO THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON CYBER-SAFETY

Input from the Australian Youth Forum

This submission to the Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety inquiry is made on behalf of young Australians who contributed their thoughts and opinions through the Australian Youth Forum (AYF). It is a summary of the thoughts, ideas and opinions of young Australians, no analysis has been undertaken and the words of young people have been used where possible. It should be noted that majority of this submission focuses on the issue of cyber-bullying.

AYF Background

Launched in 2008, the AYF is a formal framework and communication channel between the Australian Government (the Government) and young people (aged 15-24), youth policy specialists and the youth sector.

The two main objectives of the AYF are:

- widespread youth engagement around the country
- meaningful and ongoing engagement with the youth sector.

The AYF aims to develop and implement universal and targeted engagement strategies, which provide young people and the youth sector with an opportunity to contribute their ideas and opinions on issues which help inform Government policy. Components of the AYF include communication and events, sponsorships and support to the youth sector.

Since it was launched the AYF has held a number of face-to-face forums, outreach and partnership events, as well has having topics available for discussion on the AYF website where issues around cyber-safety have been discussed.

AYF website discussions

Issues around cyber-safety have been raised in a number of the online discussion topics. Bullying was one of the first topics on the AYF website. Many of those who responded felt that bullying behaviour in all forms was unacceptable and more needed to be done to curb the rise in this behaviour especially the rise in incidents of cyber-bullying.

One participant in the discussion stated that "Cyber bullying of today has proven to be amongst the most damaging forms of bullying. Cyber bullies are those who cannot confront their target head-on, and feel compelled to use their mobile phone or the internet as cover for their attacks on their targets. It can often be more damaging than physical or verbal harassment, as these draw unwanted attention from those who actively try and stop bullying, whereas cyber bullying largely goes unnoticed, until the victim often reaches

breaking point and does something drastic. For example, someone who tries to assault another person will receive unwanted attention in seconds, while someone who uses MSN or SMS to harass their target is more likely to be unnoticed by authority figures, so the abuse can progress for days, weeks, months, maybe even years."

Cyber-bullying topic

From the 30 March 2011 – 18 April 2011, the AYF hosted a topic on cyber-bullying on the AYF website. This topic asked young people to share their experience and provide any ideas or solutions for change. To supplement this discussion, the AYF also asked young people as part of the launch of National Youth Week, to provide their thoughts on this issue. Approximately 40 responses were received.
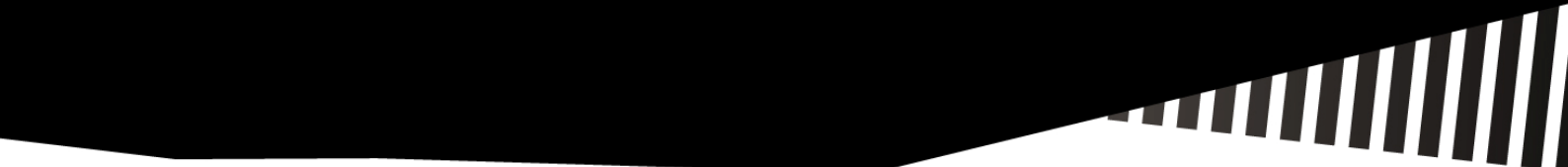
The majority of the respondents reinforced the idea that cyber-bullying is an unacceptable form of behaviour and recounted incidents of bullying they or family/friends had experienced. Many respondents called for harsher penalties for those caught cyber-bullying. One respondent suggested that there should be a way to block numbers with sms. While you can currently block voice calls from particular phone numbers, you cannot do the same for contact via sms. It was also suggested that positive peer influence needs to be used to stop the occurrences of cyber-bullying.

youTHINK: Your Say

In February 2009, the AYF held its first face-to-face event, **youTH**INK: Your Say. This event was an Australian first in youth engagement, which saw 618 young Australians aged 15-24 come together to simultaneously discuss two important issues facing young Australians, 'Violence and Safety' and 'Contributing to our Democracy'. This event was held in all capital cities, as well as Alice Springs and Cairns, and provided a truly national perspective on these issues.

The discussions on issues of online safety were around concerns with online bullying behaviour. Participants felt that a lack of education was a major factor in this behaviour. Many people felt that specific education programs at schools were needed to help young people understand the consequences of their behaviour and develop alternative conflict management strategies. There was strong support for education of this kind to be implemented early in school and continue through all school years. Early intervention was considered the key.

Many of the locations discussed the impact bullying has on people. There were a number of stories of the participants themselves, family members or friends who have been bullied and received no help from their school. Many young people reported that they were not aware

of any anti-bullying campaigns. Participants who were aware of the policies and programs could relay instances where students had reported bullying incidents to teachers and no action had been taken. There were also significant discussions on the escalating nature of bullying behaviour and the increase in cyber-bullying.
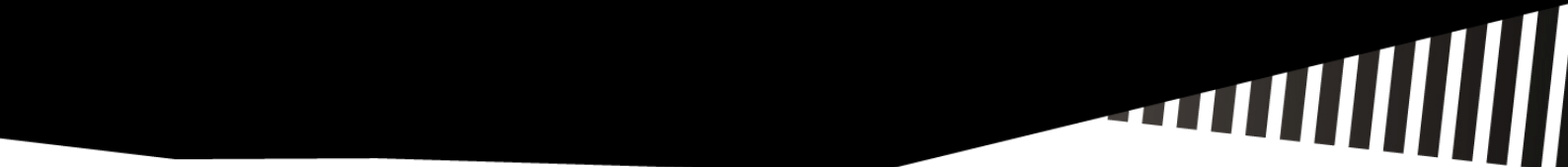
National Conversation

On 22 October 2009, former Prime Minister, the Hon Kevin Rudd MP and the Hon Kate Ellis MP (former Minister for Youth), launched the National Conversation (the Conversation) to consult with young people and the broader community on the development of the Government's National Strategy for Young Australians (the Strategy).

The Strategy released in 2010, aims to empower young people to build their own lives and sets out the Government's vision for all young people to grow up safe, healthy, happy and resilient. The aim of the Conversation was to ensure wide spread consultation to feed into the development of the Strategy. The Conversation process was supported by the AYF. Activities associated with the Conversation ran from 19 October to 12 November and included online events, national and local forums and targeted face-to-face discussions.

The consultation process aimed to reach a wide range of key stakeholders through a number of different formats including:

- the Host your Own Forum kit to host forums with friends, in schools or community groups
- Contributing to discussion topics on the AYF website
- Video commentary through the AYF YouTube channel
- Forum hosted by the Inspire Foundation- Reach Out
- National **youTH**INK event held on 12 November
- By visiting Minister Kate Ellis's Twitter page or through personal Twitter by including #youthconvo in the tweet

The Strategy outlines seven core priorities for action. Priority Four, enabling young Australians to participate safely and confidently online, received mixed reactions. There was broad recognition of the impact of the online environment on young people, however online safety was viewed as only one aspect of young people's personal safety.

Several young people discussed the impacts of internet safety and cyber-bullying in the context of their personal health and wellbeing. Feedback indicated a need for more information on support services, organised confrontation with perpetrators and strategies to help build resilience against negative online experiences.

During the Conversation, a number of live online forums were held in partnership with the Inspire Foundation. One of these was focused on online safety. The Staying Safe Online – Habbo InfoBus session found that the:

- young people reported that they acquired online safety education from a variety of settings, including school, their parents, sites such as Habbo and Reach Out and their peers.
- participants suggested that strategies to stay safe online were 'common sense'.
- young people felt safer on sites that were moderated (such as Habbo).
- participants suggested that whilst increasing awareness about online safety is important, the media 'don't get it right'.
- participants were concerned about scams and technical risks.

youTHINK: Live & Online

On Thursday 12 November, **youTH**INK: Live & Online was held to provide young people across Australia to have input into the development of the Strategy. This event involved a live audience in Sydney, with interactive web casting. There was a lot of discussion around issues of online safety and cyber-bullying. The following are brief points from these discussions.

- Peer to peer mentoring – positive peer pressure online
- Awareness of the consequence of violence (personal side)
- Violent behaviour needs to be dealt with at an early age (early intervention)
- Confidential online support for victims and instigators
- Parents should educate children about online safety
- Community and school education/awareness around respect and IT literacy (cyber-bullying)
- Young people should be aware of online risks and providing personal information – online safety is commonsense, parents need to take responsibility for monitoring their child's usage
- 'Stranger danger' applies online
- There needs to be awareness of strategies to address cyber-bullying
- Online social networks need to follow up on reported incidence of abuse/hate/bullying
- Online abusers (cyber-bullies) think there is no recourse as it is not a physical world
- Cyber-bullying/violence is not always people you know. Facebook groups, for example, provide a space for hate and prejudice to fester and grow
- Education departments should not ban social networking sites – they can be used as educational resources

- Online safety needs to include credit card safety

Submissions

As part of the Conversation, many youth organisations provided written submissions. Information relating to online safety and cyber-bullying included:

- Encouraging cooperative efforts between business, government, law enforcement and users to help create a safer, more secure online environment for children and young people.
- Educational programs (both in and out of schools) to make young people aware of the safety risks when using social networking sites and to equip them with safety measures and tools to help them manage their use of social networking sites.
- An information campaign to inform young people and adults of the possible dangers of social networking sites.

One organisation stated that 'while young people are usually portrayed as completely media savvy...or vulnerable and in need of protection, this view fails to recognise the diversity of young people's experiences online. As such, strategies to protect young people online must be similar to protective factors in the real world. Instead of denying them access, strategies which empower young people to take charge of their own safety'.

The following measures were suggested for improving online safety:

- the Government should provide information for parents about how to discuss safe internet use with their child.

- the Government should provide information for young people about their legal rights and responsibilities and how to resolve online disputes and grievances.

Conclusion

Many of the young people through various AYF events and forums expressed their concerns around cyber-safety and in particular cyber-bullying. Overwhelmingly, respondents felt that this form of behaviour was unacceptable and more needed to be undertaken to address the rising incidents of this type of behaviour. There was strong support for better education for young people, parents and schools on cyber-bullying and cyber-safety and many young people felt that there needed to be stronger penalties for perpetrators of this behaviour.