

SUBMISSION No. 35



The Secretary
Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety
R1-109, Parliament House
PO Box 6021,
Canberra, ACT 2600
jscc@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Secretary,

Re: Inquiry into cyber-safety

The Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA) is the NSW peak body representing non-government agencies providing direct services to children and young people, and their families. ACWA has a history of over 50 years in social advocacy.

ACWA welcomes the opportunity to provide comments in relation to the Terms of Reference on the Joint Select Committee's inquiry into cyber-safety. We would like to commend the Committee for the commitment shown inquiring into this growing issue.

The pivotal points in ACWA's submission are:

- Online environments are a valuable tool for breaking down physical boundaries, providing a highly accessible source of information, and contribute to the development of knowledge.
- Censorship should be avoided when considering strategies for ameliorating the cyber-safety risks that the online environments pose to children and young people.
- Parents and the community are the first lines of safeguarding children and young people from cyber-safety risks, and they should be supported accordingly to carry out this role.
- Schools are an ideal forum for children and young people to develop competence in cyber-safety and model good social behaviour for the online environment.

Should you require further information, please contact Lo-Shu Wen, Policy Officer, on 02 9281 8822.

Yours sincerely,

Sylvia Ghaly
Director of Policy and Membership

25 June 2010

Level 4
699 George Street
Sydney NSW
Locked Bag 13
Haymarket Post Office
NSW 1240
ABN: 24 459 406 828

phone 02 9281 8822
fax 02 9281 8827
web www.acwa.asn.au
email acwa@acwa.asn.au
ccwt@acwa.asn.au

Terms of Reference

The online environment in which Australian children currently engage, including and physical points of access (schools, libraries, internet cafes, homes, mobiles)

The online environment has progressively become an invaluable tool that has contributed to the breaking down of physical boundaries; it has become a highly accessible source of information, and acts as a virtual space that aids the development of knowledge. It is important that the virtues of this online environment be at the forefront of any deliberations on cyber-safety.

For children and young people, this online environment serves a multitude of purposes that traverses study, socialising and entertainment. Children and young people are technologically savvy, with young people most likely to take advantage of the public and mobile access points to the online environment. This is reflected in the inclusion of internet access on both home and handheld gaming devices, and mobile telephony.

Abuse of children online, particularly cyber-bullying

Children and young people are vulnerable in the online environment. However, this vulnerability is not markedly different to the same vulnerability that a child would experience if they were similarly left on their own in a public, physical environment. There is a lay-belief that online environments are safer because it is not a physical environment with 'real' perceived threats, when in fact threats do exist and a similar level of supervision is needed to ensure safety.

The risk of online child abuse is a genuine threat, including the potential for online grooming of children. This underscores the need to have strategies that safeguard the safety, welfare, and wellbeing of children and young people. These strategies should include:

- Parental vigilance and awareness of the risks
- Educating children and young people of the risks, and instilling a level of competence for cyber-safety
- Law enforcement authorities that are provided with the training and resources to address the issue of online perpetrators

Cyber-bullying is a pervasive issue that presents itself in multiple forms. There are multiple sources of cyber-bullying as well as a multiple ways of transgressing cyber-bullying. Sources or perpetrators of bullying may include: peer-to-peer, adult-to-child, involvement of groups, and use of third parties (knowingly or not).

There are direct and indirect forms of cyber-bullying and this may include but is not limited to:

- Direct harassment or intimidation
- Publishing of malicious content
- Systems or technology attacks including hacking or viral intrusion
- Use or encouragement of third parties to harass or intimidate
- Manipulation of systems to exclude
- Falsely impersonating in order to defame or misrepresent

Ways to support schools to change their culture to reduce incidence and harmful effects of cyber-bullying

ACWA strongly supports the use of early intervention and/or prevention strategies. By addressing an issue during the early stages or before it even presents, it prevents the issue from becoming a larger problem if left unaddressed. Rigby (2002) in his meta-evaluation of methods and approaches to reduce bullying found that, “the likelihood of success appears to be greater when programmes are implemented with younger students attending kindergartens and primary school”.

Schools are an optimal environment in which to support students to be cyber-safe. Raising the awareness of children and young people before, or as, computers are introduced into the school curriculum are positive preventative steps towards ensuring children and young people are better equipped to mitigate the risks that they are likely to encounter online.

Schools should be empowered to address issues of cyber-bullying at school even if the bullying may not directly relate to the school. For this to occur, there is a need for this role to be legitimated and schools given the authority to intervene.

The role of parents, families, carers and the community

Parents, families and carers are the front line for protecting children from risks. They are the principals that guide children on values, morals, and accepted social behaviour. Their roles include being the front line for safeguarding children and young people from cyber-safety threats, and providing the appropriate response should cyber-bullying occur.

ACWA believe that efforts should be placed in strengthening the family unit. We do not believe that censorship is the answer to ensuring cyber-safety. Through a process of empowerment and awareness raising families will be better equipped to identify, discuss and resolve cyber-safety issues. Lodge (2008) believes that, “adults have an important part to play in supervising the activities of young people when using these technologies.”

Parents, families, and carers should be able to access the information that they need to be able to make informed decisions when addressing cyber-safety issues that may be experienced by children and young people. This group could be supported with:

- Awareness raising strategies
- Resources and information on prevalent and emerging cyber-safety issues
- Resources on how to approach and discuss these issues with children and young people
- Information on interventions and supports

The desirable outcomes are empowered parents, families, and carers that:

- Are able to understand cyber-safety issues and the impact that it has on their child or young person
- Feel comfortable enough to discuss cyber-safety issues with their child or young person
- Know what actions to take or where to go to for more information or support

References

Lodge, J. (2008) *Working with families concerned with school-based bullying (AFRC briefing no.11)*, Melbourne: Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse, Retrieved March 12, 2009, from <http://www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/pubs/briefing/briefing11.html>

Rigby, K. (2002) *A Meta-Evaluation of Methods and Approaches to Reducing Bullying in Pre-Schools and Early Primary School in Australia*, Canberra: National Capital Printing