SUBMISSION No. 54

Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia

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The Secretary
Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety
R1-109
Parliament House
PO Box 6021
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir or Madam

Inquiry into Cyber Safety

Thank you for the opportunity to submit to this important inquiry. Children and young people's engagement in the rapidly evolving online environment and issues arising from their engagement, particularly relating to their wellbeing and safety, are a matter of considerable concern for me. I see the Inquiry into Cyber Safety (the Inquiry) as a first step to enabling the considerable research, expertise and good practice knowledge in this area to be reviewed and so contribute to a coordinated course of action by government and non-government agencies across Australia.

Role of Commissioner for Children and Young People WA

I was appointed as Western Australia's (WA) inaugural Commissioner for Children and Young People in December 2007 pursuant to the Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006 (the Act).[1] Under the Act my role is to advocate for the half a million Western Australian children and young people under the age of 18, specifically having responsibility for advocating for, promoting and monitoring their wellbeing.

I am also required, under section 19(b) of the Act, to promote the participation of children and young people in the making of decisions that affect their lives, and to encourage government and non-government agencies to seek the participation of children and young people appropriate to their age and maturity.

In the role of Commissioner, I travel extensively throughout Western Australia consulting widely with government and non-government agencies as well as with children and young people and their families in metropolitan, regional and remote communities.

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[1] *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006*, Western Australia, Available: http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/wa/consol_act/cfcaypa2006418/

Caring for the future growing up today

It is from this perspective that I make my submission to the Inquiry.

The scope of my submission

The scope of the Inquiry is very broad and while every topic is significant to children and young people's wellbeing and safety I have decided to focus only on the importance of hearing from children and young people and incorporating their views. I believe this will have a significant impact on the effectiveness of any action that arises from the Inquiry.

Of the many topics within the scope of the Inquiry bullying (including cyber bullying) is an issue that has been raised with me by children and young people in Western Australia. It was of concern to those involved in my Wellbeing Research, responding to my online poll and for some who meet with me as I travel around the State. Research clearly confirms what I am hearing about the significance and extent of bullying, including cyber bullying for children and young people.[2] [3] For this reason I will discuss involving children and young people in the context of this particular cyber safety issue.

Involving children and young people

Everywhere I go children and young people tell me they want to contribute. It is also my experience that children and young people often have a good understanding of what is best for their wellbeing, have unique insights into issues and can offer creative solutions to the problems under discussion.

Directly involving children and young people in decisions that impact on them and taking their views into account in the development of laws, policies and programs results in better outcomes for children and young people. This is true for all areas that impact on children and young people but is especially the case when considering their engagement with technology and the online environment – no one knows more about the ways they are engaged, the issues they face and, therefore it follows, solutions that are most likely to work for them.

Researchers and agencies currently working in areas related to the online environment are leading the way in involving children and young people. I would like to direct the Committee's attention to just a few examples.

The Australian Government has several important consultative mechanisms in place to hear from children and young people including:

- The Youth Advisory Group on cyber safety[4] which involves 500 students ages 8 to 17 years from schools across Australia in providing advice on cyber safety issues.

- The Australian Youth Forum[5] which in March 2009 discussed bullying. On this website it is noted that '*the Australian Government wants to harness the unique*

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[2] Kids Helpline, *Information Sheet: Bullying, Harassment and Physical Violence*, BoysTown, 2010, Available: http://www.kidshelp.com.au/upload/22846.pdf

[3] Cross, D. et al, *Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study,* Child Health Promotion Research Centre, Edith Cowan University, 2009, Available: http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/NationalSafeSchools/Pages/research.aspx

[4] Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, Australian Government, Available: http://www.dbcde.gov.au/funding_and_programs/cybersafety_plan/youth_advisory_group

perspectives, useful insights and important opinions of young Australians. Young people are the best experts on young people's lives.'[6]

- The Australian Communications and Media Authority through both their research[7] and their *cyber[smart:]* website[8] for children and young people consult about the reality of the online environment for them and ways to improve their programs.

Organisations such as the Inspire Foundation provide their programs in the online environment, conduct significant research about young people's engagement with technology and the internet and are working closely with young people to develop and improve their programs.[9]

Additionally I would like to specifically highlight the work of the Child Health Promotion Research Centre, Edith Cowan University, Western Australia which under the direction of Professor Donna Cross has conducted extensive research in the areas of bullying, aggression prevention and mental health promotion.[10] A feature of their evidence-based research is the extent to which significant and appropriate emphasis is placed on the perspectives and knowledge of children and young people.

For example, their research into cyber bullying behaviour in Western Australian schools (*Cyber Friendly Schools Project* and *Cyber Friendly Schools Summit*) sought young people's input initially through a student summit and then through the ongoing student reference group. According to their website these strategies *'ensure that young Western Australians are providing input to recommendations and activities that grow from the Cyber Friendly Student Summit, including the development of new strategies that will effectively reduce this increasing problem.'*[11] This is just one example of the way children and young people's views are integral to their research.

Finally I commend to the Committee the work of my fellow Commissioners in Tasmania and New South Wales[12] who have each consulted with children and young people about their views on bullying and other cyber safety issues.

Conclusion

In conclusion I recommend to the Committee the importance of hearing from and involving children and young people in any work around cyber safety topics and highlight the way in which their involvement is contributing to effective policies and programs being developed and implemented by government and non-government agencies and researchers alike.

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[5] Australian Youth Forum, Australian Government, Available: http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/

[6] Ibid

[7] Australian Communications and Media Authority, *Click and connect: Young Australians' use of online social media,* Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, Available: http://www.acma.gov.au/webwr/aba/about/recruitment/click_and_connect-01_qualitative_report.pdf

[8] Australian Communications and Media Authority, *Cybersmart survey,* Australian Government , Available: http://www.cybersmart.gov.au/en/Online%20Survey.aspx

[9] Inspire Foundation, Available: http://www.inspire.org.au/research-and-policy-research-library-recent-publications.html

[10] Child Health Promotion Research Centre, Edith Cowan University, Available: http://chpru.ecu.edu.au/research/index.php

[11] Ibid

[12] NSW Commission for Children and Young People, *Submission to the NSW Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2: Inquiry into the bullying of children and young people,* 2009, Available: http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/Prod/parlment/committee.nsf/0/584699363ef9002aca25758c00834bd1/$FILE/Submission%2044.pdf

I also recommend that the Committee pay specific attention to submissions from children and young people (and from organisations involving them in their work) about these topics as they have the best knowledge and insight into how the issues impact on their lives.

Additionally the Committee may like to consider meeting directly with representative groups of children and/or young people, either those who have made a submission or those who provide advice to organisations who have. In my experience hearing from children and young people directly about the issues that affect them is both informative and inspiring.

Yours sincerely

MICHELLE SCOTT

Commissioner for Children and Young People WA

24 June 2010