

WORDS DANIELLE VERRILLI

# Know your enemy

In our increasingly online world, using social media is fraught with danger for children – education is vital, says Danielle Verrilli, Director of Cybersafe Families.

In recent weeks we've heard about dangerous TikTok challenges, increased reports of child sexual extortion, production of child abuse material, a rise in online bullying, harassment via various platforms, online grooming, problematic screen time and associated sleep issues, and that's just to name a few.

What's gone wrong?

Children around the world have spent more time online in the past two years than ever before. As connection-seeking humans, they've found new ways to

communicate and connect with people. Online learning and social restrictions meant there was a gap to be filled and new habits were formed.

The outcome of this has been the most rapid explosion of online safety issues to ever face young people.

TikTok is a popular video sharing social network that hasn't been without issues in Australian schools. One of the most appealing features of TikTok is the sense of community it creates, with users getting younger and younger.

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Along with this popularity comes the creation of TikTok challenges. Some are entertaining, some dangerous and some are very unkind.

Last year we saw the "Blackout Challenge", which encouraged people to asphyxiate themselves until they passed out while being filmed and then waking up moments later.

Right now we're in the midst of the "Guess Who" school-based trend. Users set up a fake account, post a "Guess Who" of someone in their school, listing a number of descriptors that are often unkind. This is very hurtful and humiliating for the person who is the subject of the "Guess Who", but also for all the young people whose names are tagged as part of the guessing game.

These trends pop up and go viral faster than we can see them coming – just as we're starting to learn about them, they're gone again. If a young person you know is involved in one of these challenges or trends, it's important to remember that if they can weather the storm, it'll be gone as quickly as it arrived.

The most concerning issue we've seen this year is the significant rise in reports of child sexual extortion. Blackmailing minors for images isn't new, but the Australian Federal Police has warned that reports have quadrupled in recent times and the target is young boys. Offenders are posing as young girls and encouraging the exchange of nude photos. Once these images have been obtained the target is then blackmailed for more images or unattainable amounts of money.

We need to talk to young people about how to recognise suspicious behaviour online and the importance of speaking out if they think they're being targeted. Most importantly, we need to reinforce that if they've found themselves a part of such a scam, they're not going to be in trouble and it's not their fault. It's important that they stop sending images immediately, keep a record of any evidence, change passwords on accounts and surround themselves with support. Young people need to be aware of the warning signs that they might be talking to an offender. Parents can help them by discussing how to identify inconsistencies



Danielle Verrilli



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in profiles, to notice whether or not they are using a webcam or video, and if they have tried to encourage them to move to a different platform to communicate

once they've met someone.

Let children know that if they experience these things, it's time to raise the alarm.

One of the

best things we can do to ensure positive online habits from a very young age is to improve communication between children and their parents. Because of the generation gap, parents sometimes lack relevant personal experience in the online world to grasp what is really going on when a child shares a problem. Have open conversations with your children and be willing to talk about the big topics; awkward, embarrassing and ugly.

Restricting children from devices and games when things go wrong can be seen as a solution by parents who are at a loss as to what else to do. We've all been there! However, restricting children's online presence doesn't allow them to build the skills they

will need to tackle the online world as adults. It can also isolate them from their peers, possibly at a time when they need them the most.

If we really want open lines of communication, as parents it's important to acknowledge the positive influence of technology in children's lives. We don't want them thinking that the significant adults in their lives believe technology is the enemy; we need to support and promote engagement in positive ways.

In schools, we need to be talking about responsibility, respect, empathy and resilience online and start this education early. Students in schools need opportunities to think critically about what they see online, their own online safety and their online reputation. Everywhere children learn, work and play we need to provide access to cyber safety education to ensure young people know that they're not alone and support is always there.

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