

Guide to digital parenting

If you're out of your depth in the cyberworld, there's a new guide to help you protect your children. Alex Bernard reports

Now that 95 per cent of young Australians use the internet and 83 per cent use social networking sites they are exposed to a whole new cyberworld of threats that parents and carers are forced to confront but struggling to control.

One tool designed to give parents a helping hand is a free magazine called *Digital Parenting*, published by Vodafone. Allison Murray leads Vodafone's initiatives on child safety and responsible use of mobiles and was involved in collating the magazine's editorial.

According to Murray the publication fills a gap in Australia. Vodafone had already done a version in the UK a few years ago which was hugely popular and that prompted the company to adapt one for the local market. "While information on those hot topics of cyber-bullying and sexting are around, they are not collated into a practical guide that's easy to access and offers advice on how to manage these sometimes confronting issues," Murray says.

Vodafone approached many organisations and companies involved in cyber safety to get involved. Contributors include Google, Facebook, Yahoo!, the Cooperative Research Centre for Young People, Technology and Wellbeing, and the Alannah and Madeline Foundation National Centre Against Bullying.

The executive director of child protection group Bravehearts, Hetty Johnston, sits on the Cyber Safety Working Group which meets every three months. Yahoo! and Google are also represented in the group, which was put together by the federal government and includes members of the federal police and child protection agencies.

"It's a huge problem. The internet presents probably the biggest threat to our kids we've ever seen, introducing them to adult concepts that even some adults don't understand," says Johnston.

"It's great Vodafone is offering a practical way of dealing with the problems that are growing so rapidly we can hardly keep up."

The magazine also has a companion app called *Guardian*, which is password protected and has a number of safety features and programming capabilities that ensure children and parents decide jointly what access they will have to the internet, camera, Facebook and other features during certain times of the day. It also comes with an emergency override feature.

Plans are already underway for the next edition which will come out later this year. Allison Murray says that while the core issues will probably remain there will be new information and research the publication will highlight.

"Essentially, it has experts explaining how young people are using social media, the impact of digital footprints both now and in the future, apps, smartphones, digital security and online shopping in language that's easy to understand for parents. It also highlights local resources and current information about what is happening in schools and local programs they can access, so we're giving parents the tools to help protect

their children, to start having those sometimes difficult conversations," says Murray.

In the course of putting the publication together, Murray says that it was the phenomenon of sexting that she found the most confronting. "It's really quite shocking how much of it is going on and how young these children are. We will definitely be revisiting that in the next edition," says Murray.

Hetty Johnston says this kind of support is invaluable. "It's a new frontier now for parents and carers. We haven't had to deal with stuff like this before on this scale and it's hard because as soon as we develop a program or software to make something safe, they come up with a way around it, so anything that helps start that dialogue between parents and kids is great," she says.

Digital Parenting is free online at www.vodafone.com.au/digitalparenting or from Vodafone stores.



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