Digital media literacy & safety (Part III)

Today's children are growing up in a digital world that brings both opportunities and challenges. From new social media regulations to concerns about screen time, reputation, and online safety, families are navigating issues that didn't exist a generation ago. This webinar explored the latest research and provided practical strategies to help parents guide their children with confidence, build resilience and promote healthy digital habits.

New Social Media Regulations

- **Australia is introducing new laws** raising the minimum age for social media use from **13 to 16 years.** This world-first legislation is aimed at better protecting young people online.
- **Platforms, not parents, will be held accountable**, facing fines of up to **$49.5 million per breach** if they fail to comply.
- **Exemptions for messaging apps, gaming platforms, and educational/health sites** create loopholes, which may give parents a **false sense of security**.
- **Age verification will rely on biometrics** (such as facial scanning), as platforms are not allowed to request ID. How this will be enforced remains uncertain.
- While restrictions may help, experts stress that *"you can't ban your way to safety"*. Schools and families will still need to actively support digital literacy.

Strategies:

- **Talk early and openly** with children about the new law and its purpose.
- **Audit all devices** (phones, tablets, consoles) to check for apps or accounts.
- **Enable parental controls** and create "safe zones" (e.g., no phones in bedrooms or bathrooms).
- Develop **a family online agreement or contract** that sets clear expectations.
- **Offer healthy alternatives** to social media use (sports, arts, outdoor play).
- **Collaborate with your school** so messages are consistent across home and the classroom.

Digital Footprint & Reputation

- A child's **digital footprint can shape their future**, influencing opportunities such as scholarships, leadership roles, and even job prospects.
- Harmful behaviours like **hate speech, posting illegal content, sexual material or dishonesty** can permanently damage their reputation.
- **Guilt by association**: even being tagged in a friend's poor choices can have long-term consequences.
- **Content is often permanent** once shared, and removing it later is extremely difficult.
- Real-life cases show students have lost **university placements and sponsorships** because of historic online behaviour.

Strategies

- Teach children to **Google themselves at least twice per year** to see what others can find.
- Use **current media stories** as teachable moments to discuss consequences.
- **Pair accounts** with your child's for some level of oversight.
- Set up Google Alerts for names, usernames, and emails to monitor mentions.
- Encourage **respectful and responsible posting**, reminding children "the internet never forgets."
- If mistakes happen, respond with **empathy and guidance**, not shame, and seek professional advice if needed.

Screen Time & Brain Development

- A child's **developing brain is shaped by repeated activities**. Overuse of one type of screen activity (e.g., gaming, scrolling) limits growth in other areas.
- Excessive screen use is strongly linked to **anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicidal ideation**.
- **Not all screen time is equal**: FaceTiming grandparents is positive, while consuming harmful or explicit content is damaging.
- Balance is critical: screen use should not **dominate over play, sport, creativity, or face-to-face interaction**.
- Guidelines suggest: **no screens under age 2, co-viewing between ages 2–5**, and for older children, balanced time that prioritises offline activities.

Strategies

- Have **collaborative family conversations** about screen use and expectations.
- Parents should **model healthy habits** — e.g., no phones at meal times or in bedrooms.
- Encourage **structured offline activities** like sport, art, or music.
- **Act early if overuse is suspected** — consult a GP or psychologist promptly.
- Separate **non-negotiable tasks** (e.g., homework) from recreational screen time.

Parental Controls

- Parental controls are **"training wheels" for online safety**, not surveillance. They help children build safe habits gradually.
- **All devices** — phones, tablets, laptops, TVs, gaming consoles — have built-in parental controls that should be enabled.
- **Pair your accounts with your child's** on apps like Roblox, Snapchat, and TikTok for added oversight.
- Where needed, use **third-party tools** (e.g., Bark, OurPact, Life360) for stronger monitoring.
- Controls must be **flexible and adaptive**, as every child's needs and maturity are different.
- Parents should use reliable sources like the **eSafety Commissioner** and **Common Sense Media** to stay informed about new risks

Strategies

- Establish a **family online safety contract** with clear rules and consequences.
- **Enable device and platform parental controls** as the first step.
- Trial **third-party apps** to find the right fit before committing.
- Stay updated and **remain curious** about new apps and platforms.
- **Start with tight restrictions** when children are young, then gradually loosen as responsibility is demonstrated.
- Adjust controls over time to promote **independence and self-regulation**.

In Summary

Raising children in a digital age requires balance, awareness, and open communication. New regulations may change the rules, but **parental guidance, strong family agreements, and positive role-modelling** remain the most powerful tools. By understanding your child's digital footprint, managing screen time and using parental controls wisely, you can help them build healthy habits, protect their wellbeing, and thrive both online and offline.