The Research Files Episode 52: Keeping students safe online

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Hello and thank you for downloading this podcast from Teacher *magazine. I'm Rebecca Vukovic.*

Keeping kids safe online is a constant challenge for parents and teachers. And it can be easy to understand why it's such a worry. Data show 99 per cent of Australian parents with children aged between two and 17 report having an internet connection in the home and one in five Australian children have been cyberbullied online between the ages of eight and 17. The statistics on this are clearly alarming, but the good news is there is help out there.

My guest for today's episode is Australia's eSafety Commissioner, Julie Inman Grant, who was appointed to lead the eSafety Office in 2017, and charged with the role of promoting online safety for all Australians. Julie has an impressive resume that includes working for the US Congress, Twitter, Adobe and a 17-year stint at Microsoft.

In today's episode we talk about the common cyberbullying incidents that young people report to her office, how her team work to protect children online, and where teachers can find resources to help them to navigate cyberbullying challenges both in and outside their classrooms. But to get things started, I ask Julie to give listeners more of an understanding of her role and responsibilities as Australia's eSafety Commissioner. Here's Julie.

Julie Inman Grant: The eSafety Commissioner is the only regulatory body in the world that is charged with solely looking after the online safety of its citizens and we do this in a number of fundamental ways. We start with a robust evidence base, we have an in-house research team and then our primary prevention strategies are around education and awareness and we educate young people directly through teachers, parents and guardians and others. And then we have a series of early intervention services who are complaints and regulatory schemes.

So we deal with youth-based cyberbullying for Australians 18 and under, we have an image-based abuse reporting site where we serve all Australians who've had their intimate images or videos shared online without their consent – and we've got about an 80 per cent success rate in terms of getting those images and videos taken down from more than 150 overseas sites. We also have the Cyber Report Team which did 13 000 investigations last year into illegal online content. Our focus is primarily on child sexual abuse material but we also deal with pro-terrorist content. And the newest scheme that we're operating is around issuing notices to sites that are hosting abhorrent violent material. This came about in the wake of the Christchurch massacre that was live streamed on Facebook Live. And so, that's a whole new set of powers that have been bestowed upon us.

Rebecca Vukovic: So your office operates the world's first and only legislated cyberbullying complaints scheme where children and young people under 18 years of age can report serious cyberbullying incidents. Could you tell me more about this service?

JIG: Sure. We were established in 2015 for that very purpose. To provide children who've been seriously cyberbullied and have reported to a major social media site, to serve as that safety net, because we know that often reports fall through the cracks. So when you think about the fact that Facebook has 2.2 billion users online, there are 1 billion tweets on Twitter every two days, and more than 400 hours' worth of video content is uploaded to YouTube every minute, there are vast amounts of content that these sites are dealing with, as well as a vast number of reports.

Now, content moderators have between 30 seconds and a minute to look at that tweet or the post and decide

whether or not that contravenes their terms of service. So obviously things fall through the cracks. So in Australia, young people, their teachers, school administrators or parents can come to us. We regulate the social media sites and we will advocate on behalf of that child if we do think they have been seriously cyberbullied; and that is defined as seriously harassing, intimidating, humiliating or threatening.

RV: It's fantastic to know that there's a service like that out there for young people. But when it comes to the service though, what are some of the most common cyberbullying incidents that young people report?

JIG: I think most teachers will find this not surprising, but interesting. Now, we know that the average age of a child being cyberbullied is 14 in Australia. One in five young people have been cyberbullied, and in almost all cases, it's peer-to-peer and it's an extension of social conflict that is happening within the school gates.

So, the other thing that's really insidious about cyberbullying is that it's 24/7, it's pervasive, and it follows a child home. But it's also covert to parents and teachers but very visible to one's peers – so a child's humiliation is amplified when it's online. So one of the most common forms of bullying that we come across are saying mean or nasty comments online, what young people would describe as 'creating drama online'. But another major one is social exclusion – so, being invited to a party and deliberately excluding people. Fifteen per cent of our reports are around direct threats or violence or 'GKY' (Go Kill Yourself). So a real coarsening of language that we're seeing coming through here, that's obviously a huge concern to us.

RV: Let's chat about some of the numbers now because I know your office collects a lot of data on young people's behaviour online and incidents of bullying. Could you run me through your data on how many young people experience bullying, where they turn to for help and how their parents, carers and teachers feel about managing those incidents?

JIG: Right, well as I said earlier, about one if five Australian children have been cyberbullied online between the ages of eight and 17. And these numbers have largely stayed consistent over the past 10 years or so. It's also important to know that face-to-face bullying is still more prevalent that cyberbullying. So one in four kids are bullied face-to-face, versus one in five that are cyberbullied online. But we know that the risk factors for young people, in terms of extreme mental distress, are increased markedly when they're both cyberbullied and bullied face-to-face. So that's something that we need to keep in mind.

We also know, particularly as children reach the teenage years and they're trying to establish independence, a lot fewer than we would like will engage in help seeking behaviours or tell an adult. So we know to the young people we surveyed, only eight per cent spoke to a teacher or a deputy principal and just eight per cent spoke to a school counsellor when something went wrong online. By contrast, about 55 per cent would [talk to parents] and about 28 per cent would talk to their peers. And so this shows you why it's so important to make sure that we're encouraging people to get help, young people in particular.

We know from both research and from working with young people that the more rapidly we can take down harmful content, the more that prevents the trauma and re-victimisation of the child. So we want them to engage in help seeking behaviours which includes coming to the [eSafety Office](#) or reporting to the social media site to get that content taken down. We also work with [Kids Helpline](#). We've referred about 9000 kids for that 24/7 anonymous counselling services. They're a great service.

RV: Yeah definitely. And I'd like to focus on teachers specifically now for a moment because I've heard you say previously that 'it's incredibly important to teach kids basic principles on how to use technology responsibly, show respect online, develop digital resilience skills and learn critical reasoning.' In practice though, how does a teacher actually go about teaching these skills to students?

JIG: That's a great question and as you've probably heard me say, we talk about the 'four Rs' for the digital age – beyond reading, writing and 'rithmetic – to include respect, responsibility, critical reasoning skills, and building digital resilience. And we know that educators play a really important role in terms of helping reinforce those values which ultimately should be taught in the home in the first instance because as we say, they are values. And we know that 81 per cent of Australian parents are handing over an internet connected device to four-year-olds. So 81 per cent, and 42 per cent are handing over tablets or phones to two-year-olds. So the minute we hand over a digital device is the minute that we need to think about safeguarding our children.

One, by setting parental controls so they don't come across anything inadvertently but being engaged in their online lives as we need to be during in their everyday lives. But I'm sure there are cases when kids come to

school, who are using devices on a daily basis, they may not have limitations set at home, they may not have learned the online etiquette that they need and we know that sometimes this burden falls to teachers. We think respectful relationships education is really important to teaching some of these values, but then we've also developed a range of teacher resources that are mapped to the curriculum and that are on the wellbeing hub, [Student Wellbeing Hub](#) that teachers can access.

RV: Yeah I want to talk more about the suite of resources – in fact there's quite a lot available on the site for educators to access for free including tools, tips, and advice. Could you tell me more about that?

JIG: Sure. I mean, I think the other thing that's really important is that we're engaging with young people using the media that they use. So I know, I've got three kids, they're often on YouTube. I find this phenomenon very interesting where they're actually watching other people play Roblox or Minecraft on YouTube rather than playing it themselves. I'm sure others have experienced that phenomenon.

But we do have video resources, for instance [Rewrite Your Story](#). They're short, video snippets that are based on real life cases that have come into our office around cyberbullying and we don't come up with the solutions. It's a video that you can show in class, they come with lesson plans. So, you show the video, they're quite impactful and then you can start discussions with students about how they would resolve the issue, what they would do. You know, help them problem solve so they can apply these lessons in real life

We have the [Young and eSafe lesson plans and website](#) which again has lots of video resources, and we encourage young people to build their skills around empathy, resilience, critical thinking and responsibility online.

The newest one that I'm really excited about is called the [YeS Project](#), which is a comprehensive, teacher-led, digital and social health safety program. And it encourages young people to explore a range of confronting and challenging online experiences and, again, come up with solutions. So, because we know that so many kids will rely on their peers rather than adults in their lives to deal with online safety issues, we want to be able to arm children and their peers to be able to see the signs of cyberbullying and other forms of online harassment, know what resources to go to, but without burdening them too much and putting too much responsibility on their shoulders. But it's really about having young people themselves shape their digital worlds.

RV: And just finally, the office runs a professional learning program for teachers that focuses on supporting student digital wellbeing. I've got two questions on this one. What topics or issues are covered in the program? But then also more broadly, why is it important that we see eSafety as an overall part of a child's wellbeing?

JIG: I think that's an excellent question. I mean, I guess you probably don't have to ask teachers that because they're probably having to deal with issues in the classroom every day (even if phones are not allowed), around a cyberbullying incident or an incident where sexting has gone wrong and an intimate image has been shared. And we just need to give teachers the basic training and skills to be able to navigate those issues and help their students find resolution.

So, we do have a [pre-service training program](#) for those that are coming out of the teaching schools these days, but we're really excited about revamping our [teacher professional learning program](#).

Right now we have three new webinars that are out that focus on current trends in technology, the latest cyber-related laws and then the education resources and strategies that can empower students to deal with these online challenges. So we mix these up all the time, we have them going into the late hours of the night because we know that most teachers prefer to do these in the evening after they're done with school and marking homework and feeding their own kids and putting them to bed. And we want to make sure that all three time zones are covered. So it's free, it is accredited at least I think in ACT and NSW, but we have something like a 95 per cent approval rate in terms of the feedback we get from teachers on this, so they are high quality resources that are developed by former teachers for teachers.

RV: Fantastic and it's such important work you're doing here at the eSafety Office. So Julie Inman Grant, thanks for sharing your insights with *Teacher* magazine.

JIG: Thank you and don't forget to go to [eSafety.gov.au](#) if you need any of these education resources.

Thanks for listening to this episode from Teacher *magazine. As Julie just said, all the resources, programs and reports that we've spoken about today are all available at the eSafety website, that's [esafety.gov.au](#). If*

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