Opinion piece

Professor Donna Cross, Ambassador for Children and Young People WA
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Parents need to switch on to social media risks

Increasing access to advanced mobile and digital technologies is raising new issues for children and young people, their families and the broader community.

This is something that many parents are seeking advice on and which requires more public discussion and consideration.

Mobile phone ownership among Australians aged 15 to 17 is more than 90 per cent, and smart phones are increasingly available and affordable. In addition to text messaging and phone calls, these phones allow internet browsing and have camera and video capabilities.

There are many potential positives for young people that these technologies bring including the ability to connect with family and friends, develop and maintain relationships, access age-appropriate services and learn more about our world.

As with most aspects of our lives, technology can also be misused. It presents a number of risks to young people which we as a community can actively manage as part of our general responsibility to nurture and protect our youngest citizens.

These risks include cyber-bullying, access to inappropriate or sexualised content, online sexual predators and overuse of the internet that may negatively affect other aspects of young people's lives.

The sexting behaviour of young people is another potential risk causing considerable public concern. This behaviour involves the distribution of nude, sexually explicit or suggestive material via mobile phones or the Internet.

The ease of distributing images and video via mobile phones and the internet means that once sexual content has been shared it is no longer under the control of the sender, and can spread rapidly beyond the intended audience.

This can result in a loss of privacy, damage to friendships and relationships, bullying and sexual harassment, blackmailing, humiliation, emotional distress, and depression. Further,

the permanent nature of material distributed via the internet can damage reputations and possibly harm future employment opportunities.

Additionally, those who produce, receive or share nude or sexual images/videos of underage young people can be charged with child pornography offences – even if the photographs or videos were taken by a young person of themselves – and can result in imprisonment and possible inclusion on national registers of sexual offenders.

These risks are present for people of all ages but several factors, such as a lack of awareness about the consequences of such actions and social pressure, can put young people at increased risk of harm.

About one quarter of young people report they have shared an image of themselves naked via digital technology. These young people are most likely to be female and aged 16 years and over, although some studies have found sexting among children as young as 10.

More than half of adolescent girls, compared with 18 per cent of adolescent boys, report pressure from the opposite sex as the reason they shared sexually suggestive messages or images.

One of the most important ways to protect children and young people from these technology-related risks is through education and maintaining our positive relationships with them. As parents or adult carers we need to talk with our children often, starting at a young age, about their use of technology.

We need to show our interest and be involved in these conversations so they become a natural part of family discussions. Our conversations need to be positive, showing our children that we enjoy talking with them about their use of technology and hearing what they enjoy about it.

We also need to try to stay up-to-date by regularly sitting with our children while they are on the computer and asking them to explain their activities.

Even if your children know more than you about technology there are still conversations you can have with them about their rights, their responsibilities and ways to show respect online.

For example, children must understand the importance of obtaining permission from friends and family members before taking pictures or videos of them - especially with their mobile phone - and sending these images to others or posting them online. Similarly, encourage

your children to talk to you if they receive messages with inappropriate content or images, or stumble across something inappropriate.

To demonstrate the permanency of the online world, sit with each of your children every six months and use a search engine like Google to search their name and look at the information that forms their digital reputation.

Of course, the setting of boundaries in this environment, as you would in your children's offline life, is vital. This should include ensuring the security settings on your children's social network sites are set to private and insisting your children only use webcams in shared family locations.

There is much we can do to protect and enhance the quality of children and young people's lives, especially their online lives. Most of all, we must take positive action early and often – not wait until our children experience problems. And as a community we need to keep having these conversations.

Donna Cross is a professor of child and adolescent health at Edith Cowan University and one of 15 ambassadors appointed by the Commissioner for Children and Young People.