:practice

Safe and Connected:

Supporting online safety for children and young people in care

Acknowledgements

Centre for Excellence in Therapeutic Care

The Centre for Excellence in Therapeutic Care, a key division of the Australian Childhood Foundation, is a knowledge hub dedicated to enhancing out-of-home care. Our mission is to share evidence-based insights that equip carers and organisations to better support children and young people across all care settings—foster and kinship care, residential care, and secure care.

We spark conversations, challenge assumptions, embrace collaboration, and champion children's rights. As thought leaders in therapeutic care, our work is grounded in the expertise of practitioners, researchers, and individuals with lived experience.

We harness innovative digital tools to broaden access to training and peer learning, focusing on trauma-informed care. Our offerings include accredited and non-accredited training, peer network facilitation, leading research, and translating evidence into practice. Explore more at cetc.org.au

eSafety

The purpose of eSafety is to help safeguard all Australians from online harms and to promote safer, more positive online experiences. We use research, evidence and experience to lead and advise on online safety issues in order to:

- prevent online harm by developing resources and programs based on robust evidence.

- protect Australians and alleviate harm through regulatory and reporting schemes.

- minimise harms with initiatives that make digital environments safer and more inclusive.

eSafety has substantial powers to protect all Australians from online abuse and act as a safety net across four reporting schemes:

- an Adult Cyber Abuse Scheme

- a Cyberbullying Scheme for Australian children

- an Image-Based Abuse Scheme

- an Online Content Scheme for illegal and restricted content

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Purpose of this guide

This practice guide is designed to strengthen the capacity of staff in out-of-home care services to actively support and promote the online safety of children and young people in their care. It aims to empower staff supporting children, young people, and their carers to:

- **Gain a clear understanding of the online environments** that children and young people in out-of-home care engage in.

- **Recognise and address the unique vulnerabilities** faced by children and young people with developmental trauma when navigating the digital world.

- **Build confidence and readiness to support online safety** with children and young people.

- **Understand their responsibilities** in adhering to established guidelines and policies for online interactions with children and young people.
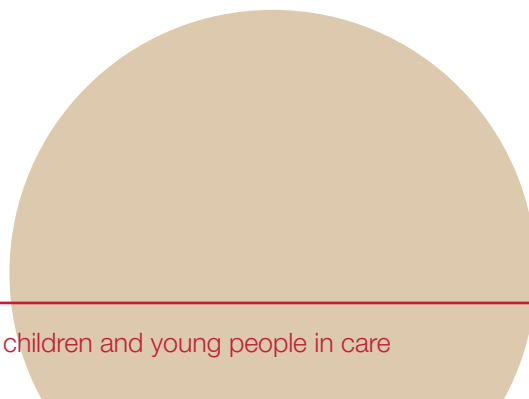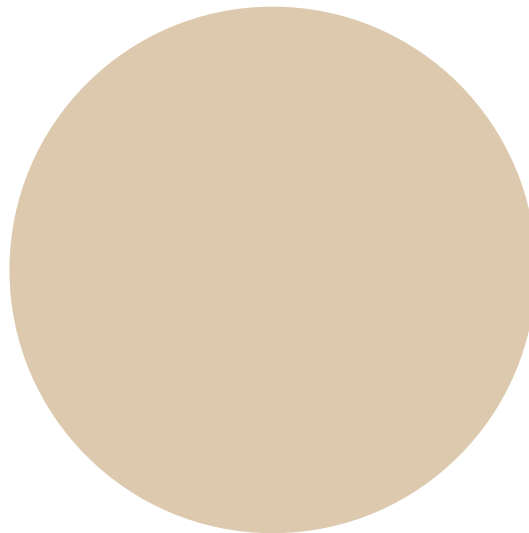
Why was this practice guide developed?

This practice guide was developed to address growing concerns about online safety for children and young people, particularly those in out-of-home care. The project was funded by **eSafety**, reflecting a shared commitment to ensuring all children and young people are safe and supported in digital environments.

While the online world offers significant opportunities for learning, social connection, and creativity, children and young people in out-of-home care face unique vulnerabilities. These challenges often stem from developmental trauma, abuse, or neglect, making them more susceptible to online risks. This guide bridges the gap by equipping professionals with the knowledge and tools needed to:

- Promote participation and agency for young people in online spaces.

- Foster strong connections between staff, carers, and children, which are essential for building trust and resilience.

- Create safer digital environments that balance protection and autonomy.

The guide also aligns with Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031, supporting the framework's outcomes to ensure all children and young people in out-of-home care are safe, well-supported, and connected.

Who is this practice guide for?

This guide is for practitioners and staff working with children, young people, and their carers in out-of-home care. It provides clear, practical information and structured guidance to help professionals:

- Understand key considerations related to online safety for children and young people.

- Reflect on challenges and opportunities in supporting safe online interactions.

- Apply best practices to promote safety, resilience, and digital well-being.

How to use this practice guide

The document is structured to support professionals in their roles, featuring:

Key message: Concise statement that conveys the core idea or principle of the section, providing foundational knowledge about approaches to online safety.

Real-world scenarios: De-identified real-world scenarios of young people in out-of-home care and online safety challenges.

Practice reflections: Questions to guide deeper thinking and application in practice.

How to support young people: Strategies to support young people.

Support resources: Additional materials to support implementation and ongoing learning.

Informed by insights from out-of-home care staff and carers

This practice guide was shaped by a national consultation with professionals and carers working in foster, kinship, and residential care services. It reflects the concerns, insights, and strategies shared during these discussions.

What we heard – key themes and concerns

This practice guide was shaped by a national consultation with professionals and carers working in foster, kinship, and residential care services. It reflects the concerns, insights, and strategies shared during these discussions.

The national consultation process identified several key themes and concerns:

- **Lack of skills and understanding:** Many children and young people in care, especially those with trauma histories, often lack the skills to navigate the online world safely.

- **Confidence and support gaps:** Staff and carers frequently feel they lack the confidence to address online risks effectively, often feeling powerless or unsure of how to respond. They noted that training, organisational policies, and procedures frequently do not offer enough guidance or support.

- **Limited preventative work:** Preventative education around online safety is often limited, with staff and carers expressing a need for better strategies to help young people understand risks before they encounter them.

- **Relationship challenges:** Attempts to address online risks can lead to tensions between carers, staff, and young people, making it challenging to balance protection with respect for autonomy.

- **Restrictive practices and their impact:** Concerns were raised about the overuse of restrictive practices in managing online risks. This can lead to further conflicts and does not always contribute to a long-term understanding of safe online behaviour.

- **Relationships are key:** Staff and carers expressed that effective online safety starts with strong, trusting relationships between carers, staff and young people.

- **Harm minimisation:** Carers and staff believe that a harm minimisation approach—rather than a zero-tolerance stance—is the most effective way to manage online risks. This perspective acknowledges that young people need guidance to learn, make mistakes, and develop resilience in a supportive environment.

A more detailed description of the outcomes of the national consultations can be found in Appendix 4.

Key messages

Promoting online safety for children and young people in out-of-home care requires a **shared responsibility** across practice, relationships, workforce development, and organisational systems to ensure safety, empowerment, and digital participation.

Developmental trauma increases both online and offline vulnerabilities for children and young people in out-of-home care. Supporting their safety requires understanding their experiences and fostering trusted, protective relationships.

Young people in out-of-home care need trusted adults who listen, guide and support them in navigating the online world. A **relationship-based approach**—focused on **open conversations, critical thinking, and everyday digital challenges**—empowers young people to engage safely.

Professionals must actively work to mitigate extreme online risks, ensuring that young people in out-of-home care are protected while building their skills to navigate online spaces safely and confidently.

Young people in out-of-home care experience **online harms differently**, as trauma, disrupted relationships, and social isolation can heighten their exposure to risks like **grooming, cyberbullying, financial exploitation, and harmful content**. These harms are interconnected and can reinforce existing vulnerabilities, making it crucial for professionals to provide **targeted support that builds digital resilience, awareness, and access to trusted help when needed.**

Strong relationships and open communication are key to online safety. Carers and professionals should create a **supportive, non-judgmental environment** where young people feel safe to seek help.

A trauma-informed, harm-minimisation approach is essential. Online safety responses should focus on education, empowerment, and risk management, rather than punitive restrictions that may push young people into unsafe online spaces.

Staff and carers must be trained and supported in online safety. Digital literacy, reflective practice, and clear organisational policies equip professionals to navigate complex online risks effectively.

Organisations have a duty to implement strong policies, procedures, and safeguards. A whole-of-organisation approach ensures a consistent, proactive response to online safety across care settings.

Young people must be actively involved in shaping their online safety strategies. Their voices, experiences, and expertise should guide policies, safety planning, and digital engagement strategies.

Introduction

Key messages

Promoting online safety for children and young people in out-of-home care is a shared responsibility. It requires a holistic approach that integrates **best practices**, fosters **supportive relationships**, enhances **workforce development,** and strengthens **organisational systems** to ensure safety, empowerment, and digital participation.

Children and young people navigate both the offline and online worlds, but the digital environment is rapidly evolving and less visible. While it offers opportunities for learning, connection, and self-expression, it also presents complex risks—particularly for those in out-of-home care, who may face added vulnerabilities due to trauma and instability.

Children and young people in out-of-home care may have already been exposed to online harm or technology-facilitated abuse, experienced disconnection from peers and family, or missed out on digital literacy due to disrupted school attendance. These factors can make it harder for them to engage safely and confidently online.

Children and young people in out-of-home care often experience early adversity, instability, and loss, which shape how they interact with the world—both offline and online. Developmental trauma can affect their ability to trust, form relationships, regulate emotions, and navigate risk, influencing their engagement with digital spaces. For some, technology provides a sense of connection and belonging that may feel safer or more predictable than in-person relationships. However, many young people in out-of-home care also face digital literacy gaps, online exploitation risks, and exposure to technology-facilitated abuse. Without supportive guidance, they may struggle to recognise and respond to online risks, making trauma-aware, relationship-based digital safety essential.

Case managers, support workers, and carers play a crucial role in helping young people engage safely online while respecting their rights to digital participation. Research by the eSafety Commissioner (2022) highlights that while young Australians benefit from online spaces, many also encounter harm. When issues arise, trusted adults remain their first point of contact (Moody et al. 2021, p. 12). Young people see digital access as a fundamental right and want adults to be informed, proactive, and involved in decision-making (Moody et al. 2021).

However, staying ahead of online safety challenges is difficult given shifting policies, legislative changes, and evolving AI technologies. Out-of-home care agencies must anticipate these shifts, equipping staff with the knowledge and tools to support young people's online safety while ensuring their rights and well-being.

Best practice framework for online safety in out-of-home care

This guide offers a multicomponent best practice framework for addressing the online safety of children and young people living in out-of-home care. At its core, the framework places children and young people at the centre and outlines a best-practice approach across four interconnected domains:

- **Practice with children and young people** – Online safety is grounded in comprehensive assessment of each child's unique needs and strengths, ensuring they are empowered, supported, and protected online.

- **The care and support context** – Strong relationships and open communication between carers, case managers, and other key adults are critical to keeping children safe online.

- **Workforce capability** – Carers and case managers must be trained, confident, and well-supported in online safety practices, equipping them to navigate digital risks effectively.

- **Organisational capability** – Policies, procedures, and system-wide infrastructure must be in place to support safe and effective online safety practices for children, carers, and staff.

CARE AND SUPPORT CONTENT

PRACTICE

DIGITAL SAFEGUARDING & CARER SUPPORT

ONLINE SAFETY POLICIES, DIGITAL TOOLS & SECURE INFRASTRUCTURE

ONLINE RISK ASSESSMENTS & DIGITAL WELLBEING INTERVENTIONS

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

ORGANISATION

ONLINE SAFETY TRAINING & DIGITAL LITERACY

WORKFORCE
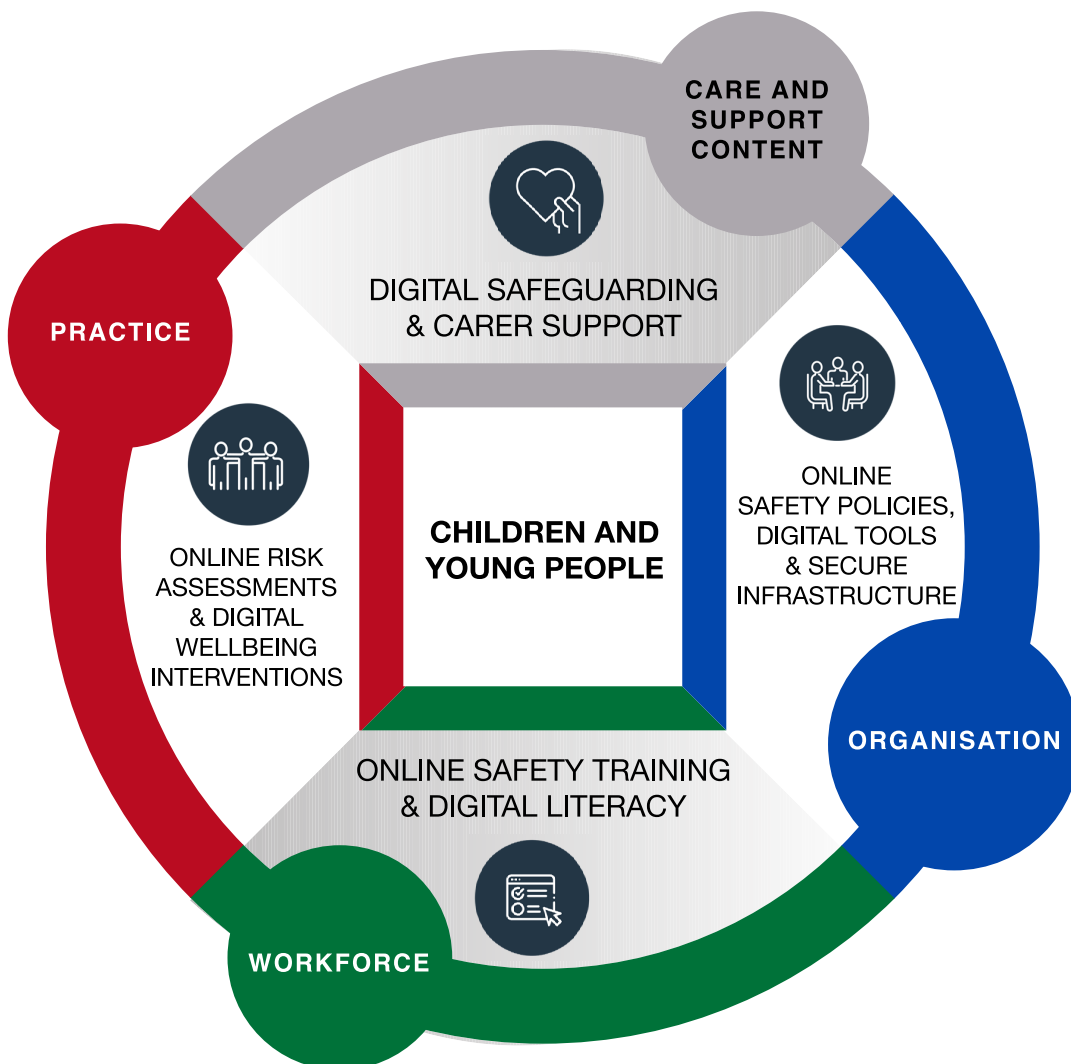
This multicomponent framework acknowledges that responding to the online safety of children and young people in out-of-home care requires a **holistic and collaborative** effort involving individuals, carers, and organisations.

Practice reflection

How do you currently approach the online safety of young people in out-of-home care? Do you bring any personal biases or challenges?

What strengths and gaps exist in how you, your team, and your organisation address children and young people's unique online safety needs in out-of-home care?

Support resources

ACWA's online safety resources for children and young people in care and their caregivers.

Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation - Report inappropriate behaviour, including grooming and child sexual abuse or exploitation, towards children online.

Keeping children safe online in communities | eSafety Commissioner - Advice so your organisation, service or practice can help prevent and handle online risks and harms while improving online safety among families in your community.

Trauma and online safety

Key messages

Developmental trauma increases both online and offline vulnerabilities for children and young people in out-of-home care. Supporting their safety requires understanding their experiences and fostering trusted, protective relationships.

How developmental trauma impacts online safety

Children and young people in out-of-home care (OOHC) often experience **early adversity, instability, and loss,** which shape how they interact with the world—both offline and online. Developmental trauma can affect their **ability to trust, form relationships, regulate emotions, and navigate risk**, influencing their engagement with digital spaces.

For some, technology provides a **sense of connection and belonging** that may feel safer or more predictable than in-person relationships. However, many young people in OOHC also face **digital literacy gaps, online exploitation risks, and exposure to technology-facilitated abuse.** Without supportive guidance, they may struggle to **recognise and respond to online risks**, making trauma-aware, relationship-based digital safety essential.

What is developmental trauma?

Developmental trauma occurs when a child is exposed to **chronic and prolonged stress or trauma** during critical periods of development. This often involves **disruptions in attachment, safety, and care**, such as abuse, neglect, or exposure to violence. Unlike single-incident trauma, **developmental trauma affects multiple areas of a child's growth**, including emotional regulation, cognitive functioning, social relationships, and physical health.

Children who experience developmental trauma may struggle with **trust, self-worth, and managing emotions**. It can shape how they **form relationships, process stress, and navigate the world**, often making it harder to feel safe and secure. Without the right support, these effects can continue into adolescence and adulthood, impacting **mental health, behaviour, and overall wellbeing.**

The following areas highlight how developmental trauma can shape young people's **social connections, trust, and online experiences.**

Disrupted early experiences

Children and young people in out-of-home care have often **missed foundational experiences** that support emotional and social development. Many:

- Lacked consistent, attuned, and responsive relationships during critical developmental periods.

- Grew up in chaotic, unpredictable environments with unclear rules and expectations.

These early disruptions can affect how they **form relationships, regulate emotions, and navigate the world**—both offline and online.

Unsafe or controlling relationships

Many have encountered **neglectful, unsafe, or controlling relationships**, leading to **mistrust and disempowerment** (Bristow, Macnamara & Mitchell, 2020). As a result:

- Attempts at autonomy may have been met with further harm or control.

- They may struggle to recognise safe and healthy relationships, including in online spaces.

Trust, connection and isolation

Due to instability in placements and relationships, many young people:

- Develop guardedness and hypervigilance, making it harder to rely on others.

- Believe relationships are temporary and unreliable.

- Experience low self-esteem, emotional and behavioural challenges, and difficulty forming positive friendships.

Cultural and community disconnection

Many young people in care experience **loss of connection to their culture and community**, deepening their sense of **isolation.**

Digital experiences

Children and young people in out-of-home care may:

- Have limited access to technology and digital education, leading to gaps in digital literacy and online safety awareness.

- Be exposed to or experience technology-facilitated abuse, such as online exploitation, cyberbullying, or coercion, family or domestic violence.

- Rely on digital spaces for connection and belonging, sometimes engaging in risky online behaviours to feel accepted.

Additional vulnerabilities

Children and young people who have experienced developmental trauma may also face additional vulnerabilities, such as:

- Disability (Livingstone and Palmer, 2014)

- Mental health issues

- Exclusion from education

- Periods of time absent from their placements

- Higher risk of sexual exploitation offline (Stoilova et al., 2021)

For many children and young people, including those who have experienced developmental trauma, the desire for acceptance, connection, and belonging is central to their lives. The online environment can **offer a space for connection** that feels **more accessible and predictable** than real-world relationships (Katz & Assam, 2020). Some young people experience **reduced fear of rejection online**, making digital spaces appealing (Worsley et al., 2017).

Practice reflection – developmental trauma

Do you have a good understanding of the impact of trauma on the children and young people with whom you support? How might their experiences shape their online behaviours and vulnerabilities?

Think about a child or young person in your care. Are you open to listening to them tell you about their online activity, relationships and digital habits, with curiosity and without judgement?

Support resources

Best Practice Framework for Online Safety Education – this framework has been developed by eSafety for use in schools to support a consistent national approach.

Supporting children experiencing domestic and family violence | eSafety Commissioner

Understanding online safety challenges

Key message

Young people in out-of-home care need **trusted adults** who listen, guide, and support them in navigating the online world. A **relationship-based approach**, centred on **open conversations and critical thinking**, empowers them to engage safely. At the same time, professionals must **mitigate extreme risks** while helping young people build the skills to navigate online spaces **with confidence and safety.**

The internet is an important part of young people's daily lives, offering opportunities for connection, learning, and self-expression. Many use multiple social media platforms—on average, five different services—to communicate, access entertainment, and seek support. A significant number also go online for health-related information, including mental, physical, and sexual health, with one-third turning to the internet for emotional support from friends or professional services (eSafety Commissioner, 2022).

For young people in out-of-home care (OOHC), the online world can offer **a sense of belonging, connection, and independence.** It can help them:

- Stay in touch with family and friends

- Access support networks and professional services

- Find validation and peer connection

- Reduce social isolation

- Explore identity and self-expression

- Engage in relaxation and recreation

- Build independence and life skills

For some, online spaces feel safer than face-to-face conversations, making them an important first step in seeking help from trusted adults. It's important to consider for each child the benefits of online engagement and the risks and work with children and young people to find effective mitigation strategies.

How developmental trauma impacts online safety

While the digital world provides many benefits, **young people's experiences of trauma, disrupted relationships, and mental health challenges can shape how they engage online,** increasing their vulnerability to harm. Their emotional state at the time of online engagement can influence whether their experiences are positive or harmful (Stoilova et al, 2021). Accessing content online may also exacerbate already problematic behaviour or prior vulnerabilities such as self-harming or eating disorders (Livingstone and Palmer, 2014).

As a result, they face increased risks of:

- Cyberbullying and harassment (Fursland, 2011)

- Sharing too much information online (Fursland, 2011)

- Online grooming

- Cyberscams (Katz and Assam, 2020)

Consultations with out-of-home care staff and carers across Australia confirmed the above risks and also raised concerns about:

- Unsupervised online contact with family and friends where there were identified risks

- Online gambling and gaming

- Access to inappropriate, racist, violent or harmful pornography and images

- Sexual exploitation

- Payday loans

- Identity theft and fraudulent use of credit cards.

We know that criminal offenders are highly skilled at exploiting new modes of communication to gain access to children and young people (Queensland Police, 2014).

What young people say about online safety

Children and young people are concerned about the risks they face online. They have recently said they are most concerned about:

- Sexual exploitation (grooming, predators)

- Accessing or being exposed to inappropriate content (pornography, violence)

- Misinformation and fake news

- Commercial advertising (sexual or false advertising, sale of illegal or inappropriate goods)

- Receiving judgement from their peers about their opinions online

- Vulnerability of certain groups (minorities) to a range of online safety issues.
  (Moody, L, Marsden L, Nguyen, B & Third, A 2021)

At the same time, young people do not want online safety discussions to focus **only on extreme risks**. They want trusted adults who listen, understand their everyday online experiences, and provide practical guidance on managing challenges like online conflicts, privacy settings, and peer judgment (Western Sydney University, 2023).

However, t**his does not mean that professionals should not be aware of serious risks**—especially given that young people in OOHC are often at higher risk of online exploitation, grooming, financial scams, and exposure to harmful content. Professionals play a crucial role in helping to mitigate extreme risks by:

- Being proactive in identifying potential dangers and mitigating the online risks that young people in your care are exposed to.

- Ensuring young people know how to report unsafe situations.

- Providing support when harm occurs, rather than just imposing restrictions.

- Helping young people build resilience and confidence to manage online challenges.

- Modelling safe online behaviours around young people in care

- Letting young people know they can talk to you if they feel unsure, uncomfortable or unsafe online

- Where restrictions are needed to keep children safe for a period of time, young people should be informed about the restrictions and how they can raise concerns about restrictive practices.

Young people want **both support for everyday concerns and protection from serious harm**—and professionals must balance these needs by **fostering open conversations while actively working to reduce digital risks.**

Relationship-based approach matters

Young people are more likely to engage safely online when **trusted adults provide support, not just supervision**. A relationship-based approach to online safety means:

- Having open, non-judgmental conversations about their online experiences

- Asking questions rather than making assumptions about their digital lives

- Helping them assess risks and make safe choices rather than just restricting access

- Encouraging safe online relationships and digital literacy

- Letting them know they can seek help without fear of blame

When adults engage with curiosity and build trust, young people are more likely to disclose concerns, think critically about online risks, and develop the confidence to navigate digital spaces safely.

Support resources

[Consultations with young people to inform the eSafety Commissioner's Engagement Strategy for Young People](#)

[Creating a balance between empowerment and limit setting in therapeutic care – practice guide.](#) Core concepts and strategies of relationships-based approach to support young people in out-of-home care

[Reimagining_Online_Safety_Education.pdf (westernsydney.edu.au)](#)

Types of online harms

Online harms are commonly grouped into three overlapping categories:

1. **Content Risks** – Children or young people see or access harmful material.

2. **Contact Risks** – Children or young people are targeted by others in harmful ways.

3. **Conduct Risks** – Children or young people are an active participant in harmful behaviours themselves, knowingly or unknowingly.

These risks are further shaped by **commercial risks**, where financial exploitation, scams, and manipulative digital marketing add to the challenges young people face online.

1. Content risks: Exposure to harmful or manipulative material

Young people may come across harmful content online intentionally or accidentally, including:

- **Violence and graphic material,** including real-world violence, abuse, or self-harm.

- **Sexual content and pornography**, which can normalise unrealistic or harmful sexual behaviours.

- **Misinformation and extremist ideologies**, which can shape young people's beliefs in ways that put them at risk.

- **Algorithm-driven content loops**, where disturbing or harmful content continues to be recommended based on past interactions.

- **Harm-promoting material**, Pro-eating disorder, self-harm, or suicide promotion.

Why does this matter for young people in out-of-home care?

- Reinforces trauma – Exposure to violent or self-harm content can normalise harmful behaviours.

- Lack of protective adults – Without trusted adults to talk to, young people may struggle to make sense of distressing content.

- Algorithms can trap them in cycles of harmful content, making it difficult to disengage.

Practice reflection

Have you talked to young people about how algorithms influence what they see online?

How can you support young people in navigating misinformation, extremist content, or unhealthy beauty and body image standards?

2. Contact risks – online exploitation and grooming

Contact risks occur when a young person is targeted by others for harmful or exploitative purposes. This includes:

- **Online grooming**, where perpetrators build trust to exploit young people.

- **Sextortion**, where young people are pressured into sharing explicit images and then blackmailed.

- **Harassment and cyberbullying**, often leading to social withdrawal or self-harm.

- **Unwanted contact**, including exposure to harmful communities.

- **Identity theft and financial exploitation**, sharing sensitive information like passwords or social security numbers. Falling victim to phishing scams or fraudulent schemes.

Why this matters for young people in out-of-home care?

- They may be more trusting of online strangers due to experiences of rejection or loneliness.

- They may feel trapped in exploitative situations, unsure how to get out.

- Perpetrators manipulate them into secrecy, making it harder to disclose concerns.

Practice reflection

How do you create an environment where young people feel safe to disclose if they are being pressured online?

Do the young people you support know how to report online grooming and sextortion to the Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation?

3. Conduct risks: When young people engage in risky behaviour

Conduct risks occur when young people themselves take actions that put them at risk, either as victims or as those unintentionally causing harm. This includes:

- **Cyberbullying**, where young people participate in or are targeted by harmful online behaviour.

- **Non-consensually sharing explicit images of another person**, often under pressure or manipulation.

- **Engaging in high-risk online behaviours**, such as participating in dangerous online trends.

- **Social isolation and mental health impacts**, excessive screen time or negative online interactions can lead to social withdrawal, anxiety, depression, or low self-worth

Why this matters for young people in out-of-home care?

- Some recreate harmful patterns of behaviour they have experienced in their own lives.

- They may struggle to understand boundaries and be at risk of exploitation.

- Being cyberbullied can reinforce feelings of rejection and social isolation.

Real-world scenario: Mia

Mia, 13, shared a personal image with someone they trusted. When the relationship ended, the image was spread in a group chat. Mia felt humiliated and afraid, unsure of how to stop it from spreading.

Practice Reflection

How would you take effective action in the case of non-consensual sharing of a sexual image of a child? How can you mitigate current harms and prevent any further abuse?

How would you take effective action in the case of non-consensual sharing of a sexual image of a child?

How can you mitigate current harms and prevent any further abuse?

How do you respond when a young person has made a mistake online?

Support resources

[Online sexual victimisation of children and young people in Australia | eSafety Commissioner](#)

Responding to online harms

Key message

Young people in out-of-home care experience **online harms differently**, as trauma, disrupted relationships, and social isolation can heighten their exposure to risks like **grooming, cyberbullying, financial exploitation, and harmful content**. These harms are **interconnected** and can reinforce existing vulnerabilities, making it crucial for professionals to provide **targeted support that builds digital resilience, awareness, and access to trusted help when needed.**

Now that we've outlined the **types of online harms**, this section explores **specific online risks in more detail**, with a focus on:

- Why this risk is a concern for young people in out-of-home care

- Common signs and real-world impacts

- How professionals can provide relationship-based support

- Practical resources for staff and carers

Each risk is interconnected—for example sharing personal information can lead to online harassment, and exposure to harmful content can influence a young person's behaviour online. Understanding these connections can help staff respond in ways that prioritise support over restriction, encouraging young people to seek help when they need it.

Online grooming

What is it?

Online grooming occurs when an adult builds a relationship with a child or young person online with the intent to exploit, manipulate, or abuse them. Grooming can happen very fast, in as little as 30 minutes and perpetrators can often be strangers online but sometimes the person can be a known adult.

High rates of online sexual solicitation can exacerbate the problem, as it is relatively common for children to be approached online and be asked by an adult to talk about sex or send a sexual image. Groomers often:

- Pretend to be a peer (using fake profiles or deception)

- Encourage secrecy and isolate the young person from trusted adults

- Gradually escalate conversations to personal details, explicit images, or meeting in person

How online grooming may affect young people in out-of-home care differently

Children and young people living in out-of-home care are at heightened risk of online grooming due to their past experiences of victimisation and trauma. They are often socially isolated, and their need for connection and belonging makes them easy prey for online grooming (Espinoza and Wright, 2018, Leung, 2014). Groomers **exploit** these vulnerabilities by offering **attention, gifts, or emotional validation** that the young person may not have received in safe relationships.

They may find it easier to seek out and form relationships online because they can feel more anonymous themselves. They may feel they have more control over online relationships than face-to-face ones. They may lack a sense of what safe or unsafe is based on their past experiences of abuse and thus not realise the risks they may be facing.

Signs of grooming

- A young person is secretive about online friends

- They spend increasing time online, particularly at night

- They become defensive or withdrawn when asked about their online activity

- They receive gifts or money from unknown sources

Responding to grooming disclosures

When a young person discloses grooming or exploitation, it is critical to respond with care and sensitivity:

1. **Stay calm:** Provide a safe, non-judgmental space for the young person to share their experience.

2. **Preserve evidence:** Where possible, save messages, screenshots, or other digital evidence for law enforcement. But make sure you don't save nudes or sexual images, or videos of anyone under 18, as that is usually illegal.

3. **Report the incident:** Notify your organisation and child protection services and support the young person in reporting the incident to the Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation.

4. **Seek professional support:** Provide access to counselling or therapy to address emotional and psychological impacts.

5. **Ongoing support:** Continue to monitor the young person's well-being and reinforce trust.

How to support young people

- Build trust so they feel safe talking about online interactions

- Help them recognise warning signs of manipulation and grooming strategies

- Avoid blame if they have been exploited—groomers are skilled at deception

- Encourage open conversations about online relationships

- Help children understand why the law prevents sexual contact with adults

Support resources

- [How you can protect children from online harm | eSafety Commissioner](#)

- [Unwanted contact and grooming – eSafety Commissioner](#)

- [ThinkUKnow – Grooming and Sextortion](#)

- [Unwanted contact and grooming: factsheet](#) – information for teachers and other professionals

- [Unwanted contact and grooming: scenarios to start the chat](#) – examples to talk with children and young people about

- [Parent and carer social media starter kit](#) – information for parents and carers

- [Sexual extortion | ThinkUKnow](#)

- [Not everyone online is who they say they are | ThinkUKnow](#)

- [Jack Changes the Game | ACCCE](#)

Cyberbullying

What is it?

Cyberbullying is a prevalent form of online harm that can profoundly impact young people in care. Cyberbullying is the use of technology to deliberately and repeatedly bully, intimidate, or harm someone, often targeting young people under 18. It can take place on:

- Social media platforms

- Online chat and messaging services

- Text messages and emails

- Message boards and forums where people can post publicly

Young people may refer to this behaviour as 'creating drama' or 'saying mean things', but it can quickly escalate into serious harm. Sometimes, this type of harm can be used to humiliate a child or young person further if they experience physical violence, e.g. the sharing of fight videos online.

Common forms of cyberbullying

- Public shaming or humiliation – Making posts on social media to threaten or embarrass someone.

- Image-based abuse – Publishing videos or photos to intimidate or humiliate.

- Doxing – Exposing a person's identity, private information, or personal details online without their consent, often encouraging others to harass them. (More on doxing from eSafety)

- Online threats and intimidation – Sending messages that incite fear or harm.

- Exclusion - Deliberately leaving someone out of online groups or activities.

How cyberbullying may affect young people in out-of-home care differently

For young people in care, the effects of cyberbullying can be particularly severe due to their unique vulnerabilities, such as a history of trauma, low self-esteem, or limited support networks.

- Past trauma may make them more vulnerable to believing negative messages
    - They may feel they deserve it and not raise it with others as an issue for them.
    - It may mirror negative messages that past abusers have told them about themselves.
- They may not recognise abusive behaviour if they have experienced normalised harm
- Fear of losing access to devices may prevent them from reporting cyberbullying

How to support young people

- **Create a supportive environment** where young people feel comfortable discussing online experiences.
- **Reassure** them that bullying is not their fault, and they are not alone.
- **Encourage them to report** and block the perpetrator—most platforms allow this.
- **Help them document incidents**—screenshots can be used in reports.
- **Support them in rebuilding confidence** and positive online interactions

Support resources

- Cyberbullying – Information for family and friends
- Dealing with fight videos | eSafety Commissioner
- A guide to online bullying for parents and carers
- How to report abuse or content to eSafety – You can report serious online abuse to the eSafety Commissioner, who can help with the removal of cyberbullying material.

Sexting and image-based abuse

What is sexting?

Sexting is **sharing sexual images or text**, with or without a photo or video. While not necessarily an online harm, sexting as part of private, consensual exchanges can **escalate** into image-based abuse, blackmail, cyberbullying, or exploitation. Children and young people in care may feel pressure to fit in with peers and participate in the sharing of intimate images or videos to gain social acceptance.

- 1 in 3 young people in Australia report some level of involvement with sexting, including sending, being asked, requesting, or sharing nude or near-nude images (eSafety Commissioner, 2022).

- 9 out of 10 young people aged 14 to 17 believe sexting is common among their peers as a part of dating culture (eSafety Commissioner, 2017).

Is it a concern?

Sexting is a concern when it leads to:

- **Image-based abuse**, when someone shares, or threatens to share, an intimate image or video of a person without their consent.

- **Sextortion** – where perpetrators use images to blackmail young people for more content or money.

- **Legal consequences** – sharing or possessing explicit images of someone under 18 can be considered child exploitation material, even if it is shared consensually.

> **Remember:** A person who asks for, accesses, possesses, creates or shares sexualised images of someone under 18 may be at risk of criminal charges – even if both people are young and agreed to it. Youth Law Australia can provide free and confidential advice for young people about sexting and other legal information and knowledge.

How online sexual victimisation can impact young people in out-of-home care differently

Many children and young people in out-of-home care seek connection, acceptance, and validation online. This can make them more vulnerable to sexting-related harms.

- Lack of experience with safe, respectful relationships may lead them to misinterpret manipulative or coercive requests as normal.

- Previous sexual abuse or early sexualisation may increase their likelihood of engaging in sexualised conversations online.

- They may struggle to recognise risk, making them more likely to trust and comply with requests for explicit content. Sharing sexual, pornographic, or violent content is something many young people will do online without fully understanding the gravity of their actions.

- Fear of judgment, a lack of trust in authority figures, or previous negative experiences with the system can deter them from reporting incidents.

- Feelings of betrayal, violation, and helplessness are common after experiencing image-based abuse.

- The young person may withdraw from social interactions to avoid stigma or judgment.

How to support young people

- **Avoid blame and shame** – Many young people don't realise the risks involved.

- **Talk about online consent and digital footprints** – Once shared, control is lost.

- **Help them recognise manipulation** – Pressuring someone for images is coercion, not connection.

- **Make sure they know help is available** – If they feel trapped, they need to know they can talk to a trusted adult without fear of punishment.

- **Respectful relationships** - Discuss respectful relationships, including mutual respect, equality, consent, communication, and boundaries, with the young person.

Support resources

- Revenge porn or image-based abuse | Getting help | eSafety Commissioner

- Sending nudes and sexting – information about how eSafety can help get content removed

- Young people and sexting – research report

- Sending nudes and sexting – information for parents and carers

- ThinkUKnow – Sextortion

Online gaming and gambling

What is it?

Online games are video games that are played online. They can allow young people to have fun and connect socially, but much more can be done to ensure their safety while gaming online (eSafety Commissioner 2024).

Online gaming is a very common activity for young people. A 2024 report from the eSafety Commissioner found that **89% of young people** had played online games, with **two-thirds (66%)** playing for more than **six hours a week**. Most young gamers (**79%**) played with others online, and **40%** played with people they didn't know in real life. **One in four (26%)** also chatted with strangers while gaming.

The report also found that **66%** of young gamers communicated with others while playing, including **26%** who spoke to people they hadn't met offline.

While online gaming can be positive, there are a number of risks that out-of-home care agencies and staff should consider to keep children and young people safe online. These include:

- Unwanted contact from strangers, including potential grooming risks

- Exploitation of personal data and location tracking

- Requests to send nude images or sexual information

- Exposure to potentially harmful ideas

- Bullying, trolling, harassment

- Risks associated with gambling behaviours including exposure to **loot boxes, simulated gambling,** and **tokens** bought with real money.

> Australian studies of problematic video-gaming over the last decade have estimated that between 1 to 8% of adolescents experience symptoms of problematic gaming.
>
> 'Gaming disorder' and 'Hazardous gaming' are now officially listed in the International Classification of Diseases (11th Edition) (ICD-11).

Loot boxes and simulated gambling

Although online gaming and gambling are separate activities, simulated gambling and gambling promotions can be found in online games and social media. Popular online games can offer players (often small) purchase options known as 'microtransactions' (King 2018). Loot boxes—randomised, purchasable in-game rewards—have no guaranteed financial return, but their design mirrors gambling mechanics, encouraging repeated spending.

- Simulated gambling in games normalises gambling behaviours, making it appear safe, exciting, and socially accepted.

- Winning can feel easy in-game, creating false confidence about real-world gambling.

A report from the Growing Up in Australia Snapshot Series (2022, Issue 7) found that playing simulated gambling games increased the likelihood of young people spending money on gambling. Having parent/s who gambled, alcohol use, and being a young man were also associated with gambling among young adults.

Understanding gaming for young people in out-of-home care

For many young people in OOHC, gaming is more than just play—it's a way to find connection, control, and self-worth.

- Gaming can replace offline friendships, especially for those experiencing placement instability.

- School disengagement may lead to increased gaming, as they have more unstructured time.

- Sleep difficulties can lead to excessive late-night gaming as a coping mechanism.

- They may excel in gaming, reinforcing a sense of achievement and self-worth they struggle to find elsewhere.

- Financial exploitation. Young people may overspend or be pressured into financial transactions by other players.

How to support children and young people

- Recognise gaming as a **legitimate and common social activity for children and young people** —understanding why they play is key.

- **Help them navigate in-game safety** settings—privacy controls, reporting tools, and blocking functions.

- Talk about **gambling mechanics** in games—loot boxes and betting systems should be discussed openly.

- **Encourage balance**—supporting alternative social and recreational activities alongside gaming.

- **Play online games** (or engage in children and young people's game play in other ways) as a way to build connection and strengthen relationships.

Support resources

- [Online gaming](#) – information for parents and carers

- [Youth and online gaming - state of play](#) – research report

- [The risks and benefits of online gaming for children and young people | eSafety Commissioner](#)

Exposure to harmful online content

What is it?

The online world **does not always reflect reality**—children and young people may:

- **Compare themselves to unrealistic body images** on social media

- **See violence or risk-taking as 'normal'** through online content

- **Feel pressured to meet online beauty or social standards**

While all children and young people navigate these challenges, those in out-of-home care (OOHC) may be particularly vulnerable due to their trauma histories. Without guidance and critical thinking skills, they may internalise harmful messages about body image, violence, risk-taking, and identity.

Understanding the risks

- **Unrealistic body standards:** Social media platforms are saturated with videos and images that promote unrealistic beauty standards—extreme thinness, hyper-muscular physiques, or digitally altered appearances. Children and young people may compare themselves unfavourably, leading to body dissatisfaction, disordered eating, or reliance on unregulated supplements.

- **Normalisation of risky behaviours:** The online world can create the illusion that everyone engages in risky behaviours—substance use, dangerous stunts, or excessive spending. For children and young people in out-of-home care, who may already struggle with impulse control and identity development, this can increase their likelihood of engaging in these behaviours to fit in or cope.

- **Echo Chambers:** Online spaces may reinforce feelings of isolation or victimisation by connecting children and young people with others who share similar grievances but without offering healthy coping mechanisms.

- **Violence as entertainment:** Online content often presents violence as exciting or justified, with perpetrators framed as heroes. Children and young people rarely see the long-term consequences—trauma, legal consequences, or personal suffering. Research shows exposure to virtual violence can increase aggression, reduce empathy, and reinforce existing trauma responses.

- **Stereotypes and discrimination:** Although online spaces have become more inclusive, harmful stereotypes persist. Gender, race, and cultural biases can shape children and young people's self-perception, making them feel excluded or reinforcing negative internal beliefs formed through past trauma.

How distorted reality might impact children and young people

- They may already struggle with self-worth, making online comparisons harmful

- They may seek validation online, reinforcing negative self-image

- They may not recognise the difference between curated content and reality

How to support children and young people

- **Encourage media and digital literacy**—help them critically analyse online content

- **Help build emotional resilience** - equip children and young people with skills to manage comparisons, build self-esteem, and recognise their inherent value beyond online representations.

- **Discuss self-esteem and body image** in relation to social media

- **Promote online spaces that reinforce positive identity**

- Teach adolescents about the risks introduced by AI-content generators

- **Support children and young people in using settings** that prevent exposure to this type of content where possible.

- **Encourage access to content that promotes help-seeking** from trusted sources, including Kids Helpline, Headspace, ReachOut and Minus18.

- Limit exposure to content that encourages violent or risky behaviours and/or reinforces negative stereotype

Practice reflection – Your digital consumption

- How do you respond to idealised images and messages online?

- Have you ever felt pressured to conform to unrealistic standards based on social media?

- What strategies help you critically engage with digital content?

- How do you support children and young people's healthy video viewing?

Support resources

- The deadly connections feeding eating disorders – eSafety Commissioner

- Fake news – for young people - eSafety Commissioner

- Catfishing – for young people – eSafety Commissioner

- Pressures from social media – for young people – eSafety Commissioner

- Resources to support media literacy – eSafety Commissioner

- How to manage your screen time | eSafety Commissioner

- APA Recommendations for Healthy Teen Video Viewing

Financial risks

What is it?

Children and young people are increasingly targeted by financial scams, payday loans, and manipulative marketing online. These risks can lead to long-term financial difficulties, particularly for children and young people in out-of-home care, who may lack financial literacy support or have unregulated access to online lending schemes.

An emerging area of concern

Consultations with carers and case managers highlighted growing concerns around how children and young people in out-of-home care access and manage money online. While financial risks are not always recognised as a core part of online safety, they are becoming a significant issue due to:

- The rise of Buy Now, Pay Later (BNPL) schemes – Nearly half of children and young people aged 18-29 have struggled to meet repayments (eSafety Commissioner, 2023).

- Easy access to payday loans and short-term credit – These schemes do not require a credit history and often have high fees and penalties for late repayments.

- Impulse-driven spending – Poor impulse control, combined with targeted online advertising, increases the likelihood of young people spending beyond their means.

- Financial exploitation or coercion – Some young people use online loans to cover gambling or drug debts, leaving them in even greater financial distress.

Understanding financial risks for children and young people in out-of-home care

For many children and young people in care, financial independence is important, but without support, they may:

- Use BNPL or payday loans without fully understanding the repayment conditions.

- Be influenced by misleading advertising, making purchases they cannot afford.

- Experience financial coercion, where peers or adults pressure them into accessing money online.

- Struggle with impulse control, leading to risky financial decisions.

Real-world scenario: Financial risks online

Callum, 16 – Payday loans and debt collection

Callum, aged 16, living in residential care, had used a fake ID to secure a payday loan to pay off drug debts. Callum had been heavily influenced by online advertising marketing the ease at which this money could be obtained.

Carers were only alerted to the problem when the debt collectors for the agency started to intimidate and threaten the young person. When the debt collectors discovered the young person was underage, they backed off.

Carers were concerned the young person's credit history could be negatively affected when he turned 18 years.

Sarah 17, BNPL debt cycle

Sarah, aged 17 years, lives in kinship care. She has a disability and receives Centrelink payments.

Sarah had accessed four different BNPL schemes to buy clothing, shoes, and other items. She thought it would be okay because these loans were not interest-free; however, there is a late fee whenever you do not make the payment on time.

Sarah struggled to meet the payments and incurred repeated late fee charges, resulting in mounting debt.

Practice reflection

Consider Callum's and Sarah's situations:

- What early signs of financial distress might have been noticed?

- How can carers or case managers support children and young people in developing financial awareness before they face these risks?

- If a young person was in a similar situation, how could you approach the conversation in a way that is non-judgmental and solution-focused?

- What preventative strategies could be introduced to help children and young people manage money safely online?

How to support children and young people

- Talk about online financial risks early—help children and young people understand how online loans, BNPL, and payday loans work.

- Encourage budgeting and financial literacy—support them in making informed financial decisions.

- Monitor for signs of financial distress—if a young person suddenly seems anxious about money or withdrawing funds frequently, they may be struggling with debt.

- Educate them about scams and financial coercion—some children and young people may be pressured by peers or adults into taking on debt for others.

Support resources

- Sortli by CREATE Foundation has some helpful, youth friendly information to support children and young people managing money, budgeting and financial literacy.

- National Debt Helpline and information on rights surrounding payday loans 1800 007 007

Best practice framework for online safety in out-of-home care agencies

Key message

Promoting online safety for children and young people in out-of-home care is a shared responsibility. It requires a holistic approach that integrates **best practices**, fosters **supportive relationships**, enhances **workforce development**, and strengthens **organisational systems** to ensure safety, empowerment, and digital participation.

This **best practice framework** offers a multicomponent response to addressing online safety of children and young people living in out-of-home care. At its core, the framework places children and young people at the centre and outlines a best-practice approach across four interconnected domains:

- **Practice with children and young people** – Keeping children and young people safe online starts with understand each child's unique needs and strengths, ensuring they are empowered, supported, and protected online.

- **The care and support context** – Strong relationships and open communication between carers, case managers, and other key adults can help to identify issues early and prevent issues escalating to dangerous thresholds.

- **Workforce capability** – Carers and case managers must be trained, confident, and well-supported in online safety practices, equipping them to navigate digital risks effectively.

- **Organisational capability** – Policies, procedures, and system-wide infrastructure must be in place to support safe and effective online safety practices for children, carers, and staff.

ONLINE SAFETY FRAMEWORK FOR OOHC
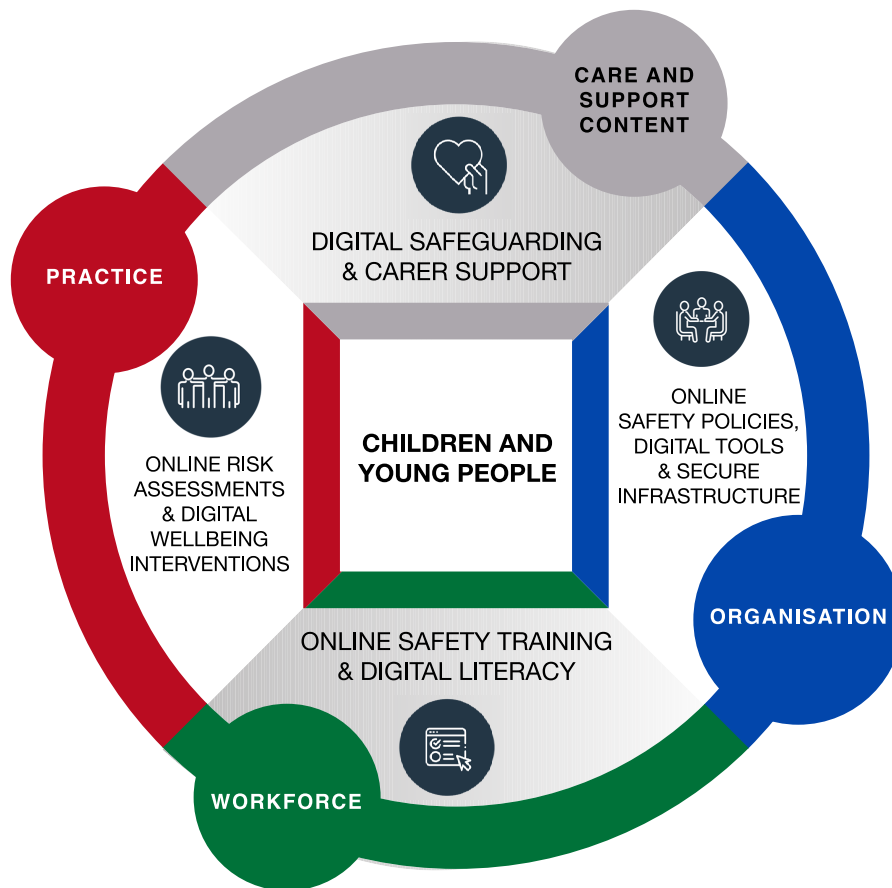
The framework recognises that addressing the online safety of children and young people living in out-of-home care requires a multi-component approach that:

- **assesses and responds** to the unique needs and strengths of individual children and young people to empower, support and protect them

- **ensures the support of and collaboration** between carers and other key people in the child or young person's life

- ensures that carers and case managers are **trained and supported**

- ensures that carers and case managers operate within an **organisational context** with the necessary policies, procedures, and infrastructure to support effective practice.

Across all these areas, it is essential to acknowledge and respond to the **specific needs of First Nations families, LGBTQIA+ young people, young people with disability, and those from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds.** This means providing **culturally safe, inclusive, and accessible** resources and approaches that reflect the realities of young people's lives.

The **eSafety Commissioner** offers videos and resources in multiple languages to help ensure information is available and accessible to diverse communities. These tools can support carers, case managers, and children and young people in understanding and navigating online risks in ways that align with their needs and lived experiences.

Each domain is explored in more detail in the following sections.

Practice: Assessment

Understanding vulnerabilities and strengths

Children and young people in out-of-home care have changing and complex vulnerabilities and strengths both online and offline. Offline vulnerability to risk is a strong predictor of online vulnerability.

The online world differs from the offline world in key ways:

- **Unrestricted access** to vast content as well as design features like recommendation systems that funnel young people to content with the aim of keeping them watching longer

- **Greater speed and scale** of interactions

- **Persistent and anonymous communication** that is difficult to escape

This can enhance existing vulnerabilities and expose new ones, even if such vulnerabilities are not obvious in the offline world. How children and young people are affected by the online environment will differ, depending on a variety of factors, including the young person's age and stage of development, their existing relational supports, the experience of disability or neurodivergence, or if they are exploring their gender and/or sexuality.

Understanding online risk

Significant numbers of children have participated in risky online behaviours or had negative experiences, including communicating with someone they first met online, being treated in a hurtful way online, being the target of hate or seeing extreme and negative content.

These risks can arise from, amplify or interact with other factors in the child's life including:

- Existing vulnerabilities and strengths

- Experiences in online and offline environments

- Design features and experiences provided on digital platforms used

Taken together, **these interacting factors can lead to some children and young people in out-of-home care experiencing significant harm online.** The boundary between online and offline life is often blurred (Baumer et al., 2010), making it difficult to isolate risks to one platform, space, or behaviour. This 'mosaic effect' complicates efforts to identify and mitigate online harms.

Beyond digital responses and towards a holistic approach

Addressing online harms requires more than just digital solutions. While technology plays a role, effective responses must also consider the young person's broader care environment and the offline factors that shape their online experiences. This means staff, carers, managers, and policymakers need to take a **holistic approach**—one that combines **digital tools** (such as privacy settings, content moderation, and reporting mechanisms) with **non-digital strategies** like building trust, strengthening relationships, and providing education and emotional support.

A comprehensive **assessment of strengths and vulnerabilities** is critical to understanding:

- How online spaces can support and resource a child or young person

- The nature and degree of online risks they face

- How to balance risk mitigation with empowerment and participation

Assessment tool

The following assessment tool builds a comprehensive understanding of the child or young person as the basis for planning and intervention in regard to online safety. It uses a developmental, trauma-informed approach to consider their strengths, capabilities and vulnerabilities offline and online. It addresses a child or young person's risks and protective factors across the following critical domains of a child/young person's life:

- physical,
- emotional,
- behavioural,
- social and relational,
- learning,
- connection to culture and community,
- care context,
- recreation and interests,
- online activity,
- and the wishes of the child or young person.

By mapping these domains, the assessment tool provides a clearer picture of **relative risks and protective factors.** It helps identify **where support is needed** and how strengths in one area may **offset vulnerabilities in another.** It offers a way to guide efforts to empower, support, and protect children and young people in both their online and offline lives.

Assessment Domain	Risk factors for online harm and abuse	Protective Factors
Physical	Disability Autism/Spectrum Disorders Substance abuse Sleep difficulties Symptoms that may indicated overuse of technology such as carpal tunnel syndrome, dry eyes or strained vision, back and neck aches, headaches, pronounced weight gain or loss	Good physical health Established routines regarding sleep and healthy eating Good self-care
Emotional	Low self esteem Experiences anxiety and low moods Feelings of hopelessness and helplessness Self-harming or suicidal behaviours	Positive sense of self Capacity to regulate strong feelings Self-confidence Resilient in the face of set-backs or challenges

Assessment Domain	Risk factors for online harm and abuse	Protective Factors
Behavioural	Poor impulse control Poor conflict resolution skills Difficulties with judgement and reasoning Risk-taking and sensation-seeking behaviour Aggressive behaviour offline ADHD	Ability to set reasonable personal limit on technology to prevent overuse/reliance Is mostly able to understand and meet behavioural expectations set by adults Able to demonstrate good decision-making Ability to understand the impact of their behaviour on others
Social and relational	Few positive friendships in the offline world Difficulties making friends offline Attracted to negative peer groups offline Isolation from family	Understands the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships (including tactics involved in abuse, coercion, grooming or sexual solicitation.)
Learning	Disengaged from school Difficulties with short term and working memory Difficulties following instructions Difficulties in comprehension Inability to distinguish between the real world and the distorted realities offered in the online environment	Attends school regularly Achieving academically Is provided with instruction on online safety, digital literacy and respectful relationships Enjoys extra-curricular interests at school Has good problem solving skills
Culture and community	Disconnected from culture and community	Strong sense of identity Connection to Country, family and community Engages in cultural practices
Care context	Lack of consistent and available carers History of placement instability Spends periods of time away from placement Carers are blaming and judgmental Child/young person feels criticised and judged by carers Carers lack awareness of the child's digital experiences and internet use	Carers offer safe, stable, nurturing relationships that are responsive to the needs of the child/young person Care environment is consistent, reliable and stable Carers model respectful and supportive relationships Carers feel confident to support children's safe use of digital technologies and use a range of digital parenting strategies

Assessment Domain	Risk factors for online harm and abuse	Protective Factors
Recreation and interests	No or limited involvement or opportunities to experience offline interests including exploring arts, culture, sport and nature	Provided with a range of opportunities to explore offline interests and experiences including arts, culture, sport and/or nature
Online activity	Time online or online experiences lead to decrease wellbeing (e.g. body image, comparisons, excessive use, interfering with sleep) Time online or online experiences impact relationships (experiencing or engaging in online exclusion, hate, harassment, cyberbullying or image-based abuse) Spending lots of time in communities or viewing content that promotes dangerous or unhealthy idea (e.g. sexist, racist, extreme ideologies) Unsafe online experiences (e.g. sharing too much personal information, engaging in sexual interactions with adults)	Engaging in positive communities of support or with like-minded peers Exploring hobbies and interests Seeking appropriate information online and sharing it with carers or other trusted adults Can talk about their online friends, interests and activities Will talk about things that worry them in the online environment with trusted adults Has good digital literacy Has a history of overcoming challenges online and learning from them
Wishes of the child or young person	What does the child/young person want to see happen? What goals do the child/young person have for themselves? What supports are needed to resource the achievement of their goals?	

Real-world scenario: Grace – Part 1: The initial approach.

Grace is a 13-year-old girl in foster care. During COVID-19 lockdowns, she began posting videos of herself dancing on TikTok after receiving a smartphone from her grandma for her birthday. Over time, she noticed that her videos received more likes when she wore certain outfits and imitated popular dance trends.

Her foster carer and worker became concerned about who was viewing these videos and the potential risks of bullying or sexual exploitation. Their response was to ban Grace from using TikTok. However, she continued to access the app without their knowledge.

While this restriction was intended to protect Grace, it did not address the underlying reasons for her behaviour or provide her with alternative ways to express herself safely. Without open communication, Grace's online activity remained hidden, and the risks persisted.

Practice reflection

What strengths, needs, and protective factors can you identify in Grace's story?

What are the potential risks associated with Grace's online activity, and how might these be balanced with her rights to participation, autonomy, and connection?

How might Grace's experiences in foster care influence her engagement with social media?

Do you think banning TikTok was an effective response? What alternative approaches could have been taken?

What additional conversations or support strategies could be explored to help Grace navigate social media safely while feeling heard and respected?

Support resources

eSafety has a range of research and resources to support young people with diverse online safety experiences and needs including young people with disability, LGBTQI+ youth and being a young man online.

We also have a range of resources to support young adults, families and older Australians who have diverse online safety needs and experiences.

This includes women, Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander peoples, LGBTIQ+ individuals, people with disability, and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Practice: Planning and Intervention

Key message

Strong relationships and open communication are key to online safety. Carers and professionals should create a **supportive, non-judgmental environment** where children and young people feel safe to seek help.

Online safety should be included in the care and support plans for all children and young people in out-of-home care.

The online world is now built into the fabric of modern life. The challenge is to empower and resource children and young people enjoy the benefits of going online while having the skills and knowledge to identify and avoid the risks.

As such care and support plans should explicitly address children and young people's needs, risks and views in both offline and online worlds.

Using a trauma-informed approach to planning and intervention, we will explore four critical foundations for implementing effective care and plans that protect, support and empower children and young people in both their online and offline worlds:

- Relationships

- Communication

- Education and awareness

- Balancing risk and safety

RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships are the primary vehicle for change when working with children and young people who have experienced trauma. They are also a critical tool for supporting their safety and well-being online. Young people are most likely to seek help from trusted adults first (Moody et al., 2021).

However, as explored earlier, developing safe and trusting relationships with children and young people in out-of-home care takes time and persistence. They need to feel confident that you will be there for them and that investing in a relationship with you is worth it. Many will test your commitment before allowing trust to develop.

Build safety in relationships

Safety and trust grow when children and young people consistently feel:

- Valued, important, and respected

- Understood and listened to

- Reassured that someone is there for them

Safety also comes from knowing that relationships can withstand challenges—that disagreements or difficulties won't lead to abandonment. Fun, shared experiences further strengthen trust. Small, consistent acts of engagement show children and young people that you care, expect nothing in return, and can be relied upon.

Risks and opportunities in online relationships

For many young people in out-of-home care, online relationships play an important role in **connection, support, and identity.** These spaces can be beneficial, providing:

- **Continuity of friendships** despite placement changes

- **Belonging in online communities** (e.g., gaming, social media, shared interest groups)

- **Opportunities for self-expression and support** when offline relationships feel unsafe or unreliable

However, not all online spaces offer genuine safety. Consider:

- Is an online gaming community always a safe space? Some young people find camaraderie and connection in gaming groups, while others may face cyberbullying, grooming, or harmful interactions.

- What about group chats or messaging apps? They can provide stability in friendships, but they can also be spaces where children and young people are excluded, pressured, or manipulated.

Rather than assuming all **online interactions are harmful**, it's important to **assess the context** and **equip children and young people with the skills** to navigate these spaces safely.

Use relationship networks to build safety

A child or young person's **relationship network**—both online and offline—is an important source of safety. Consider:

- Who are they most connected to?

- Who do they turn to when worried?

- Who do they trust to listen?

Sometimes, other children and young people in a placement alert carers to difficulties experienced by their peers. How can you create a culture in the placement that fosters trust, respect and safety amongst everyone in the living environment so that worries can be shared?

Children and young feel safe in their relationship when they, or their friends feel accepted. Fear of judgement, blame and punishment are significant barriers to children and young people talking about their online world and seeking out help when it's needed (Moody et al, 2021).

How to support children and young people – be open and interested

☐ Approach conversations about online activity with **curiosity, not judgment**. Children and young people may find this intrusive or uncomfortable.

☐ Help them develop **safe ways to socialise online and offline**, appropriate to their age and stage of development. The same rules should apply to online and offline friendships.

☐ Show genuine interest in their **online world**—games, apps, and people they follow. Make these discussions a normal and enjoyable part of everyday conversations.

☐ **Be interested** in the various platforms, games and apps children and young people are using and what they like and dislike about them.

☐ **Being interested is a way of countering the messages that perpetrators use** to set children and young people up to be controlled. They rely on carers knowing little about the online lives of children and young people.

☐ **Respect appropriate boundaries** and avoid being seen to 'invade their space' or pry.

☐ Reflect on your own values and biases—can you stay **curious and non-judgemental** if a young person discusses sensitive topics like pornography or age-restricted sites?

Do you feel uncomfortable having conversations with young person where they may reveal that they are accessing sites that are illegal for people under 18?

☐ **Use supervision and reflective practice** to navigate difficult conversations and strengthen your approach.

Real-world scenario: Grace – Part 2: A relationship-based approach

Let's revisit Grace who was banned from using TikTok.

Seeing that banning TikTok had not changed Grace's behaviour, her case worker—who had a strong relationship with her—chose a different approach: seeking to understand rather than simply restrict her online activity. In their conversation, Grace shared that she loved dancing and had turned to TikTok to learn new moves after her dance lessons stopped during COVID-19. She also enjoyed the validation she received from likes and comments on her videos.

Recognising this, the worker encouraged Grace to return to dance lessons and participate in performances now that restrictions had eased. Her carer also offered to take her to local dance events, helping her explore different styles and connect with others who shared her passion.

As a result, while Grace continued posting on TikTok, she did so less frequently and agreed to let her carer review videos before posting. Her relationships with both her worker and carer strengthened, and they felt more confident that she would seek help if she experienced online bullying or exploitation.

This **relationship-based approach** allowed Grace to feel supported rather than punished, leading to a more positive and sustainable outcome.

Practice reflection

1. Why was a relationship-based approach more effective for Grace than the limit-setting that had been tried earlier?

2. How important was it to understand the need that Grace's TikTok use met in developing an effective plan for Grace?

3. Think about a child or young person you work with. What needs does their online activity meet? How else can these needs be met so that there is less reliance on the online environment?

Key takeaway

Grace's experience highlights that restriction alone does not change behaviour or address the underlying needs driving online engagement. By focusing on relationships, open conversations, and opportunities for offline connection, her worker and carer were able to guide her toward safer and more meaningful participation—both online and offline.

This relationship-based approach is key to helping children and young people navigate digital spaces in a way that supports their wellbeing, autonomy, and safety.

COMMUNICATION

Open, ongoing conversations help children and young people feel supported and more likely to seek help when needed. Carers have told us they want clearer guidance on what to say and how to approach these discussions.

Key Topics to Cover

- Online experiences

- Recognising unsafe situations

- Dealing with threats to share nude images or videos

- What to do if their nudes are shared

- Safety planning

Making online safety part of everyday conversations	
☐	Build conversations about online safety into daily care, not just when problems arise.
☐	Take an active and engaged approach—be genuinely interested in how and why children and young people use the internet.
☐	Encourage help-seeking by creating a safe, non-judgmental space where children and young people feel comfortable discussing their online experiences, including mistakes or concerns.
☐	Don't be afraid to discuss both the risks and benefits of online spaces. If children and young people trust you to support their internet use, they'll be more likely to seek help when needed.
☐	Use casual, positive conversations rather than focusing solely on prohibitions. Humour and relatable stories can make difficult topics easier to discuss.
☐	Children and young people are most responsive to messages from other children and young people. Consider how to facilitate group conversations, such as in a residential care setting and you could encourage young people seek out online safety messages from other young people to enhance connection: Young People	eSafety Commissioner

Real-world scenario: Jason – accessing pornography

Meet Jason.

Jason is a 14 year old boy who began viewing pornography and chatting to other males online.

The carer became aware that Jason was accessing pornographic sites and, with the support of the foster worker, began to have conversations with him about his pornography use.

It seems that Jason was exploring his sexual identity and was accessing pornography to find out what gay sex looked like and speaking to other gay young people.

The carer and the worker provided opportunities for Jason to explore his identity and provided education on healthy relationships, such as accessing the Kids Help Line site and appropriate sites to support young people in exploring their gender identity.

There were ongoing conversations with Jason and the foster care worker and carer about what he has seen in pornography and how this compares with real-life relationships. Although the carer believes Jason may still be accessing pornography, he was supported to explore other avenues to understand his sexuality and critique what he was viewing online. The carer and the worker consulted with a sexual health clinic so they felt comfortable and knowledgeable to speak with Jason about his pornography usage.

Practice reflection

What risk was Jason facing as a result of his online behaviour?

How important was it to understand the meaning behind the online behaviour to the success of the plan?

How could you work with Jason to reduce the risks around viewing pornography?

How can you build relationships and communication with children and young people to support challenging conversations?

Support resources

Consider some of the activities in Together: A collection of activities for exploring and strengthening relationships – Australian Childhood Foundation

Talking about online child sexual abuse with 13 to 18 year olds | eSafety Commissioner

The hard-to-have conversations - Talking with children and young people about tricky personal subjects

Young people's attitudes towards online pornography and age assurance | eSafety Commissioner

Youth engagement and online safety - Research with young people that covered a range of key issues regarding online safety including help seeking, support and how they want information provided to them

COMMUNICATION

Open, ongoing conversations help children and young people feel supported and more likely to seek help when needed. Carers have told us they want clearer guidance on what to say and how to approach these discussions.

Key Topics to Cover

- Online experiences

- Recognising unsafe situations

- Dealing with threats to share nude images or videos

- What to do if their nudes are shared

- Safety planning

AWARENESS AND EDUCATION

Children and young people living in out-of-home care often miss out on important information about online safety due to the primary vehicle for this being within the education curriculum at school. The reality of schooling disruption or disengagement from school may mean that many children and young people living in out-of-home care may miss out on this important learning.

Children and young people are equally concerned that carers and workers don't have adequate information or experience to assist them with their online activities and safety (Moody et al, 2021)

Awareness and education about online safety should be viewed as a two-way process within which the carer or worker and the child or young person are **both teaching and learning.**

☐	**Acknowledge their expertise:** Encourage children and young people to share their knowledge about the online space. This builds trust, strengthens relationships, and ensures their experiences are valued.
☐	**Learn together:** Explore online environments in a proactive and tailored way, ensuring learning meets the individual needs of both the child or young person and yourself.
☐	**Understand online tools:** Have children and young people explain the apps and websites they use, including privacy settings and controls. Discuss why privacy matters and how to manage it effectively.
☐	**Develop risk management skills:** Help them recognise online risks and confidently use tools like blocking, muting, ignoring, or reporting to protect themselves.
☐	**Start early:** Ideally, introduce shared online learning experiences before they begin using digital devices, ensuring supervision and guidance from the start.
☐	**Engage in co-viewing:** Spend time online together to assess their understanding, strengthen digital skills, and discuss strategies for handling inappropriate content or scams. Create a safe space for them to seek support without fear of punishment.
☐	**Strengthen privacy and security:** Support the use of privacy settings, content controls, and location settings on devices to prevent accidental exposure to risks. Encourage them to help you review your own privacy settings for mutual learning.
☐	**Teach reporting and blocking:** Show them how to report offensive content and block harmful users on their favourite platforms, reinforcing their ability to make informed online decisions.
☐	**Manage tagging and identification risks:** Check settings that control tagging in images and comments to ensure they are not unknowingly linked to inappropriate content.
☐	**Keep devices secure:** Encourage regular updates of apps and devices to maintain security and privacy.
☐	**Acknowledge their expertise:** Encourage children and young people to share their knowledge about the online space. This builds trust, strengthens relationships, and ensures their experiences are valued.

Practice reflection

How can you make the process of awareness and education about the online environment fun and engaging?

How can you set up opportunities where the child or young person is the teacher, and you are the student as you learn together about online safety?

Support resources

The eSafety Guide | eSafety Commissioner

Young People | eSafety Commissioner – Self-identity and community, Dating and relationships, Navigating difficult situations, Protecting yourself online

BALANCING RISK AND SAFETY

Key message

A trauma-informed, harm-minimisation approach is essential. Online safety responses should focus on education, empowerment, and risk management, rather than punitive restrictions that may push children and young people into unsafe online spaces.

There is no way of removing all the risks in the online environment. When we use a **harm minimisation approach** we can address serious risks online whilst maintaining protective factors, especially maintaining safe and supportive relationships.

Blocking or banning access to devices is rarely effective. For children and young people in care, mobile phones are essential for maintaining connections with friends, family, and carers. While concerns about device use are valid, confiscation is not a sustainable or effective strategy. It is often perceived as punitive, leading to conflict, breakdowns in trust, and, in some cases, placement instability.

Confiscating a young person's phone is a **restrictive practice** that should only be used as a last resort, following legislative and government guidelines. Appropriate policies and processes need to be in place and enforced to prevent harmful use of restrictive practices. For example, children and young people should understand how they can raise concerns or complaints about the use of restrictive practices related to device use and ownership.

In the following scenario, **12-year-old Bec's carers became increasingly fearful for her safety**, leading them to respond with **punitive measures** that ultimately resulted in poor outcomes for everyone involved.

Real-world scenario: Bec – restriction

Bec is a 12-year-old girl with a mild intellectual disability. Bec started sending semi-nude pictures of herself online to unknown males. When her carers discovered this, they banned her from using the app. When this restriction failed, they limited her phone use and eventually confiscated her phone entirely. This led to escalating conflict, a breakdown in Bec's relationship with her carers, and ultimately the end of her placement. Now in residential care, there are ongoing concerns about her vulnerability to online sexual exploitation.

Practice reflection

Describe the risks that Bec was facing. Could the placement breakdown have been prevented?

What support did Bec need? What support did the carer need?

Applying a harm minimisation approach

A harm minimisation approach recognises that online risks cannot be eradicated, but they can be managed in ways that prioritise both safety and connection. This approach acknowledges children and young people's digital rights, experiences, and the importance of online relationships, while reducing the likelihood of harm. A similar approach has been proposed in supporting children and young people who are being sexually exploited offline and who may be reluctant to seek help for fear of being judged (Hickle and Hallett, 2014).

Harm minimisation emphasises **assessing risks and recognising protective factors** to manage potential harm without excluding children and young people from online opportunities. For instance, this approach has been successfully applied to support children and young people at risk of exploitation in offline contexts, where judgment or punitive measures might prevent them from seeking help.

The **assessment tool** supports harm minimisation by integrating risk and safety planning into a holistic understanding of a child's needs across all areas of life. Safety planning should be a core part of every care and support plan in out-of-home care.

Practice reflection

Think of a child or young person that you work with and consider the strengths, risk and vulnerabilities that have that mitigates or increases the risks they face online.

How do the carer and other significant people understand these in the child or young person's life?

What, if any, dilemmas can you identify in applying a harm minimisation approach? How can these be addressed in your practice, within your team, or by your organisation?

Responding to serious online harm

eSafety supports Australians in **preventing and addressing** harm caused by serious online abuse or illegal and restricted online content.

eSafety can investigate **cyberbullying of children** and **image-based abuse** (sharing or threatening to share intimate images without the consent of the person shown) and **illegal and restricted content.** Illegal and restricted online content ranges from seriously harmful material, such as images and videos showing the sexual abuse of children or acts of terrorism, to content that should not be accessed by children, such as simulated sexual activity, detailed nudity or high-impact violence.

eSafety has the authority to **seek removal of the most harmful online content**, including material that involves the exploitation and/or sexual abuse of children.

For eSafety to investigate cyberbullying, the harmful content must first be reported to the platform or service where it was posted. In many cases, this is the fastest way to have content removed. The eSafety Guide explains how to report complaints to common services and platforms, including social media sites, online games and other apps. If the cyberbullying is very serious, and the service or platform does not remove the harmful content, then you can report it to eSafety for investigation.

The eSafety website has a comprehensive range of information related to the reporting of serious online abuse.

Responding to serious online harm

The following flowchart has been developed to assist with managing incidents of serious online harm.

Serious online abuse of a child or young person is identified involving cyberbullying and/or image-based abuse

Make an assessment of impact of serious online abuse on immediate safety as well as the mental health or health of child or young person

Follow internal protocols/policies to enact safety plan for child or young person. Ensure that consideration is given to

- addressing the immediate risks to child/young person
- involving child/young person's own views in the decision-making process
- developmental capacity of child/young person to provide consent for any actions that involve them
- the relationships available to child/young person to continue to support them
- the need for involvement of the Police

Weigh up benefits and risks associated with making a report. If a report is indicated, follow the eSafety recommended steps involving contacting the platform seeking the removal of online abusive content.

If the social media platform takes action, then continue to support the child or young person. If the platform does not take action, then make a report to eSafety.

Continue to support the child or young person providing additional information or referral to specialist services.

Support resources

Protecting children from sexual abuse online | eSafety Commissioner

Cyberbullying quick guides and Image-based abuse quick guide these are also available in a variety of languages.

Supporting children experiencing domestic and family violence | eSafety Commissioner

Care and support context

Supporting carers

Many carers feel **uncertain or underprepared** when it comes to supporting children and young people in the online environment. A lack of skills, knowledge, or confidence in this area can lead to **anxiety** and **self-doubt** about how to provide guidance and protection.

Carers want to feel **equipped and empowered** to support children across **all areas of their lives—both offline and online**. Children and young people want carers to trust them, and to have open dialogue with them about what happens online. They also want to be able to turn to them for help when they need it, without fear of getting in trouble.

Reassure them that **strong relationships and open communication** are two of the most effective ways to **keep children and young people safe online.** These **core principles of good care** apply just as much in the digital world as they do in everyday life. Support carers to develop their confidence to engage with children and young people about awareness and education activities through opportunities to build their digital literacy.

The following six steps to good digital parenting may be a useful framework to talk through with carers.

Six Steps to Good Digital Caring

1. Use your relationship and opportunities to talk with the children and young people in your care.

Talk early and often. Be open and direct. Remember to stay calm.

2. Increase your own knowledge.

Many carers report they have limited understanding of why children and young people engage with technology. Carers also indicate that their own digital literacy is not sufficient to enable them to guide children and young people's engagement.

Search online for anything you don't understand Try out the apps, games, and sites yourself.

3. Make use of parental controls.

Set content and time limits on the children's devices. Routinely check privacy settings on social media. Monitor children's' use and their screen time.

4. Co-develop ground rules.

Discuss and sign a safety agreement. Restrict where and when devices can be used.

5. Explore, share, and celebrate.

Go online with the children and young people in your care and explore their digital world. Share your own online experiences. Learn from each other and have fun.

6. Be a good digital role model.

Assess your own digital habits. Know when and where to unplug. Show the children and young people in your care how to collaborate and be kind online.

Adapted from 7 Steps to Good Digital Parenting Family Online Safety Institute
https://www.fosi.org/how-to-be-good-digital-parent

Support resources

Parents | eSafety Commissioner

Webinars for parents and carers | eSafety Commissioner

https://www.esafety.gov.au/parents/children-under-5

The care team

Supporting the online safety of children and young people in out-of-home care isn't always straightforward. Care teams often navigate complex challenges, such as managing different devices with varying parental controls, differing values and perspectives on online risks versus benefits, and varying levels of digital literacy among team members.

For children and young people in care to thrive online—making the most of opportunities while staying safe—they need a confident and coordinated network of support around them. Keeping up with the ever-changing online landscape requires a flexible, responsive approach, as young people quickly move between platforms and digital spaces.

A **Care Team** is a relationship-based, trauma-informed approach designed to counter fragmented and inconsistent support (Macnamara, N., Mitchell, J. and Tucci, J., 2020). It brings together all key professionals, carers, and, where possible, the child or young person's family to foster cooperation, communication, and shared responsibility. A well-functioning Care Team ensures that the adults in a child's life—across home (foster, kinship, or residential care), school, family, and community—are aligned in their responses to risks and needs, providing a stable foundation for safety both online and offline.

By maintaining a **'shared lens'** on a child or young person's risks, needs, and preferences, Care Teams ensure that online safety is not treated as an isolated issue but is embedded into broader care and support planning. This means that strategies for managing digital risks are not only reactive but also proactive, ensuring consistency across different environments and the transitions between them.

Real-world scenario: Jordan – navigating online safety in a care team

Meet Jordan – a 14-year-old in residential care who has recently started engaging in online gaming and social media. Jordan uses different devices in different environments: a shared tablet at the residential unit (with some parental controls in place), a school laptop (which is monitored by the school but allows social media access), and a personal phone gifted by an extended family member (with no restrictions).

Jordan's Care Team—made up of residential workers, a caseworker, their teacher, and a psychologist—has differing perspectives on online safety:

- **The residential care staff** believe tighter restrictions should be in place due to Jordan's history of online risk-taking, including chatting with unknown adults in gaming spaces.

- **The school staff** focus on digital literacy and believe Jordan should have opportunities to learn responsible online behaviour rather than just imposing restrictions.

- **Jordan's psychologist** highlights the importance of online spaces for connection and identity development, particularly given Jordan's history of disrupted relationships.

- **Jordan's caseworker** is concerned about maintaining relationships with family online, especially given previous instances of harmful contact.

As Jordan moves between these different environments, they receive **inconsistent messages** about what is safe and appropriate online behaviour. Sometimes, a strict approach at the residential unit leads Jordan to seek out less supervised access elsewhere, making risks harder to monitor. The lack of a shared approach creates **confusion for Jordan and frustration among the team**, as they struggle to balance safety, access, and skill-building.

How a care team approach helps

Through coordinated Care Team discussions, Jordan's support network:

- **Develops a shared agreement** on online safety strategies across all settings.

- **Creates consistency,** ensuring that expectations and monitoring are aligned.

- **Balances risk and opportunity,** acknowledging the importance of connection while implementing safeguards.

- **Engages Jordan,** ensuring their voice and experiences shape the decisions made about their online access.

Practice reflection

How would your team approach a situation like Jordan's?

What strategies could you use to align different perspectives on online safety?

How can children and young people be included in shaping their online safety plans?

How often is online safety integrated into the discussion and planning of Care Teams?

How can Jordan's care team ensure they adjust their approach to online safety to meet his current and future developmental and relational needs?

Workforce

Key message

Staff and carers must be trained and supported in online safety. Digital literacy, reflective practice, and clear organisational policies equip professionals to navigate complex online risks effectively.

Training

As we have emphasised throughout this practice guide, **children and young people's online world is as real and significant as their offline experiences.** Training ensures that staff and carers have the **knowledge, confidence, and skills** to provide the **support, guidance, and protection** needed to help children and young people navigate digital spaces safely.

> *"All agencies providing services to children have a duty to understand e-safety issues, recognising their role in helping children to remain safe online while also supporting adults who care for children"*
> *(Becta, 2008)*

The complex and constantly evolving nature of the online world requires staff and carers to feel **confident** in their ability to:

- **Educate, support, and empower** children and young people to navigate online spaces safely.

- **Recognise and respond to the additional vulnerabilities** of children in out-of-home care, considering the impact of trauma and past experiences.

- **Develop trusting relationships** where children and young people feel comfortable seeking support about their online lives.

- **Identify and assess risks,** taking proactive steps to minimise harm.

- **Work collaboratively** with all key adults in a child's life—including carers, educators, family members, and community networks—to ensure consistent support.

Ensuring a safe and professional approach to online safety

While supporting young people's online safety, it is equally important that **carers and staff uphold their own responsibilities** in creating a safe and respectful digital environment. This includes:

- ✓ **Applying safety protocols when communicating with young people online** – Ensuring all interactions follow professional boundaries, are transparent, and align with organisational policies.

- ✓ **Maintaining appropriate boundaries** – Being mindful of the power imbalance in professional relationships and avoiding any digital interactions that could be misinterpreted or cause harm.

- ✓ **Creating a culture of consent** – Seeking informed consent from young people before taking or sharing photos of them, and ensuring they understand where and how images may be used.

- ✓ **Leading by example** – Demonstrating respectful and responsible online behaviour, as young people often model the digital practices of adults around them.

By prioritising these practices, carers and staff not only **reduce potential risks** but also build **trust and accountability**, reinforcing young people's right to safety, privacy, and respect—both online and offline.

Practice reflection

Does your organisation provide **regular training** on online safety for staff and carers?

How is the **impact of training monitored and evaluated?**

Where do you source information on online safety, and how is it shared within your team?

Is there a **consistent approach** to online safety within your team or organisation?

Have you received training on your organisation's social media policies and Code of Conduct? Do you understand your responsibilities in managing digital communication with children and young people?

Is online safety an ongoing part of supervision and practice discussions?

What practice resources are available to support your work in this area?

Support resources

Social media for personnel – Practice Guide: Centre for Excellence in Therapeutic Care

Raising Children Network – Offers expert-reviewed resources on online safety, digital wellbeing, and technology use for different age groups.

Webinars for parents and carers | eSafety Commissioner

Practice reflection

Developing a **learning culture through reflective practice** drives continuous improvement, enhances outcomes for children and young people, and supports the well-being of staff and carers.

Reflective practice enables staff and carers to:

- **Step back and critically review their responses** to children and young people, analysing needs and considering alternative approaches.

- **Identify gaps in skills and knowledge,** helping to direct learning and improve practice.

- **Examine communication and relationships,** strengthening collaboration and teamwork.

- **Evaluate decision-making,** ensuring well-reasoned and justifiable practice.

- **Adopt a questioning approach,** fostering adaptability and problem-solving.

- **Develop emotional intelligence,** including self-regulation, resilience, empathy, and perseverance.

- **Enhance stress resilience** and overall well-being (Macnamara, N. and Mitchell, J., 2019)

Reflective practice provides an opportunity to explore:

✓ ethical issues that arise in relations to supporting and protecting children and young people online such as balancing rights to privacy

✓ practice dilemmas regarding online safety

✓ shared approaches to risk identification and management

✓ the impact on staff and carers of caring for and supporting children and young people engaging in risk taking behaviour online.

Practice reflection

Does your organisation provide opportunities for reflective practice?

What opportunities do you currently have to explore practice dilemmas with children and young people's online world?

How can you and your colleagues create a safe space for reflective practice to occur?

Support resources

Reflective Practice – Practice Guide: Centre for Excellence in Therapeutic Care

Reflection and planning tool | eSafety Commissioner

Organisation

Key message

Organisations have a duty to implement strong policies, procedures, and safeguards. A whole-of-organisation approach ensures a consistent, proactive response to online safety across care settings.

Policies and procedures

When organisations are planning projects involving the use of social media and digital technology, they need to understand the environment in which they are working in order to reduce the risks to children and young people.

Since social media presents new ways of communicating that we are still learning to navigate, it is not surprising that our understanding and uses are constantly changing. One of the greatest challenges of social media is the way that they blur professional and personal identities. Determining best practice in an organisational setting – and navigating the layers of identity that different stakeholders hold – can be difficult. But it is essential, in order to prioritise the safety and welfare of young people and to provide staff and carers with clear guidelines for use (Australian Childhood Foundation, 2020).

Practice reflection

Does your organisation provide opportunities for **online communication** between staff/carers and children/young people?

What **guidelines or policies** support this communication?

What **training or support** do staff and carers receive on engaging with children and young people online?

What are the **benefits and risks** of digital communication?

Have there been c**hallenges or unintended consequences**? How were they managed?

The **National Principles for Child Safe Organisations** recognise the importance of safe physical and online environments to promote the safety and wellbeing of all children and young people.

Online safety risks that your organisation may have to deal with include (Child Safe Checklist):

- **Online abuse,** including bullying, non-consensual sharing of intimate images, image-based abuse, online grooming, online exploitation and abuse, or unwanted online contact

- **Technology-facilitated child sexual abuse and exploitation,** including online grooming, coercion, and harmful sexual behaviours involving digital platforms.

- **Exposure to explicit, violent, or otherwise inappropriate content,** either intentionally or accidentally.

- **Data breaches and privacy risks,** including misuse of personal information.

- The uploading of content by adults or children and young people featuring children and young people without informed consent

- **Age-inappropriate access to online spaces and content,** increasing exposure to harm

Organisations must acknowledge and proactively address the risks of child sexual abuse and exploitation in digital environments, ensuring that **policies and procedures explicitly address online grooming, image-based abuse, and the misuse of technology in harmful sexual behaviours.**

By ensuring that staff, carers, and young people understand these risks and have clear reporting pathways and safeguards, organisations can create safer online environments while empowering children and young people to navigate digital spaces with confidence.

Developing a strong online safety policy

Out-of-home care providers must have **clear and comprehensive social media and online safety policies.** A strong **vision for online safety** should:

- Recognise **children and young people's right to engage** in the online world.

- Balance **opportunities for connection with protections against harm.**

- Ensure the **organisation's responsibility to create safe digital environments.**

Policies should reflect safe and ethical online practices for children, young people, staff, and carers, linking to existing policies on child safety, behaviour management, anti-bullying, and the **National Principles for Child Safe Organisations.** These should be developed with input from staff, carers, children, young people, and families

Key policy considerations

The table below represents **critical considerations** for developing an online safety or social media policy. Answering these questions will give your organisation a snapshot of its online issues and risks, and signpost required policies, procedures, and actions.

☐	Does your organisation allow access to the internet for children and young people on its premises?
☐	Does your organisation allow the use of social media, e-mail, instant messages, and other digital technologies to communicate with each other, including children and young people?
☐	Do staff and/or carers consider how to keep children safe when using devices with them or around them?
☐	What type of devices are in use and who do they belong to? Are children and young people allowed to bring their devices into the organisation?
☐	Does your organisation provide digital devices for use by children and young people on or outside the organisation's premises?
☐	How is individual and/or group privacy being managed? What has consent been given for?
☐	Does your organisation allow the use of personal and/or professional digital devices?

☐	Does your organisation allow photos or videos of children and young people to be taken and published online? How are these shared, published, stored and managed?
☐	How will illegal, inappropriate or harmful content online be prevented?
☐	Do children and young people know who can they can tell and/or how to report if they experience online harm or abuse?
☐	Does the organisation have an online safety policy written in plain English?
☐	Are children, young people, staff, and carers involved in policy development?
☐	Who is responsible for coordinating online safety in the organisation to ensure that best practice is developed, implemented, and updated?
☐	Do all services have acceptable use policies for children, young people, carers, and staff? Have staff and carers signed an acceptable use policy or a Code of Conduct? See the example in Appendix 3.
☐	Is the application of these policies monitored? Are they kept up to date with changing issues and technologies?
☐	Does the organisation use data effectively to assess the impact of online safety practice and how this informs strategy?
☐	Are the children and young people who use your services aware of their responsibilities for staying safe when online? Are they aware of their responsibilities to others? Do they know who to speak to if they encounter problems online or accidentally access inappropriate materials?
☐	What are the procedures for reporting a child or young person who may experiencing online harm. Are staff aware of their responsibilities in responding to certain types of incidents? How are incidents escalated? Do you report incidents to the eSafety Commission?
☐	Who is responsible for monitoring online safety measures?

Support resources

Best Practice Framework for Online Safety Education – this framework has been developed by eSafety for use in schools to support a consistent national approach. The framework includes:

- advocacy of children's rights and the positive framing of online safety

- features of school environments that increase the likelihood of online safety education having desired effects – for example, system-wide approaches, policies and procedures

- online safety education content – including information about digital citizenship, social and emotional learning, specific risks, and help seeking.

Keeping children safe online in communities | eSafety Commissioner

Creating a family tech agreement

Appendix 3 – Acceptable use agreement

Infrastructure and technology

The technological infrastructure that an organisation uses plays a key role in protecting children and young people. Organisations need to consider which technical solutions can be implemented to lessen and manage risks to children, young people, staff, and carers.

Critical considerations for the development and maintenance of appropriate infrastructure and technology are represented in the table below.

☐	Are there minimum standards for technical safety and security in all settings where children may access the internet, digital and mobile technologies?
☐	Do you have filtering systems in place to prevent access to inappropriate material?
☐	Is the organisation using accredited Internet Service Providers?
☐	What specifications are in place for the purchase, upgrade and/or replacement of digital technologies and equipment?
☐	How are technical standards monitored? Are local issues centrally reviewed for evidence of emerging problems or trends?
☐	Is there a regular risk assessment of your digital infrastructure?

Support resources

Parental controls | How to keep your child safe (esafety.gov.au) practical tips for setting up filters and controls

Appendices

Appendix 1 Glossary

eSafety maintains an up to date glossary of terms that provides a comprehensive reference of key terminology regarding the online environment

Appendix 2 Chat Slang

Language used in online chats, messaging apps, and social media evolves rapidly. New slang and abbreviations emerge frequently, making it important for carers and professionals to stay informed about commonly used terms.

Below is a general guide to some chat slang that may be relevant when engaging with young people online. However, slang changes quickly, and meanings can shift depending on context.

CHAT SLANG

182-
I hate you

2mz or 2moro -
Tomorrow

9, CD9 or Code 9-
Parents are nearby

1337 –
Elite

420 -
Marijuana

121 -
Let's chat in a private message

2nte -
Tonight

8 –
Oral sex

99-
Parents are gone

143 -
I love you

Banana -
Code word for penis

1174 –
Nude club

GGP-
Gotta Go Pee

ASL –
Age/Sex/Location

GOMB-
Get off my back

FOMO –
Fear of Missing Out

HAK -
Hugs And Kisses

GNOC –
Get Naked on Cam

JK –
Just kidding

GYPO -
Get Your Pants Off

KITTY -
Code word for vagina

J/O –
Jerking Off

IDKWTD-
I don't know what to do

KOTL –
Kiss On the Lips

NMU -
Not Much, You?

IMEZRU –
I Am Easy, Are You?

NP -
No Problem -or- Nosy Parents

NM -
Never Mind -or- Nothing Much
-or- Nice Move

NIFOC –
Nude In Front of The Computer

NEW
NUB or NUUB-
New person to a site or game

MPFB -
My Personal F*** Buddy

MOS -
Mom Over Shoulder

MUSM-
Miss You So Much

See: https://securingtomorrow.mcafee.com/consumer/family-safety/2018-texting-slang-update-decode-teen-saying-online/ for more examples

Appendix 3   Acceptable Use Agreement

*Sample template to be adapted as required.

Child/Young Person's Acceptable Use Agreement

This agreement reflects the voices of young people and their vision for a safer, more supportive internet. It is designed to help create a positive online experience that respects our choices while keeping us safe.

When using the internet on any device (computer, laptop, mobile phone, gaming console, or other web-enabled device), I agree to:

- [x] Check in regularly with my carer or staff about what I'm doing online and how it makes me feel.

- [x] Keep others safe by not sharing inappropriate content and getting permission before posting about them.

- [x] Protect myself by being cautious with online friendships and thinking carefully about what I share.

- [x] Avoid harmful content or online spaces that promote dangerous or illegal activities, including violence, crime, or discrimination.

- [x] Keep my personal information private, including my full name, age, address, photos, school details, phone number, and places I visit.

- [x] Ask for permission from my carer or staff before sharing personal details online.

- [x] Keep my passwords and usernames secret and secure.

- [x] Block and report anyone who upsets me.

- [x] Tell my carer, staff, or case manager if I see something upsetting or if someone asks to meet me.

- [x] Never meet someone in person that I've only spoken to online unless my carer, staff, or case manager approves and a responsible adult comes with me.

- [x] Be respectful and never use the internet to upset, harass, or harm others.

- [x] Not download illegal or harmful content, including material showing abuse, exploitation, or extreme violence.

- [x] Take breaks when asked.

- [x] Work with my carer or staff to create a set of home internet rules that suit my needs.

- [x] Speak up if I feel my internet use is too restricted—I will talk to my carer, staff, or case manager if I feel that monitoring or controls are stopping me from accessing things I need.

My voice matters

Young people should be part of the conversation about online safety. If there's something important to me about staying safe and happy online, I can add my own rule:

✔ ➡ _____

I understand that my internet use may be **monitored, filtered, or restricted** to help keep me safe, but I want adults to listen to my concerns, support me in making good choices, and help me feel confident online.

Child/Your Person's Name: _____   Signature _____

Carer's Name: _____   Signature _____

Staff Member's Name: _____   Signature _____

Case Manager's Name: _____   Signature _____

Date: _____

Appendix 4   Consultation outcomes summary

Consultation Methodology

The focus of the consultation process was on how children and young people in out-of-home care, direct care staff, Case Managers and Therapeutic Specialists have been navigating the online environment with a specific focus on case examples, risk awareness/identification, mitigation and management.

A series of semi-structured interviews were held via zoom with staff and carers working in foster, kinship and residential care across Victoria, ACT, Tasmania, NSW and Western Australia. This included Case Managers, direct care workers and Therapeutic Specialists from a representative sample of agencies including:

Agency	State
Australian Childhood Foundation	ACT, VIC, NSW, TAS, WA, NSW
Allambie Care	NSW
Anglicare Victoria	VIC
Oz Child	VIC, ACT
Uniting	VIC
Mallee Accommodations Support Program	VIC
Baptcare	TAS
Barnardos	TAS
South Coast Aboriginal Medical Service	ACT
Southern Family Life Youth Services	NSW
Catholic Care	NSW
MacKillop Family Services	NSW
Marist 180	NSW

The outcomes of the consultation process have been analysed into key themes with recommendations for the focus of resources to better equip out-of-home care staff to understand, mitigate and manage risk.

Key Themes to Emerge from Consultations

Staff in out-of-home care hold a range of concerns about the online environment for children and young people in out-of-home care

The common themes staff identified relating to children and young people's use of the online environment included:

- Cyber Bullying (internal to place of residence)

- Cyber Bullying (external to place of residence)

- Sexting (receiving and sending)

- Online Gambling

- Accessing Pornography

- Accessing Pay Day Loans

- Being duped by online scams

- Fraudulent credit card use

- Child Sexual Exploitation (internal and external to place of residence)

- Children and young people uploading images/ videos of themselves on sites such as Tok-tok and concerns that these maybe used in child sexual exploitation or pornographic materials

- Unsupervised contact with family members which could be risky due to concerns of abuse.

Whilst many of the concerns such as sexting and accessing pornography were known and identified in the ACWA Outcomes and Co-design Workshop, some of the issues were new and less familiar. These issues centred around young people accessing pay day loans and being susceptible to online scams.

There is a need for resources to raise awareness and increase financial literacy so that young people particularly those transitioning to independent living are not lured into taking on loans or scams that appear as easy money but can lead to long term debt and hardship.

Some young people in out-of-home care have increased vulnerability

In discussing concerns about online safety, two groups of young people were identified as being particularly vulnerable. The first group related to young women with an intellectual disability who seemed more susceptible to online sexual exploitation in terms of sending of naked photos of themselves. These young women due to their trauma histories and limited cognitive capacities struggle to discern when they are being exploited as well as reaching out and seeking help early.

The second group identified was young males who were exploring their sexual identity particularly in terms of being gay/bisexual and had been accessing pornography to learn more. There is limited information available about what healthy heterosexual relationships look like, let alone how this may be different if you might be considering a non-normative relationship. There is a need for education about healthy relationships and potential dangers of online environment which encompasses young people's experience, developmental stage and is provided in a flexible way.

Importance of language in identifying risks and responding in a proportionate manner

Foster care, residential care workers and therapeutic specialists supporting staff at times, use language to describe children and young people's behaviour in the online environment which may contribute to further shaming and not being able to accurately assess and respond to risk. Examples of this include referring to young women being sexually exploited as "prostitution "or young people who distribute sexual images of other young people as "perpetrators or offenders". This language can lead to risk being minimised or an overreaction rather than a proportionate response to what has occurred. This language may also contribute to young people feeling shamed and less likely to seek help.

There is limited preventative work undertaken in relation to education of young people regarding the online environment and mitigating potential risk

Case example

A young woman who is sending semi-nude images of herself to someone she considered was her boyfriend. Some of her friends became concerned about the images being sent and alerted care staff to their concerns.

Once staff became aware of the concerns, they set up a safety plan including talking to the young person about the potential risks, alerting police and child protection authorities and shutting down her account.

However, the images sent could not be retrieved as they had been sent to an overseas address or the person involved whom they believe was an adult could not be prosecuted because he was overseas.

There is limited work done to educate and alert children and young people to the potential downside and risks associated with online behaviour.

Both in foster care and residential care, the way that online risk with children and young people is understood and managed is usually post the problematic behaviour emerging rather than any preventative efforts undertaken to mitigate potential risk.

The limited preventative work being carried out within foster and residential care leaves young people vulnerable to online harm. Research indicates that whilst the online world is an important connection for young people in care, they are seven times more likely to encounter risky situations than their non vulnerable peers (internet matters.org 2021). If we wait for the risk to occur, then we are exposing young people to potential for ongoing abuse.

Staff lack confidence to have conversations with children and young people about risks

Some staff indicated that it was difficult to have conversations about the online environment with young people for a range of reasons: lack of existing strong relationship with the child/young person; lack of knowledge and understanding of risks; raising online safety when a problem had not been identified. Other staff/direct carers were unsure about what to say and felt that they did not have skills or knowledge to have informed and ongoing conversations with children and young people.

Whilst there was a great deal of information available around safe internet use, this was not collated and was not specifically focused on the needs of children and young people in care, at times resulting in inappropriate responses to children and young people.

Attempts to address online risks often lead to conflict in relationships between staff/carers and children and young people

Many staff reported that when carers, particularly in the foster care, tried to initiate conversations and preventative measures, this was met with a lot of resistance from young people, leading conflict within the relationship and at times a placement breakdown would result. This was also an issue identified within the ACWA co design workshop with carers requesting support in managing the situation.

Concern about the use of restrictive practices in responding to risks online create challenges for responding effectively to online risks

Case example

A young woman aged 14 was conducting online relationship with older males. The carers and foster care workers response to this was to shut down the apps the young person was using and to regularly check her browser history.

The young person continued to find ways to seeing males leading to increased levels of surveillance and conflict and ultimately a break down in the placement. The young woman now lives in residential care and there continues to be concerns that she is being sexually exploited online.

Staff/carers may not be aware of the risk occurring as young people may not speak up due to shame or fear of potential repercussions such as loss of privileges. Restrictive practice appeared more likely to occur in foster care than residential care. Foster care workers felt that when carers lack the confidence to navigate technology or it conflicted with their own values, then they found it more difficult to think flexibly or creatively on how to manage the situation and were more likely to be rigid in their approach.

Staff in residential care are less likely to view a young person's browser history or confiscate phones as this would be viewed as a restrictive practice and potential breach of a young person's privacy. However, this often resulted in no monitoring of the risks facing the young person.

Effective work regarding online safety begins with the quality of relationships between staff/carers and the children and young people

One of the key factors highlighted was the need for strong relationships between the staff/carers and the child/young person when considering online safety. A stronger, trusting relationship meant that staff/carers were more likely to effectively navigate the challenges and complexities facing children and young people in the online environment.

A collaborative approach between staff/carers and children/young people that understands and respects a young people's knowledge of and need for technology is needed. This was also highlighted in the eSafety youth consult as being useful in engaging young people's co-operation with online safety. A stronger relationship also meant that young people were more likely to seek help from staff/carers earlier when they encountered difficulties online and felt assured that any consequences would be proportionate to what had occurred.

Workers, particularly in residential care, revealed that it was difficult to develop these relationships with young people due to the rostered staffing model, staff turnover and the short-term nature of some placements. These young people are the most vulnerable in care, often having lost connections with key adults, thus there is a critical need to continue to build relationships so young people are more willing to engage staff/carers in help-seeking.

Lack of organisational policies, processes and training to guide practice

Most workers in residential, foster and kinship care indicated there was a lack of organisational policies procedures, assessment frameworks and training to guide them in how to navigate and support young people's safety online. Workers indicated that in the foster and kinship care they were often guided by what the carers wanted rather than any agency guidelines to provide a framework for responding.

Whilst it is important for safety and prevention planning to be tailored to the developmental needs of the child or young person, it is also necessary for clear agency policies, guidelines and training to support high quality and consistent practice regarding online harms.

There were no clear processes of assessment, planning or Care Team/multidisciplinary practice with regard to online safety and risk mitigation and management. No staff consulted were able to identify any tools or decision-making aides to support practice with children and young people re online risk and safety.

Foster and residential care workers wanted further training on technology use and implementing relevant filtering and monitoring devices particularly for younger children who may accidentally stumble on harmful content. This was also a recommendation from the ACWA co-design workshop.

'Harm minimization' a desired approach to managing risk

Many foster and residential care workers talked about a desire to adopt a 'harm minimization' approach when working with children and young people regarding online safety. Such an approach was perceived as allowing children and young people to benefit from the online environment (perceived benefits included connection to peers and family, and opportunities to explore their identity) whilst increasing awareness of the risks of the online world and providing support and guidance in dealing with difficulties.

A 'harm minimization' approach was conceptualized as supporting children and young people to develop skills to navigate the online world safely and prepare them for independent living. This approach was seen to avoid children and young people from feeling shamed or judged when problems occur or fear that they may be banned from social media or have their digital devices confiscated. This is also likely to increase the likelihood of young people seeking help, reduce tension within carer/child relationship and lead to better outcomes for children and young people in care.

'Harm minimization' can operate well alongside a preventative approach to risk. However, a 'harm minimization' approach will require further nuancing in terms of age and stage of development, agency policy and guidelines and relevant legislation.

A specialised helpline would support good practice given the rapidly changing nature of the online environment

Some workers suggested that a helpline would be useful to get more up to date and personalised advice, given the rapid changes in technology. The helpline may also provide advice to workers about the where they could access the relevant information required.

Recommendations

1. There is a need for training resources for out-of-home care staff and carers to raise awareness and understanding about the online environment for children and young people.This will be addressed in part through the training programs for carers developed by ACWA as part of their current project.

2. Practice by out-of-home care staff regarding online safety and risk requires urgent attention to:

   - Policy guidance for the development of organisation level approaches to online safety that promote consistency, transparency and accountability.

   - Practice guidance and tools to support clear risk and need assessment and planning to effectively respond to the needs of children and young people in out-of-home care with regard to online risk and safety.

   - Practice guidance with regard to intervention strategies across the continuum of prevention, mitigation and remediation in addressing online risk and safety.

3.   Resources and tools must:

- Be developmentally sensitive and trauma informed.

- Support the use of language that does not serve to stigmatise or marginalise children and young people, minimise or exaggerate risk.

- Position relationships between care staff, children and young people as key vehicles for promoting open and trusting relationships within which help-seeking and conversations about online safety and risk can occur.

- Highlight the benefits as well as risks of their online lives to children and young people in out of home care.

- Build worker confidence and capacity to support children and young people in regard to both their online and real world lives.

- Explore the range of needs that the online world is meeting for children and young people and consider how these may be better met in the 'real world' e.g. relationships and connection, access to money and financial means, online scams.

- Build children and young people's capacity to understand safety and risk in the online environment as many children and young people in out-of-home care have limited ability and or experience in experiencing safety and assessing risk.

- Build children and young people's financial literacy and awareness of risks related to online financial scams, payday loans etc.

- Include the needs and wishes of children and young people and balance rights to privacy with safety considerations.

- Use restrictive practices only as a last resort

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