STUDENTS, CYBERSAFETY, RELATIONSHIPS AND LIFE EDUCATION

A literature review

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CONTEXT

With the support of McAfee, the world’s largest dedicated security technology company, Life Education is expanding its program to specifically address the knowledge, skills and attitudes that children need for their online experiences to be safe, positive and constructive. This will see new and contemporary program content developed relating to core life skills such as building positive and respectful relationships, effective communication, and decision making in social situations. These skills are fundamental components for promoting cyber safety and positive cyber citizenship.

This program content will also provide support for schools to implement the National Safe Schools Framework (2011 revision) and address many of the core aspects of prevention identified in the NSSF such as school-connectedness, positive relationships and the development of empathy, pro-social values and social and emotional skills.

Life Education will incorporate this new content into its existing program structure that sees it working closely with schools, year on year, supporting the classroom teacher in their promotion of student safety and wellbeing.

This paper has been prepared to explain the evidence base guiding the development of this new program content. The author, Dr Helen McGrath, is a leading psychologist and educator with a particular interest and expertise in mental health, social and emotional skills, relationships and cybersafety. She is an Adjunct Professor in the School of Education, RMIT University, a part-time senior lecturer in the School of Education, Deakin University and a counseling psychologist in part-time private practice. She is a member of the National Centre Against Bullying and has been involved in a range of major government projects such as the Victorian Education Department’s Anti-Bullying Review (2005), the Australian Government’s Revision of the National Safe Schools Framework (2011) and the Australian Government’s Scoping Study on Student Wellbeing (2008). She is the author or co-author of 22 books for educators, psychologists and the general community.

Should you wish to discuss any aspect of this paper please contact the National Office of Life Education.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Digital media has become a significant and predominantly positive aspect of the education, leisure and social lives of most of today’s children and young people.

- The use of digital media also poses some risks to the safety and wellbeing of children and young people. The most harmful of these appears to be cyberbullying.

- Other Contact Risks include exploitive communication, sexting, impersonation, humiliation via doctored images and under-age enrolment on social media sites.

- Content Risks include exposure to material that is inappropriate, misleading, unacceptable, illegal or health-compromising material.

- Commerce Risks include exposure to inappropriate advertising, gambling solicitation and financial deception.

- Children and young people need opportunities to learn the skills and values that will enable them to be safe online and become good digital citizens.

- The middle and upper primary years of schooling represent a sensitive and timely period for introducing students to these skills and values.

- Life Education’s new program content will support the class teacher in this regard, providing an opportunity for young students to learn and practice a set of relevant skills and values (technical, thinking, emotional and social) that are fundamental to the promotion of cyber safety and positive cyber citizenship.
**INTRODUCTION**

Digital media has become a significant part of the lives of most of today’s young people from their early childhood years through to their adult years. They use it for finding information and playing games. As they move into their early teens they see it as an essential component of their social life, their personal relationships and their sense of identity (ACMA, 2009). Acquiring a personalised mobile phone (and it’s accessories) and joining online social networking sites have become early and significant developmental milestones towards adulthood (Belsey, 2008).

Rideout et al. (2010) conducted a large and comprehensive study to investigate the amount and nature of recreational media use among young people (aged 8-18) in the USA. They identified that young people aged between 8 and 18 spent an average of seven hours a day across seven days a week engaged with media (i.e. reading books, watching TV, playing video and computer games, listening to recorded music, visiting websites, speaking on the phone and communicating on social networking sites). The researchers estimated that these young people actually managed to pack approximately ten hours of media content into those seven hours a day by multi-tasking.

Today’s students will be the workforce of tomorrow and will need advanced skills for working with increasingly sophisticated technology that will contribute to Australia’s long-term economic and social wellbeing (Department of Broadband, Communications & the Digital Economy, 2011).

The 2008 Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008) highlighted the importance of teaching ICT literacy within the classroom, affirming that:

>‘rapid and continuing advances in information and communication technologies (ICT) are changing the ways people share, use, develop and process information and technology. In this digital age, young people need to be highly skilled in the use of ICT. While schools already employ these technologies in learning, there is a need to increase their effectiveness significantly over the next decade (P6)’.

**DIGITAL LITERACY**

A good digital citizen is one who:

- is a confident and capable user of a variety of forms of ICT
- uses technologies to participate effectively in educational, cultural and economic activities
- uses and develops critical thinking skills about online material and dynamics
- understands and uses the language, symbols, and texts of digital technologies
- is aware of the range of ICT challenges, including the need to self-protect and stay safe online, and can manage them effectively
- uses ICT to collaborate with, and relate socially to others positively and respectfully
- demonstrates integrity and ethical behaviour in their use of ICT and acknowledges the rights of others

(Adapted from Netsafe, 2010)
CHILDREN IN THE MIDDLE AND UPPER PRIMARY YEARS

Most young children enter primary school with some simple ICT skills. By the time they reach Year 3 they are starting to use ICT more extensively and need more school-based opportunities to learn and practice those technical, thinking, emotional and social skills that are the core components of ‘digital literacy’.

Increasingly young people appear to be spending more of their time using all forms of ICT when they are out of school than they do when they are in school (Friedman & Coates, 2009). A major Australian report (ACMA, 2009) summarised responses from a sample of 3000+ Australian parents (between 2007-2009) and identified the following patterns in the media use of young people:

- 61% of young people aged 8-11 years used the internet at home and spent an average of 30 minutes online each day; they mainly used it to play games online (24%) and do homework (23%)
- 83% of young people aged 12-14 years used the internet at home for an average of one hour and 32 minutes online each day; they used it mainly for doing homework (45%) and chatting online (41%)
- 88% of young people aged 15-17 years used the internet at home and spent an average of two hours and 24 minutes online each day; they mainly used it for doing homework (38%), chatting online (48%) and visiting social network websites (44%)
- The use of mobile phones increased significantly when students were of high school age. Only 11% of young people aged 8-11 years used a mobile phone to make or receive calls (Compared to 42% of 12-14 year-olds) and 7% used one to send or receive text messages (compared to 45% of 12-14 year-olds)
- Similarly, the use of instant messaging (on either a mobile phone or using a computer) and emails (from a computer) increased with age. Only 10% of young people aged 8-11 years used instant messaging, whereas 41% of 12-14 year-olds did so. Only 9 %of young people aged 8-11 years sent or received emails via computer whereas 41% of 12-14 year-olds did so.

Most researchers agree that the internet is perceived by young people as a normal and healthy form of communication that helps them to stay connected to their peer group and participate in an increasingly open, inclusive and collaborative online community (Collin et al., 2011). The challenge for schools is finding ways to embrace these new technologies as positive tools for teaching, learning and building relationships whilst at the same time identifying and addressing the safety risks attached to their use (McGrath, 2009).
New and ever-improving technologies can be used to build positive peer relationships but also to enhance student engagement and learning e.g:

- Students can use mobile phones to take photographs during a science experiment or nature walk to incorporate into a report or project; they use blogs, forums and video-sharing sites to enhance writing skills and creativity
- Schools can install customised online social network platforms such as ‘Ning’ to create a community in which students can communicate, collaborate on a project and discuss/share their work with each other through the use of blogs and forums
- Email can be used by students to communicate with students in other schools and/or other countries as an opportunity for language development as well as research
- Students can use a wiki to plan a school event
- Students can create an e-portfolio, a computer program, a spreadsheet to keep track of money raised for charity or develop creative products using multimedia and multimodal programs such as Digital Story Telling or Claymation animations

The available evidence (although still small and not always consistent) suggests that the incorporation of ICT into learning activities has a positive effect on students in terms of their motivation and engagement with learning (e.g. Friedman & Coates, 2009) and their learning outcomes (e.g. Balanskat et al.;2006; Condie & Munro, 2007; Cox et al.,2003; Waxman et al., 2003). Additionally, a review of research studies by Condie & Munro (2007) identified other positive outcomes such as increased student collaboration, more persistence and increases in on-task behavior. Higher order thinking is more likely to occur when students collaborate or discuss their ideas and views in small groups where there are opportunities to debate, challenge and see multiple perspectives (Ashton & James, 2008).

However there are also concerns about the use of ICT by young people that need to be addressed. For example, at the same time as they are discovering the satisfaction that can be derived from being part of this online culture, they are experimenting with risk-taking and moral issues. They are still maturing in their capacity to manage their explorations and make good decisions based on moral and consequential thinking (Bauman, 2007; Berson & Berson, 2005). They are also relatively naïve about the power and implications of online communication.

As young people increase their use of ICT they increase their risk of being exposed to negative online experiences (Dooley et al, 2009, p13). The Summary Report From the Office of the Victorian Privacy Commissioner’s Youth Advisory Group (2012) identified that there are children as young as 10 years of age who have engaged in ‘sexting’.

This data provides support for the proposal that that the most sensitive period for teaching young people about the risks attached to the use of ICT is likely to be between 8 and 12 years. The important values, emotional skills and social skills that contribute to cybersafe behaviour can be taught more effectively if the teaching starts at an early age.
Literature Review: STUDENTS, CYBERSAFETY, RELATIONSHIPS AND LIFE EDUCATION

CYBERSAFETY

Cybersafety can be defined as the use of a set of precautionary policies, practices and actions taken by individuals, schools and communities to prevent harm to users of technologies within the school community and promote safe and responsible behaviour (eSmart, n.d). Ogilvie (2000) has argued that life on the internet is a precursor to real-world behaviours and that real-life behaviour always involves some elements of risk. Therefore online risks need to be viewed in the context of the overwhelmingly positive role that the internet plays in young people’s lives and should be addressed in an educative rather than restrictive way (Inspire Foundation Submission,).

The British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (Becta, 2006) proposed several categories of potential risks associated with using ICT. The most relevant of these are risks related to content, contact and commerce.

Content Risks

This category includes the risk of intentional or unintentional exposure to:

- inappropriate material (e.g. violent video-clips)
- misleading and inaccurate information (e.g. websites that deny the danger of specific drugs)
- socially unacceptable material (e.g. pornography and websites that recruit for ‘hate’ groups)
- illegal material (e.g pirated movies and songs)
- health-compromising material (e.g. online sites that promote smoking or substance use, pro-anorexia websites and websites that support self-harm)

Contact Risks

This category includes risks such as:

- receiving communication from individuals who seek to groom young people with a view to sexual assault or exploitation
- being cyberbullied or cyberbullying others
- being pressured to send or post personal intimate photographs which are then shared (e.g. texted via mobile phone or posted online) with others without permission (‘sexting’).
- uploading a normal photo which is then digitally altered by others in a demeaning or humiliating way
- signing up to a social networking site despite being under the age limit for the site
- being impersonated by someone else online in a way that is detrimental to reputation
Commerce Risks

This category includes risks such as:

- receiving inappropriate advertising that entices young people to sign up for plans or deals that are either bogus or exorbitant
- being exposed to gambling services
- financial scams or identity theft entice young people to provide personal identity and security information for them to steal, sell or otherwise misuse for their own ends

The most harmful of the above categorized risks appears to be cyberbullying - the use of ICT for the purpose of bullying others. Overviews of research are clear that bullying occurs in every type of school, and that there are significant negative physical and mental health outcomes associated with any type of bullying (Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008; Carter, 2011). Bullying can start at any age, even during the pre-school years, but most research studies identify the ‘peak times’ as Years 5 and 6 in primary school and the ‘transition’ year in which students move from primary school to secondary school (which varies by state). As children get older cyberbullying starts to increase because they have easier access to technology (Smith et al., 2008). Current research has identified cyberbullying as a potentially more harmful form of bullying, especially given the size of the potential audience and hence the amplification of the humiliation that is often involved (e.g. Smith et al., 2008). Dooley et al. (2009) have also noted that more people are potentially likely to participate in cyberbullying as the size of this ‘group’ is not limited by school boundaries as is usually the case in offline bullying. Additionally, initiating and/or taking part in any type of bullying of other children at school has been identified as a strong predictor of delinquency, aggression & violence and later criminal behavior (Bender & Losel, 2011; Farrington & Ttofi, 2011; Herrenkohl et al., 2007; Herrenkohl et al., 2009; Pepler et al., 2008).

The sexual grooming and solicitation of children and teenagers is ‘possibly the most publicly debated, emotive and largely misunderstood risk associated with the internet’ (Dooley et al., 2009, p27). Although the potential danger to young people from online sexual predators is real and serious, the situation appears to be more complex and less frightening than originally thought. Although there appears to be very little scientific literature about the use of the internet to groom young children for sexual exploitation, sexual predation of very young children by paedophiles (i.e. those who are sexually attracted to children under 12 years of age) appears to be relatively rare (e.g. Wolak et al., 2008). Internet predators are mostly the same age as their targets or approximately 5- 10 years older. They tend to target young adolescents (who have greater access to technology than younger children) and usually use seduction and romance rather than deception and coercion. Young people may be more responsible and self-protective in the way they use technology than previous studies have suggested and hence less likely to be targeted by internet predators.
SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SKILLS

Young people need a repertoire of values, emotional skills, social skills and higher-order thinking skills to navigate cybersafety risks. In summary, if children are to manage the risks attached to the use of ICT they need opportunities to learn and practice:

- pro-social values such as support, compassion, respect, honesty and acceptance of differences
- emotional skills such as self-respect, impulse control (e.g. to help them ‘think before they click’), managing emotions and empathy
- social skills such as cooperation, sharing, managing conflict, making and keeping friends, supporting others, and using good manners online
- Higher-order thinking skills such as consequential thinking, perspective-taking and critical analysis

Any student can potentially take part in bullying/cyberbullying others (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Pepler et al., 2008) as part of the process of developing their moral values. Most students quickly decide that bullying others is cruel and unfair and they don’t engage in it at all or they tentatively take part in it but soon discover how distressing it is for the person being mistreated and how bad it feels to behave that way towards another person. Observing the distress of others and responding to it with empathy is what inhibits most students from taking part in bullying (Endresen & Olweus, 2001).

A small group of students have more frequent and persistent involvement in bullying. Although these students are not all alike, many research studies have found some consistent trends in the way many of these students think and behave (e.g. Arsenio & Lemerise, 2001; Gendron et al., 2001; Hymmel et al., 2005; Nabuzoka, 2003; Natvig et al., 2001; Poillastri et al., 2010; O’Brennan et al., 2009; Salmivalli, 2001; Pepler et al., 2008, 2008; Swearer & Cary, 2007; Tani et al., 2003). For example they tend to:

- be more egocentric and less considerate of the rights of others
- demonstrate lower levels of moral development than their peers
- endorse the view that using aggression against others is an acceptable way to achieve their own social goals.
- be less empathic, less friendly and less cooperative compared to peers
- have poor impulse control and difficulties with managing anger
- have relatively high self-esteem and an inflated view of themselves but they are often over-reactive and defensive in the face of any criticism or feedback that might ‘deflate’ them
- experience a lot of conflict within their relationships with family and friends but have little confidence about using strategies to respond to this by using non-aggressive strategies
- have limited capacity for thinking about the consequences of their actions
Therefore, it is reasonable to propose that students may be less likely to engage in bullying and cyberbullying if they have opportunities to learn and practice:

- **values** such as friendliness, respect and acceptance of differences
- **emotional skills** such as self-respect, impulse control, anger-management and empathy
- **social skills** such as making friends, conflict management and cooperation
- **thinking skills** such as consequential thinking and perspective-taking

Similarly, any student can become the target of bullying/cyberbullying. He/she may be different in some way (e.g. they do not conform to gender stereotypes or have different preferences or opinions), new to the school or be without social support because their friend has moved to another school. Some students may be targeted because they pose a threat (e.g. by being likable or successful in some way) to the social status of a student who has a pattern of bullying others (NSSF, 2011a; NSSF, 2011b).

However, many research studies have identified some reasonably consistent trends in the way some students who are bullied tend to think and behave (e.g. Analitis et al., 2009; Rodkin & Hodges, 2003; Goldbaum et al., 2006; Wilton et al., 2000; Nansel et al, 2004; Fox & Boulton, 2006; Pellegrini, 2002). For example they tend to:

- lack quality friendships with peers at school (but not necessarily outside school)
- display high levels of emotionality that indicate vulnerability (e.g. look sad or anxious and cry, or become sad or angry easily)
- demonstrate low levels of resilience that also signals vulnerability
- avoid conflict and be socially withdrawn
- be relatively non-assertive
- lack confidence and the skills needed for effectively interacting with peers

Therefore, although it is hard to separate cause and effect in some of the research studies, it seems reasonable to propose that students may be less likely to be the targets of bullying/cyberbullying if they have opportunities to learn and practice:

- **emotional skills** such as self-respect, resilience and managing negative emotions such as sadness, loneliness and anxiety
- **social skills** such as assertiveness, conflict management, conversing and playing games, and making and keeping friends
However it should be noted that teaching social skills in small groups to students who are currently being bullied does not result in the bullying decreasing or stopping (Fox & Boulton, 2003). It appears teaching social and emotional skills to students may be a reasonably effective prevention strategy, but not an effective intervention strategy.

Several research studies (e.g. Barboza et al., 2009; Bear et al., 2003; Roseth et al., 2008) have suggested that lower levels of bullying and higher levels of student well-being are more likely when:

- all students have sound levels of a wide range of social and emotional skills
- teachers promote the values and skills of cooperation by using cooperative learning and cooperative group work
- students experience positive peer relationships
Bystanders

Bullying has been likened to a ‘theatre performance’ that needs an ‘audience’ in order to be successful (Pepler & Craig, 2000). The largest part of the audience for bullying and cyberbullying are the bystanders. Bystanders are those students who either witness, or are aware of, direct bullying or cyberbullying that is occurring. In direct bullying situations it is more likely that a bystander has seen or heard the bullying behaviour or been told about what has been happening. In cyberbullying situations a bystander is more likely to either view the bullying text or images that have been made available to them about someone else or have been told about it.

Bystanders play an important role in the dynamics of any bullying situation (Oh & Hazler, 2009; Tremlow et al., 2004). When bystanders intervene to support a student who is being bullied, the bullying stops in 57% of cases (Hawkins et al., 2001).

Most young people feel angry when another person is picked on, like to see someone standing up for and supporting the targeted person, and feel safer themselves when someone does so (Slee & Rigby, 1993; Kanetsuna et al., 2006). However the reality appears to be that most students don’t intervene or support students who are being bullied, even though they prefer for this to happen and feel that it is the right thing to do (Craig & Pepler, 1997; Craig et al., 2000; O’Connell et al., 1999; Salmivalli, 1999; Slaby, 2005). Many factors have been identified as contributing to their passivity and inaction such as:

- Some are concerned about their own safety and social inclusion (Rigby & Johnson, 2006) and don’t want to draw attention to themselves (Thornberg, 2007)
- If the person isn’t their friend they feel less responsibility to stand up for them
- If there are other bystanders present there is a ‘diffusion of responsibility’ i.e. they feel less personally responsible and expect that someone else will probably do something to help (Salmivalli, 2010). If nobody else does anything either they conclude that it is probably better not to become involved and to keep out of it (Thornberg, 2007)
- They are concerned that their actions could make things worse for the person being bullied (Hazler, 1996)
- They don’t really know the best way to help and don’t feel confident that they could make a difference (Carney, 2000; Hazler, 1996: Oh & Hazler, 2009)
- Some students believe that what is happening is nothing to do with them (Rigby & Johnson, 2006) or conclude that the believe that the person being bullied must deserve it (Rigby & Johnson, 2006) or that what is happening isn’t really all that bad (Thornberg, 2007)
In a cyberbullying situation, almost everyone who receives, sends on, follows up out of curiosity or just knows about what is being repeatedly posted or transmitted is a bystander. Recipients of messages or images that are part of a cyberbullying situation are being deliberately included in the dynamics in order to solicit their endorsement and reinforcement of the harmful actions of the perpetrator. These messages/images can include messages that provide information about how to access, for example, a ‘hate site’, a website that invites people to view a recorded set-up playground fight or a website that encourages people to vote for which of two classmates is the ugliest

This ‘personal inclusion’ in a cyberbullying situation may increase the recipient’s sense of personal responsibility and encourage them to take action in support of the person being targeted, as he/she may be unsure of how many others know about it. Finding a way to support the targeted person could also be easier because a caring online bystander can often do something to help with more anonymity and less exposure than in a more face-to-face bullying situation. For example a caring bystander could:

- phone the person who is the target to let them know about what actions have occurred
- send them a private email or text to reassure them that you recognize that what has been done to them isn’t fair (or you don’t believe or agree with the mean things that have been posted)
- comfort them by responding empathically, ask a teacher to help and/or ask others who may have received it to do the same
- contact trustworthy friends and ask them, if they have received it too, not to send it on to others (even if it has been created to be funny) or follow up on websites etc.

Young people who are more likely to support another person who is being bullied are those who have a higher level of empathy, feel confident about their social abilities (especially assertion), and have a strong sense of social justice. Those who hold the view that bullying is mean, unfair and unacceptable and that intervention is a courageous action to take are also more likely to be supportive (Cappadocia et al., 2012). Therefore it is reasonable to propose that more students would be prepared to support someone who is being bullied/cyberbullied if they have had opportunities to learn and practice:

- values such as fairness, compassion & respect
- emotional skills such as empathy, self-respect and acting with courage
- social skills such as assertiveness and conflict management
CONCLUSION

Digital media has become a significant and predominantly positive aspect of the education, leisure and social lives of most of today’s young people. The use of digital media also poses some risks to the safety and wellbeing of young people.

Young people need opportunities to learn the skills and values that will enable them to be safe online and become good digital citizens. The middle and upper primary years of schooling represent a sensitive and timely period for introducing students to these skills and values.

Life Education is expanding its program to specifically address the knowledge, skills and attitudes that children need for their online experiences to be safe, positive and constructive. This will see new and contemporary program content developed that provides students with the opportunity to learn and practice core life skills such as building positive and respectful relationships, effective communication, and decision making in social situations. These skills are fundamental components for promoting cyber safety and positive cyber citizenship.

This paper has been prepared to explain the evidence base guiding the development of this new program content.
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17 Informing the development of the Life Education Program