

# Online safety for young people with intellectual disability

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# Contents

<b>Contents</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>eSafety research program</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Overview</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Key highlights</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Next steps</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Detailed findings</b> .....	<b>7</b>
Case study .....	7
Positive aspects of being online .....	8
Communication .....	8
Social engagement .....	9
Entertainment .....	9
Independence .....	10
Factors influencing online engagement .....	10
Educator views on online technology .....	11
Negative aspects to being online .....	12
1. Cyberbullying .....	12
2. Inappropriate content .....	13
3. Stranger danger .....	14
4. Excessive screen time .....	15
5. Online scams .....	16
6. Sexting .....	17
7. Accidental online purchasing .....	17
8. Sharing private information online .....	17
9. Being embarrassing online .....	18
Management strategies for online safety .....	18
Young people .....	18

Parents and carers..... 19

Educators.....20

**Conclusions .....21**

**Methodology .....22**

# eSafety research program

The eSafety Commissioner (eSafety) supports, encourages, conducts and evaluates research about online safety for Australians. The eSafety research program tracks trends, collects, analyses and interprets data and uses this to provide an evidence base for the development of eSafety resources and programs. eSafety also works closely across agencies and internationally so that its research program can proactively identify and explore online safety issues.

With thanks to Nadrasca Ltd for reviewing the document and providing a sector perspective.

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## Overview

This research underscores that the digital environment can be a great equaliser for young people with an intellectual disability, as it can have a destigmatising effect for those who might otherwise be left out. There are clear positive benefits of online engagement for these young people. Technology can help break down barriers encountered in the physical world, enabling communication and socialisation with their peers, combatting isolation, presenting opportunities to join communities of interest, play games and access to information and services. However, there are challenges for these young people in navigating potential online pitfalls.

While young people in general can be vulnerable online, this research highlights that the risk can be more profound for those with an intellectual disability. For these young people there can be real struggles with understanding and negotiating the social world. This can lead to communication difficulties and vulnerability in social interactions. They may find it difficult to read social cues, regulate their behaviour, understand boundaries or judge if someone is trustworthy. Because of these challenges, young people with an intellectual disability may be at higher risk of online scams, cyberbullying, harassment or grooming by predators. They may also have greater needs in terms of support to increase their awareness and capabilities in relation to staying safe online and building digital resilience in the face of setbacks.

While parents and carers recognise and see the benefits of their children engaging online, participants in this research expressed a real sense of inadequacy in terms of understanding and navigating digital technologies and the internet. Parents and carers (non-parent guardians) felt caught between not wanting to deny their children the visible benefits from engaging online and the urge to protect their children from perceived and actual online threats by restricting their use of technologies and the internet.

This research fills an information gap in relation to the experiences and challenges of engaging online by young people with an intellectual disability in Australia. It also brings to light the concerns and awareness of their parents, carers and teachers in relation to keeping these young people safe online and managing excessive technology usage.

# Key highlights

## Benefits from engaging online

- Parents, carers and educators and young people all agree that digital technologies and the internet have a positive role and influence in the lives of young people. Connected devices facilitate learning/education, communication, social engagement, entertainment and independence.
- Many of the experiences and attitudes reported – including young people’s passion for technology, parents’ and carer’s sense of inadequacy about digital and online worlds – are similar to those of young people without a disability.
- Parents and carers also used digital devices to manage their children’s behaviour. In these situations, technology was seen as a way to engage young people while parents and carers got on with other activities such as housework, attending to the needs of other family members or just relaxing.
- Young people used the full range of connected devices, including iPads, smartphones, laptops/PCs and gaming devices such as Xbox and Nintendo including using multiple social media services.

## Factors sharing online engagement

- What these young people do online depends on general and specific influences linked to their disability including:
  - *General influences:* age, gender, interests, the degree of parental involvement in their lives.
  - *Influences linked to their disability:* physical, intellectual and social development, preferred communication and learning styles, manual dexterity, ability to read and write.

## Perspective of parents, carers and educators

- While parents and carers attempt to monitor and control their children’s online lives, they are also often astounded, and sometimes alarmed, by what their children do online.
- Parents and carers can feel overwhelmed by their children’s tech savviness. They wonder how digital devices and online technologies work and how their children seem to manage so naturally to incorporate it into their lives. In many instances, young people surprised adults with what they could do online or with digital devices.
- Young people’s use of technology is visible to their teachers, whether in mainstream or specialist schools. However, overall, educators were less focussed than young people and parents and carers on technology as an empowering force but rather seeing it as an issue that they “have to manage.”

## Online safety issues and experiences

- Interviews highlighted a range of online safety issues in relation to these young people engaging online. These included cyberbullying, exposure to inappropriate content, contact from strangers, excessive screen time, online scams, sexting, accidental purchases and sharing private information online. While these experiences are like

those experienced by other young people, the response strategies adopted by young people with an intellectual disability differed significantly.

- Rather than reach out and seek support, these young people responded to negative online experiences by shutting down and avoiding the use of a particular channel e.g., social media, avoiding purchasing online or, in more extreme circumstances, avoiding online/digital devices altogether.
- Parents and carers also reported being caught between how to best respond to online safety issues – not wanting to remove technologies or access in the face of the overwhelming benefits they bring to their child while at the same time wanting to limit or remove their children’s exposure to online risks.

### Strategies used to manage or mitigate online risks and related barriers

- Parents and carers interviewed as part of this research often reported having limited access to online safety information with most using informal strategies to manage their children’s online safety. Responses tended to be reactive, triggered by a specific incident, rather than being proactive or preventive.
- In those cases, parents and carers used a range of strategies to manage young people’s time online including having conversations and setting rules, to using technology, such as filters or switching off Wi-Fi, to either restrict time online or access to certain types of content. However, these met with varying success in the face of young people’s ingenuity.

## Next steps

- A key take out from this research is that eSafety needs to continue to build its programs on the understanding that they will be accessed by diverse audiences, ensuring we hear from the range of voices at all stages.
- As outlined in its *Protecting voices at risk* statement, eSafety is developing a youth engagement strategy to hear directly from young people about their online safety experiences and needs. This will ensure eSafety services and programs reflect a broad range of youth voices and our programs reflect real concerns and needs.
- eSafety will continue to expand its materials for parents and carers, in recognition that some may have particular information needs. eSafety’s continuing research, community consultation and collaboration with educators and frontline workers will also build and improve the evidence base for new online safety strategies for specific groups including young people with an intellectual disability.

# Detailed findings

## Case study

Young people living with an intellectual disability are active users of digital technologies and the internet. In many ways their dependence on, and use of, the internet is no different to other young Australians. However, because of their circumstances, these young people may face distinct challenges online especially around their capacity to navigate and rebound from negative online experiences. The typical experiences and challenges faced by these young people in relation to participating online are highlighted in the following anonymised composite case study.

### Jason

Jason is 13 years old and has autism, intellectual disability and very limited verbal communication.

Technology and the internet play a big role in his life and he has access to a number of devices including a PlayStation in his room, a Smart TV in the lounge room (which is used mainly for watching Netflix or YouTube), and an iPhone that his mum bought for him when he started high school. He is active on social media and has several accounts, including Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest, that he checks regularly on his phone. Jason's favourite is Snapchat which he uses to exchange photos, short messages and funny memes with school friends. He generally prefers watching YouTube to television and is attracted to content uploaded by other teenagers and young people – particularly gamers.

As a young teenager, Jason likes the internet because it provides a way to socialise and have fun at home. He tends to be most active online after school, during school holidays and on weekends. However, now that he has an iPhone, he also checks social media before school. Jason used to sneak his phone into his room late at night to watch YouTube under the covers until his mum found out and put a stop to it.

Jason's mum is thrilled that he is connecting with friends and other young people online and does not want to curb this. However, she does have concerns about how much time he spends online and his increasing dependence on devices for entertainment. She is also a little worried about cyberbullying and online predators – and that a stranger might be cruel to him or invite him to meet up in secret. She fears that as Jason gets older and more independent, she will be less able to protect him from these negative experiences.

Jason seems to be aware of the potential pitfalls of the online world and can repeat messages that he learnt at primary school around online scams and stranger danger, such as not opening email attachments from strangers, or not posting where you live online. However, his mum seems a little shocked when he also admits that he sometimes does 'friend' or play games with people he has not met. In his eyes, however, this is different because they are 'friends' of his friends – not complete strangers.

### Jason ... continued

While Jason's mum is interested in simple hints and tips for parents that are geared toward empowering young people to be safe, Jason has no interest at all in printed information. Like many teenagers his age, he wants to fight his own battles and figure things out for himself. And while he says that he has never had a bad experience or felt unsafe online, Jason also admits that he would think twice before telling his mum if he had one. His concern is that she would overreact and stop him from going online.

## Positive aspects of being online

Research respondents believe that digital technologies and the internet play a positive role in the lives of these young people, and this is true in terms of their education, social engagement and entertainment. These technologies are also seen to play an important role in developing young people's sense of independence. Digital technologies are key tools both at school and within the home. Further, digital devices (those with internet access) are used in several ways to support learning life skills and education. iPads and laptops, in addition to specific education programs and using internet search engines, are seen by parents, carers and young people alike as a much more engaging way to learn than using textbooks. In addition to engaging young people, in the education setting digital technologies are used to:

- facilitate communication
- drive interest
- tailor curriculum content to young people with different cognitive abilities – this is particularly important in mainstream school settings where educators must cater for a wide variety of abilities
- develop social skills, spatial awareness and fine motor skills; for example, by using programs such as Minecraft: Education Edition.

*'[We use technology] as a creative writing prompt, anything to actually engage young people in a world that is more relevant to them.'* Educator

The benefits to young people with an intellectual disability from engaging online are also evident outside of formal education.

## Communication

For young people who are non-verbal or have difficulties reading and writing, augmentative and alternative communication applications, such as Proloquo2GO, are an important way to communicate – making a dramatic difference in the way users express their thoughts and feelings. One young woman interviewed, for example, had very different IQ test scores depending on whether she used a communication application to take the test.

Formal communication applications like Proloquo2Go, Siri and predictive text and even easy-to-use devices such as iPads or smartphones, make it much easier for young people to search for and gather information as well as to use applications like email and Google.

*'It's been great for her to have the iPad, I suppose, a bit of independence and choice and control. It's certainly a lot more accessible than the old traditional forms of dial-up internet. She can access the things that she's wishing to access a lot easier.'* Parent

## Social engagement

Online interactions using email, social media and interactive gaming offer young people with an intellectual disability, ways to support and build on their in-school friendships and to foster other friendships outside school and their immediate social circle. This was particularly important for young people with limited opportunities to socialise outside their family – such as those limited by physical disability, who have difficulties in communication or highly protective family members.

*'[What are the things that make kids happiest about being online?] We make new friends, we're all friends.'* Young person

*'Sometimes they've been at school together and they'll say, 'Who's in for Fortnite after school, we'll meet up there'... So, they can carry on their social interactions online.'* Parent

## Entertainment

As with many other young people, the low cost, 24/7 entertainment offered by the internet is a hugely popular pastime for young people with an intellectual disability.

*'The iPad and the apps, that is really the only time where she really initiates to play, she has always been one that you've needed to guide a lot with play and do a lot with her. Whereas she will tend to grab her iPad whenever she wants to, and that's the only thing throughout her life that she's gravitated towards and chooses to do. I think it's probably just because it's the ease of it, like a lot of toys and things [can be] difficult with her fine motor skills.'* Parent

The internet also offers ways to expand and enrich offline interests. The young people interviewed described searching for additional content on gaming, sport, music, Lego and current affairs on Google and YouTube.

*If there's questions about things on some of her shows, then we'll use YouTube to try and find out more. Are they real? Do they exist? What do they look like? If they don't look like a cartoon, what do they look like in real life?' Parent*

*'I think I used to just occasionally research things when I was a kid, because I had an interest in them. To be honest, the internet is quite amazing in the sense that it's an encyclopedia at your fingertips. Almost all the information on Earth has been uploaded to it, so you can find almost anything, within seconds, which is awesome. So, I guess that's sort of what got me into it.'* Young person

Both channels were highly valued to explore topics of interest and provide young people with another way to understand the world around them.

## Independence

Many of the young people interviewed for this research have parents and carers who are interested in encouraging independence, but who are also concerned about the risks their children might face navigating the world on their own. Young people themselves could be cautious about a world that can be hostile to people with a disability.

For parents and carers, being able to track or contact their children using a mobile phone means they are willing to give them more independence, for example travelling to and from school/other places by themselves. Teens and young adults are also more confident going out on their own if accompanied by a smartphone to help navigate the world (using Google Maps and journey planners) as it provides a safety net if they are lost or in trouble.

*'So, he has a phone which we are trying to encourage him to use more as a communication device, more than the whole technology side of it. Just to make sure that he's safe when he's out and about in the community, because he does a bit of traveling to school on the train and that sort of stuff.'* Parent

Young people surprised adults with what they could do online/using digital devices. For example, one teen – who was on the non-academic track at a mainstream school – reported hacking into the school email system; another young man, who used an iPad and Proloquo2Go to communicate, had a large following on Instagram for his positive postings of cute babies and animals. Children who struggle to read or write somehow managed to 'crack' their parents' passcodes, or hack into their social media accounts and post embarrassing messages. This suggests a need to coach young people in the responsible use of technology and making good decisions online.

*'I got a message from a friend in London at 3am saying 'I think <your daughter> has got into your Facebook account again. You need to take a look.'* Parent

## Factors influencing online engagement

The young people interviewed for this research access the full range of internet-enabled devices, including iPads, smartphones, laptops/PCs and gaming devices such as Xbox and Nintendo.

However, what these young people do online depends on many things: age, developmental stage, interests, preferred communication and learning styles, manual dexterity, ability to read and write and the degree of parental involvement in their lives.

For example, some young people had both a smartphone and a range of social media accounts – and their parents/carers admitted that they were not quite sure what the teen was up to online. Some independent young adults bank and shop online and dabble in online dating. Others have more limited access to internet-enabled devices, with their usage mostly facilitated by parents and carers. In this case, parents/carers may be heavily involved in their children's interaction with digital devices, often because their children can't type or spell well enough to navigate the internet for tasks such as searching YouTube or Google or posting to social media. Even in

these more mediated situations, however, children and young people often undertake relatively independent navigation of the internet and apps using a smartphone or other devices such as a tablet.

*'She can't spell. So, she would sign to me what she wanted, and I would initiate ... the search, and then she selects what she would want to watch from the suggestions ...'* Parent

Parents and carers sometimes feel overwhelmed by their children's tech savviness. They wonder how the internet and digital devices work and how their children seem to manage so naturally to incorporate them into their lives. Parents and carers of young people with disability sense that young people have a natural affinity with digital technology – and often know much more about the online world and how it works than they do.

*'I suppose I'm just ... I'm no tech wizard by any means, and I probably get a bit worried that technology is more advanced than what I know about. And potentially, there's stuff that I should know, that I don't know.'* Parent

## Educator views on online technology

The research showed that young people's use of technology is highly visible to their educators, in both mainstream and specialist schools. Technology is interwoven into the school curriculum. As well as communication and learning-specific applications, educators report that young people access social media, games, entertainment at school, in addition to texting and using instant messaging. Young people also access programs and content when they bring their own internet-enabled devices to school or use school computers. Classroom staff to student ratios mean that educators cannot observe the online interactions of each child closely when multiple devices are being used at once. This is still the case in specialist schools, despite lower staff to student ratios.

*'There was one boy, he followed NRL and he could quote any statistic, date, whatever. He's constantly on the device and it is open to advertisements and that's one of the biggest risks of them being on all of these strange sites. Some of them just want to play games but adverts come up all the time. So if I just look at a classroom I was in, we'd have one playing 'Words with Friends', we'd have another on the NRL, we'd have another watching it could be Disney on YouTube and then another one on Fortnite, it could be that broad.'* Educator

Educators report that young people can be so fascinated with a device or application that this dominates their attention at the expense of other aspects of the curriculum. This can lead to educators having mixed feelings about the use of technology in the classroom. While they acknowledge the positive role of technology, educators tend to see it as an issue that they must manage. In contrast, young people, parents and carers consider it an empowering force.

*'This technology is not stopping. We are quite interactive with learning and teaching. We no longer have the old method of teaching.'* Educator

Educators typically believe that young people with an intellectual disability are more vulnerable to a range of online harms, including cyberbullying (as victim and perpetrator) and harmful contact from strangers. Increased vulnerability is put down to a more limited understanding of social communication cues (i.e., leading to accidentally saying hurtful things online) and being more trusting of strangers.

## Negative aspects to being online

Young people and their parents, carers and educators report a range of negative online experiences, concerns and challenges in terms of navigating the online world. While previous eSafety shows<sup>1</sup> that these are online challenges typically faced by most young people, this research shows that young people with an intellectual disability, and their parents and carers, demonstrated significantly different coping strategies when faced with these situations. The range of experiences and concerns raised during interviews covered:

- cyberbullying
- inappropriate content
- stranger danger
- excessive screen time
- online scams / fraud
- sexting
- accidental purchases
- sharing private information online
- being embarrassing online.

### 1. Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying was the most cited online safety incident in this research. This includes people saying unkind things online and the targeted person being excluded on social media and in interactive gaming. In the research sample, perpetrators were both strangers as well as people known to the young person with disability.

*'He went on it [Facebook] for a little while, but then he just found that there was too much negative and nasty stuff on there.'* Parent

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<sup>1</sup> eSafety, *State of Play-Youth, kids and digital dangers*. May 3, 2018 [www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/research/youth-digital-dangers](http://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/research/youth-digital-dangers)

Young people and their parents and carers are very aware that disclosing a disability might lead to the young person being targeted online. Some choose not to identify themselves online as having a disability because of this. Not all took this tactic – some took an advocate stance, using social media like Twitter and YouTube to promote inclusion and acceptance.

*'I never put anything about his disability on there. I've just let him live this online life of being normal, and he loves it when he puts in a picture of the dog or something and the next thing, there's 63 likes on it.'* Parent

Some young people choose to avoid using social media altogether because of the potential for negativity. However, the young people who had experienced cyberbullying typically had not thought about the potential for negative online experiences on social media before it had happened to them.

When young people experienced cyberbullying their reaction was to shut their accounts down; to disengage and stop using social media, which was distressing for them. However, much they wanted to avoid future nasty experiences, their sense of missing out, that yearning to do what everyone else is doing, was still strong.

*'I was on Facebook for a bit, but the people said mean things, so I deleted it from my phone.'* Young person

Parents and carers reported feeling deeply worried about their children's potential vulnerability to online cruelty. Some cited examples from their school and social circles where young people had been bullied offline, noting they wanted to protect their children from these experiences. If their children were happy not to use social media, then they were content to avoid the potential pitfalls.

*'I've heard some stories about the bullying on various social media with other kids with specials needs. So, yeah. I'm happy for him not to be on it.'* Parent

Educators in special and mainstream schools talked about the difficulty of managing incidents where children had cyberbullied each other. They noted that they would not necessarily find out about the issue until matters became serious, and parents or carers brought an incident to their attention. Classroom educators or welfare co-ordinators would then attempt to resolve the issue through mediation between students. In these circumstances, there appeared to be a tension between parental expectations and the educators' view that what happens outside school should be dealt with by parents and carers. Educators sometimes resent that parents and carers see the issues as a school responsibility.

## 2. Inappropriate content

Some young people interviewed for this research had come across inappropriate imagery and language – including pornography, violence and swearing. They were often reluctant to tell their parents, carers or educators about the experience for fear they would overreact or, worse, try to limit or stop them from using devices. These teens, like

others their age, understood that they had to manage the adults in their lives carefully to retain screen access. When parents/carers walked into the room, the young people would hide their devices, delete screen histories – anything to ensure they could continue to have relatively unfettered access to internet-connected devices.

Parents, carers and educators are highly aware of the potential for young people to come across inappropriate content online; and that harmful or damaging content is only a click or two away from more benign material. In the interviews, they questioned the extent to which some young people with an intellectual disability would see the warning signs as they click through from good to bad.

*'I guess the concern that we as parents have is that it's so easy, the bad content is only a couple of clicks away and they could be in something completely inappropriate that just comes up as a suggestion.'* Parent

Parents', carers' and educators' prevention strategies for managing access to inappropriate content include putting filters in place, having conversations with their children, and, in some instances, hoping for the best. Where parents, carers and educators realise that a young person had come across inappropriate content their responses ranged from ignoring the situation and hoping it would not happen again, to putting in place or strengthening internet filters.

*'We did have an incident last year where we found all of these photos, they came up on the iPad. I think he'd accidentally found them; we get the impression it was probably an innocent search request. We were like, oh my God, like it was really, really full-on. And so, we were then frantically running around, because we thought we had the parental controls in place, but obviously it wasn't done properly.'* Parent

### 3. Stranger danger

The research showed that if young people had received any information or education on online safety, it was mostly on 'stranger danger', and the potential for people they don't know online to be ill-intentioned, or not what they seem to be. However, while young people know what they are *supposed* to do – not interact online with anyone they do not know in real life – their behaviour does not always follow suit. Many acknowledged accepting people as 'friends' on social media sites who they had never met before or playing interactive games with friends of friends. In addition, for some young people with an intellectual disability a key reason for going online is to expand their social world; they are curious about meeting people and making new friends. This is further highlighted by 2018 eSafety research<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> eSafety, *State of Play-Youth, kids and digital dangers*. May 3, 2018 [www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/research/youth-digital-dangers](http://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/research/youth-digital-dangers)

which shows 50 per cent of young people with a disability in Australia aged 8-17 had talked to a stranger online in the 12 months.

Some young people had negative experiences while interacting with people they don't know in real life; however, these instances were of strangers being nasty to them, rather than the more challenging experience of strangers attempting to meet up in real life or asking a young person to exchange intimate photographs. In some cases, young people were able to continue using an application and block a stranger – for example, using Roblox's reporting service. More often though, young people withdrew from using an application following a negative incident (as outlined for cyberbullying above).

Parents, carers and educators reported worrying about strangers inappropriately targeting their children/students online. They noted that young people with an intellectual disability could be much more trusting than other young people and would not necessarily be able to determine if someone online were targeting them with negative intentions.

*'I was worried about paedophiles and stuff like that.'* Parent

One educator had outlined a situation where they suspected that a young person with an intellectual disability in their charge was contacted online by a predatory stranger.

*'A lot of our young fellows are just understanding and picking up the cues of strangers online who've suddenly become their best friend, who report to be 14 but when I read the emails, I don't think it's a 14 year old.'* Educator

#### 4. Excessive screen time

In the research young people themselves generally did not see excessive screen time as an issue. If anything, their concern was often the opposite – how to have more screen time. However, some of the older teens and young adults voiced regret about the amount of time they spend online. They were conscious of the addictive nature of screens and spoke of wasting time online when they could be more productive or feeling that they would rather be out and about in the community talking to 'real' people than being stuck at home staring at a computer screen.

*'I go on every weekend, all day. Because I've got nothing better to do. And, mostly, when I come back from school, I go on it, every single day ... I know it's wasting my life.'* Young person

Parents and carers of children with intellectual disability do use devices to manage their children's behaviour. For parents and carers of young people with high support needs who are very demanding of their time and who are mostly at home, technology can be a way to keep the child occupied while parents and carers do chores, attend to other children or relax.

Some parents and carers worry about the ‘addictive’ potential of the internet – however even they struggle to limit screen time for their children. Educators also acknowledged that they, like parents and carers, use technology as a behavioural management strategy – as a way of occupying the time of young people with high needs.

*‘So, I work with some students that are mute and high needs behaviourally. I would imagine that it is a way of parents getting some peace.’ Educator*

Some parents and carers have different screen time rules for their children with an intellectual disability and for their neurotypical children, especially if the former relied heavily on communication or connected devices for entertainment.

*‘So, the boys have picked us up on that a bit. They say: well how come she gets unlimited time? And we’ve always said, ‘Well you can go out and kick a ball, but she struggles with that.’ So, that’s an interesting thought actually, because I guess the same concerns are there, but it just feels different for my daughter, because that is her tool to communicate and her way to access the world really, in a different way.’ Parent*

Several parents and carers noted that it is hard to know how much screen time is too much – and that as far as they could tell, there is no clear-cut, evidence-based amount of time. For some, this led to not setting clear screen time limits.

Educators also reported worrying about what they see as excessive screen time. Where young people with intellectual disability are heavily reliant on digital devices to communicate or learn, educators can be especially reluctant to remove access.

## 5. Online scams

The more independent young adults of those interviewed with this research talked a lot about scams – some had been targeted through fake websites, email or online pop ups and worried about it. Being targeted online by potential scammers was much more difficult and frightening for young people with little, or no, reading/writing skills. This group were easily overwhelmed and scared about people ripping them off as well as worrying about their ability to judge good from bad.

Like their experience of social media, facing an online scam often leads to young people disengaging from the application where it appeared– stopping using online banking and shopping for example. This is in addition to working through the issues the scam has created, such as the need to cancel credit cards. One young person stopped using the internet altogether for several months.

*‘I found out that was a scam, but that terrified me, honestly ... I didn’t actually go online for probably a couple of months after that. I actually avoided the internet in general.’ Young person*

Parents and carers of young people also worry about their vulnerability to online scams – but do not necessarily know what they can do to support their children. If dependent children are caught up in an online scam involving their parents' banking or Apple accounts, it can take time and effort to disentangle their finances. This can be a highly confusing process that parents and carers navigate with some difficulty. Even when retrospectively describing these circumstances, parents and carers had not fully grasped what had happened, nor had they developed a clear sense or pathway to supporting their children's safe online engagement in the future.

## 6. Sexting

In discussions with educators, they mentioned sexting or sharing inappropriate images as a *potential* issue – they believed that young people with an intellectual disability might not understand what is or isn't appropriate to share online, nor the ramifications of sharing certain types of content. While young people with an intellectual disability have been identified as being particularly vulnerable to sexting, young people and their parents interviewed for this research either had not experienced the issue or chose not to share their experiences. Most of the issues highlighted in this research related to accessing inappropriate content online such as pornography or violent content.

## 7. Accidental online purchasing

Parents and carers mentioned instances where their children had bought items online. In these circumstances, they were quick to remove their children's access to payment options when they realised this had happened.

## 8. Sharing private information online

Some young people who participate in online gaming or use social media know that they are not supposed to share personal information online – their real name, phone number or address, identifying school details, or bank account details – and also that they should choose passwords that are hard to guess. The following exchange illustrates how a young person described their knowledge.

Young person: I don't want people to find out who I am and then hack my account.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about that? How does hacking work?

Young person: They could take all my stuff, mess up my [gaming] character.

Interviewer: What information would they need to get into your account?

Young person: My password especially and my name.

Interviewer: So how do you keep your password safe, what do you do?

Young person: Don't mention your password to anyone.'

Not all young people understand the need to protect their information though, and educators report that online privacy is conceptually quite a hard issue to establish, and education needs to be repeated and reinforced to remain top of mind.

*'A lot of young people that are struggling with a range of issues don't appreciate that when something is shared with a friend it's not just sharing it with a friend it's sharing it with the world.'* Educator

## 9. Being embarrassing online

In this research, parents and carers noted being acutely aware that their children might act inappropriately online in a way that would embarrass them, the parents or carers, or the children themselves. They did not want their children to be exposed to teasing or ridicule because of inadvertently posting embarrassing material online, nor of reaching out to, or harassing, strangers or celebrities. In this context, young people were messaging their parents' friends, or tagging them on Facebook, and trying to 'friend' celebrities or strangers they liked the look of. Where this happened, parents and carers were quick to react, and remove access to the phone or social media account.

## Management strategies for online safety

### Young people

The young people interviewed did not consider safety strategies when managing their time online and had received little online safety education. In fact, the most powerful educational experience observed in this sample was a young person who had closely followed a Home and Away catfishing storyline.

*'She was stupid. Because she gave her address to a total stranger ... And you don't know who they are, or what they want.'* Young person

While young people had received some information on 'stranger danger and sharing private information online' from parents and educators, advice about not connecting with people online that they don't know (e.g., not meeting them in person in a public place, giving them your real name or address) was often ignored if this was in the way of enjoyment – increasing their gaming network, for example, or connecting with an attractive person on social media.

Some young people would 'report' or block strangers or 'mean' people on gaming sites like Roblox or Fortnite.

*'When you click on a name that's been rude to you, it comes up with 'report player'. You put the players name and then you can report them.'* Young person

Those who actively manage their social media and gaming experiences did so by adjusting the privacy settings on their social media accounts while young people with a more passive relationship to interacting online – including those whose experience was heavily mediated by their parents – said they are less likely to adjust privacy settings.

Young people's main approach to managing online safety was to 'shut down' – closing social media accounts, for example, or by avoiding answering emails, or no longer making purchases/paying bills online.

## Parents and carers

Some parents and educators wondered if young people with significant cognitive impairments would ever be able to fully protect themselves, even with education.

Parents and carers acknowledged that their attention to online safety issues was often triggered by an incident, rather than being proactive or preventive. Parents and carers indicated that they have little access to online safety education and use relatively informal strategies for managing their children's online safety.

*'We tend to be more pro-active when something happens, like finding all this stuff on his iPad. And then you frantically look about, 'How can I lock all this stuff?'* Parent

The range of strategies used to manage young people's online safety range from having conversations and setting rules, to using technology intermediaries to either restrict time online or restrict access to certain types of content. These strategies are summarised in Table 1. Some parents and carers interviewed did not use any strategies to manage their children's online safety. In those circumstances they either convinced themselves that there was not a problem or acknowledged there could be a problem but did not know what they should do. Some admitted to being frightened and overwhelmed by the digital world or had more pressing issues to contend with in their role as a parent and carer of a child with a disability. In fact, many of the strategies highlighted by parents and carers are similar to those adopted by parents in general.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1: Summary of strategies used by parents and carers to manage the online safety of young people with an intellectual or cognitive disability**

Strategy	Context
<b>Conversations/building trust/rule setting</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relying on a good relationship with their child</li> </ul>	Reasoning that if a child tells them everything, they do not need to monitor closely.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Having a conversation with children</li> </ul>	
<b>Monitoring/being present etc.</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'Doing for' i.e., heavily mediating their child's access</li> </ul>	While this protected children from harm in the short term, it could mean that they were less prepared to navigate the online world by themselves when becoming independent.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monitoring their children's devices</li> </ul>	Looking at content on their children's phones or iPads. But while parents often attempted to monitor what their children did, busy lives – including work and the need to care for more than one family member with disability,

<sup>3</sup> eSafety, *Parenting in the digital age*. 2018. [www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/research/parenting-digital-age](http://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/research/parenting-digital-age)

Strategy	Context
	meant that it wasn't always possible for parents to monitor their children's usage as closely as they would like.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'Doing with'</li> </ul>	Doing online activities with a child, such as a father gaming with his child both as a bonding and monitoring activity. One parent had hired a support worker who was a gamer who could support their child to safely engage online. Another parent relied heavily on support workers to help her daughter navigate the technology and internet to make up for her own lack of skills in this area.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being in the same room as children using internet-connected devices</li> </ul>	Reasoning that they will be alerted if any inappropriate content arises.
<b>Technology-related</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>E.g., parental filters / location tracking via a child's mobile phone.</li> </ul>	Parents who had been to information sessions or had done some research on the internet were alert to the need to use device filters. These included commercial products and built-in filters for individual devices. However, these filters were not fit for purpose – either filtering too much or not enough. In some cases, location tracking was used to monitor the child's whereabouts.
<b>Other strategies</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limiting access to technology</li> </ul>	Some parents deliberately had not given their child a mobile phone, seeing this as too hard to monitor and control. Alternatively, they may have disconnected Wi-Fi, confiscated devices after certain hours or shut down their child's social media accounts.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Older siblings who tend to be more tech savvy</li> </ul>	Parents and carers could effectively delegate responsibility if they had access to an older, reliable, tech-savvy child who could set filters and ensure privacy.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Asking schools for advice</li> </ul>	Seeking advice on how to handle a situation or relying on the school to do online safety education with them and their children.

## Educators

In their interviews, educators indicated using a wide range of online safety strategies with young people. However, even those who were doing quite a lot to address online safety issues were not at all confident they were doing enough. Strategies included:

- arranging for police to do talks in schools
- putting away devices during school hours
- visual reminders in classrooms about the need to keep information private
- internet filters to block access to disturbing content
- safety practice, for example, getting young people to practice not clicking on spam emails
- having open conversations with children and parents about the importance of online safety.

Some schools also held more formal education sessions, including using eSafety Commissioner's resources (resources such as Cybersmart and Hector's World were mentioned), however these were not the majority.

While educators were interested in doing more to promote online safety for young people with a disability, they are stymied by a lack of time, an already crowded curriculum and lack of appropriate resources. Dense, paper-based education material about online safety was also rejected by their students who are more used to digital formats or who are non-readers.

Interviews also showed that educators in mainstream schools were less confident in their ability to tailor online safety education to young people with an intellectual disability. Parents noticed that educators in mainstream schools could be less adept at dealing with the special needs of their children. However, educators in specialist schools felt that tailoring education to young people with disability was in their comfort zone and area of expertise. They were interested in helping mainstream colleagues, however there was no connection to link specialist educators with those in mainstream schools to provide coaching.

## Conclusions

This research highlights the positive and negatives of young people with intellectual disability being online. It indicates that there are gaps in the online safety information and education these young people receive. It also identifies useful approaches to supporting and improving their own, and their parents and carers, understanding of online safety issues and how-to best deal with them in a tailored and appropriate way. This research highlights that there are also opportunities to improve general teacher knowledge about how to meet the specific online safety needs of these children through tapping into the expertise of specialist educators and to make their learnings available to mainstream schools and organisations.

Young people who participated in this research learn about preventing and managing online safety incidents through trial and error rather than through systematic education. This is reflected in their seemingly default response to retreat from engaging online when confronted by negative online experiences. Providing more support and tailored advice, which considers young people's preference for digital formats, will encourage these young people to continue to be active online as empowered, resilient, digital citizens, rather than lose access to the benefits that technology offers at the first hurdle. Improving the awareness and "digital" confidence of parents and carers is also a necessary step in building the digital resilience and support networks of young people with an intellectual disability.

As outlined in its *Protecting voices at risk* statement, eSafety is developing a youth engagement strategy to hear directly from young people in an ongoing fashion about their online safety experiences and needs. This will ensure eSafety services and programs reflect youth voices. In addition, eSafety's continuing research, community consultation and collaboration with educators and frontline workers will build and improve the evidence base for new online safety strategies for specific groups including young people with an intellectual disability.

# Methodology

This report is a summary of research undertaken for eSafety by WhereTo Research Pty Ltd. The report also draws on desk research and other material produced by eSafety. Interviews were conducted in Melbourne, Sydney and Hobart. This included group discussions with 17 young people with an intellectual disability aged 13-25 years of age, 10 interviews with parents of young people with an intellectual disability and two group discussions with educators of young people with an intellectual disability.

**Table 2: Sample frame for interviews**

Research unit	Cohort descriptor	Other sampling criteria
<b>Interviews</b>	Parents and carers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Live/be in close contact with young people aged 13-25 years with intellectual disability</li> <li>• Reflecting families of young people with different intellectual disabilities</li> <li>• Reflecting the age ranges of young people 13-25 years (5 under 18, 5 over 18)</li> <li>• Male and female parents and carers</li> <li>• Low and high socioeconomic status parents and carers</li> <li>• 2 x culturally and linguistically diverse</li> <li>• 1 x Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander</li> </ul>
<b>Group discussion 1 (7 people)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Young people with an intellectual disability aged 18-25 years +</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aged 13-25 years</li> <li>• Reflecting families of young people with different intellectual disabilities</li> <li>• Male and female</li> <li>• 2 x culturally and linguistically diverse</li> </ul>
<b>Interviews 11-20</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Young people with an intellectual disability, aged under 18 years</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 x Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander</li> </ul>

<b>Group discussion 3, 4-6 people</b>	Educators or integration aides for young people with intellectual disability or autism and intellectual disability	
<b>Group discussion 4, 4-6 people</b>		

### Discussion guides for interviews

For young people with an intellectual disability:

- How do young people with an intellectual disability use digital technologies and the internet?
- What technology is being used and how is it used – e.g., text messaging, social media, email? What are the patterns of engagement (e.g., combination of different technologies, times, etc)?
- What roles does technology play in young people’s lives – for entertainment, education, work, socialising with friends or family, self-advocacy etc? How do these technologies (positively) contribute to emotional and social wellbeing or functionally support education or work?
- What strategies, ideas, people and pathways appear to support positive or constructive engagement?
- Have young people had negative experiences? How do they describe these? How do these impact on wellbeing, enjoyment and the functional benefits derived from their online experience? Do they see these negative experiences as relating to their disability? How? What resources, supports or pathways have been used/are recommended to resolve online safety issues?

For those who might support young people with an intellectual disability online (parents, carers, educators):

- How do they describe use of digital technology by young people with an intellectual disability (positive and negative experiences)?
- What do they believe are the most urgent issues regarding online safety for people with an intellectual disability?
- How are the vulnerabilities of young people with intellectual disability being addressed through informal and formal guidance, education or other means?
- For those who have had a direct mentoring role, what sort of situations and issues have they navigated? How do they facilitate and support online activity?
- What resources and support do people value and trust? Why?
- What pathways have been used or are recommended to resolve online safety issues?
- Are there gaps with respect to supports, resourcing and pathways?

