

## Safe Online Together Project Project Summary

### Summary

The Safe Online Together Project (SOT) successfully ran from the end of 2020 until February 2022 within the Canberra region. During this time, **thirteen family workshops** were delivered to **225 participants** (115 parents and 110 children) and school presentations were delivered to more than **1100 students** from grades 5 – 10 across six Canberra schools. The project was developed by researchers from the University of Canberra and was funded under the Australian Government’s Online Safety Grants Program.

Working with community services partners—Community Services #1 and Capital Region Community Services— and with input from other stakeholders including the ACT Education Directorate and participating schools, we delivered an innovative, integrated and evidence-based program that successfully provided parents and children with information, tools and strategies for balancing the risks and opportunities of digital media while endeavouring to minimize family conflict related to media use.

The school presentations, and the family workshops in particular, were extremely well received, with 95 per cent of adult participants rating the workshops as very good or excellent.

### School Presentations

Through tailored presentations to more than 1100 students from grades 5 to 10, students were provided with age-appropriate information focusing on what it means to be a good digital citizen. The project team met with executives from all participating schools to discuss the main technology related issues that schools were dealing with. Rather than adopting a top-down, risk-focused approach that assumes a lack of knowledge, experience and judgement on the part of young people, we acknowledged the importance of media in the lives of young people and the tremendous benefits of digital media technologies. By accounting for their varied existing skills and knowledges, our presentations (which were between 45 and 80 minutes) covered topics including media balance and wellbeing, online relationships and respectful communication (including digital drama), and digital footprints, to provide young people with the tools and knowledge to minimize online risks and harms, while enjoying all the benefits of digital media.

### Family Workshops

The family workshops were the central element of the project, designed to facilitate and guide discussion between family members to promote intergenerational understanding, and balance the risks and opportunities of media and to reduce family conflict around media use. Their aim was to challenge the perception of young people as vulnerable risk takers in online spaces, as well as perceptions of their parents as lacking knowledge and expertise in relation to technology. This was achieved by providing a forum through which young people and parents can share their knowledge about digital media and online risk. Young people were

invited to share the various ways they use digital media technologies and the benefits and value they derive from their online activities, as well as their knowledge about and strategies for managing online risks. Parents in turn shared their concerns about their children's media use and their motivations for mediating it. The workshops encouraged participants to negotiate digital media use together as a family, with the aim of reducing conflict about media use.

Family workshops were generally oversubscribed, particularly those that were promoted through schools. The seven workshops that were facilitated through participating schools received a particularly strong response compared to the six public workshops. This likely points towards effective school/parent communications, the important role of the school presentations to promote the family workshops and suggests that the involvement of schools afforded the project credibility and legitimacy.

Families with children in grades 6 – 8 (approximately 11 – 14 years old) were over-represented in terms of both their expressions of interest and at the actual workshops. This suggests media-related conflict may peak during this time, and is consistent with feedback from school teachers and principals. Material promoting the family workshops made it clear that the workshops were not a cyber safety presentation but were aimed at facilitating intergenerational understanding and helping families negotiate media use. The strong response from participants expressing their interest provides further evidence of the need for this kind of collaborative approach.

#### Preliminary findings

During the workshops the project team collected a large amount of data, documenting parental concerns and mediation strategies, young people's uses of media and what they value about it, as well as parent and child responses to online risk. We are still in the process of analysing this data, however some high-level findings emerged from the workshops as well as the follow-up focus groups and interviews.

Preliminary findings indicate that parents hold a range of conduct and content-related concerns about their children's digital media use, beyond the major categories of risk typically addressed in cyber safety literature, and that most children were highly attuned to those concerns. The main issues raised by parents included time online, inappropriate content, online bullying, privacy and digital footprint, changes to their child's behaviour, mood and/or attitude, and potential health effects. When asked what they thought their parents were worried about, the children — to the surprise of some of their parents — identified most of the same issues, demonstrating that their children perhaps knew more than their parents gave them credit for.

In terms of the workshops themselves, preliminary findings indicate that parents find it valuable hearing from other parents, that the workshops legitimised their existing approaches, and that they intended to adopt more democratic and enabling forms of mediation going

forward. Further, many parents expressed surprise at their children's knowledge about and strategies for managing online risk. This is a promising finding as it contributes to demystifying the assumption of young people as vulnerable risk-takers when using technology. Typical of insights provided in post-workshop evaluation, parents said:

It is comforting to know a lot of parents have the same struggles. We learn a lot from each other (male, 46).

The workshop gave confidence I had a good base-line around technology use in the family (female, 48).

We will have more open conversations rather than just imposing top-down rules which can seem arbitrary to the kids. We will work to come up with family rules, using the provided template, to guide our discussion (female, 43).

Young people indicated that they appreciated being asked their thoughts and opinions and being heard by their parents. In response to being asked what they liked about the workshops, they responded:

'[T]hat I could discuss my opinions and my family can now understand how I feel about technology (female, 12).

This workshop enabled parent-child communication and focused more on the opinions of families rather than set guidelines (female, 12).

Ninety-five percent of parents who attended a family workshop rated it as very good or excellent. While not all children completed an evaluation form, 74 per cent of those who did rated the family workshop as very good or excellent.

An article outlining the theoretical justification and methodological approach for the project has been published in the Journal of Communication Research and Practice - [here](#). Please get in touch with Catherine Page Jeffery at [Catherine.PageJeffery@sydney.edu.au](mailto:Catherine.PageJeffery@sydney.edu.au) if you would like a copy of this paper.