

# SUBMISSION No. 25



Senator Dana Wortley  
Chair of Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety  
c/o Department of House of Representatives  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600  
AUSTRALIA

25 June 2010

Dear Senator Wortley,

The Youth Affairs Council of South Australia (YACSA) is the peak body in South Australia representing the interests of young people, youth workers, organisations and networks throughout the non-government youth sector.

YACSA is an incorporated community sector organisation with a broad membership base. Policy positions are independent and not aligned with any political party or movement. YACSA's overarching aim is to encourage young people, and those working with them and for them, to achieve meaningful improvements in the quality of young people's lives.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety, particularly under terms of reference (ii) and (iv) – ***the nature, prevalence, implications of and level of risk associated with cyber-safety threats, such as abuse of children online (cyber-bullying, cyber-stalking and sexual grooming)***, and ***examining the need to ensure that the opportunities presented by, and economic benefits of, new technologies are maximised.***

76.5% of young people aged 15-24 have access to and use the internet regularly – the largest proportion of any age group in Australia.<sup>1</sup> Young people use the internet for an enormous variety of reasons and in an equally large number of ways. In considering cyber-safety issues, YACSA acknowledges that young people are often the experts on their own use of technology, and that blanket restrictions on this use are neither practical nor useful. Instead, we encourage parents, politicians and other decision-makers to work with young people to determine safe and sensible ways of using technology.

---

<sup>1</sup> ABS, 2008, *Australian Social Trends: Internet Access at Home*, catalogue number 4210.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra, p.3.

YACSA acknowledges that the majority of young people who use the internet do so in a positive and constructive manner. However, we also acknowledge that young people may behave in risky ways online, though it is important to note that these risks do not always arise from the internet *per se*, but rather from traditional sources such as peer group dynamics, which are then transferred to the internet and amplified through repetition and reproduction. For example, certain actions on social networking sites may seem harmless, but may lose meaning or take on a different meaning in a different context.

YACSA is also concerned with the often-hysterical tone taken by the media when reporting on cyber-safety issues. Such reporting can perpetuate the stereotype that young people are passive victims in the online environment, whereas anecdotal evidence suggests many young people are more technologically literate than their parents and other decision-makers. In fact, young people who generally experience the internet as a safe medium – and one in which they are highly competent – are likely to find sensationalist reports and warnings lacking in credibility. Furthermore, poor quality media coverage has severe negative implications for the quality of the policy responses implemented by governments and other bodies.

For example, a study conducted by the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children in the United States gives the number of children and young people who had received an unwanted sexual solicitation online during 2006 as one in seven.<sup>2</sup> This figure is cited in numerous publications and media reports as evidence that there are large numbers of adult sexual predators active online, including in the Australian Institute of Criminology's report *Online child grooming: a literature review on the misuse of social networking sites for grooming children for sexual offences*.<sup>3</sup>

However, an examination of the original study shows that nearly half of the solicitations (43%) were made by young people under the age of 18, and 14% of all solicitations were made by people already known to the young person being solicited.<sup>4</sup> While this does not diminish the potential impact of unwanted sexual solicitations, it does clarify that the type of sexual solicitation most often reported by the media, and most dreaded by parents and caregivers – that of the adult stranger targeting a young person – is very rare.

*The experience of the stranger danger" in real world settings is instructive here. The focus on stranger danger initially adopted by authorities was eventually discarded when it became clear that the most common source of adult abuse of children was from adults known to them. (be good to have a reference for this)*

The online world plays a vital role in the development of young people's self-confidence and values, and that young people today are simply taking advantage of the technology they have grown up with to do what they have always done: test boundaries, experiment with relationships, challenge adult

---

<sup>2</sup> Wolak J, Mitchell K & Finkelhor D, 2006, *Online victimization of youth: Five years later*, National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, Alexandria, Virginia, USA, p.7. Available online at: [http://www.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/ResourceServlet?LanguageCountry=en\\_US&PageId=2530](http://www.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/ResourceServlet?LanguageCountry=en_US&PageId=2530) Viewed 15 June 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Kim-Kwang, R.C, 2009, *Online child grooming: a literature review on the misuse of social networking sites for grooming children for sexual offences*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra, p. xi.

<sup>4</sup> Wolak et al., p.15.

norms and develop an individual identity. These behaviours have long been an important part of adolescence – the difference now is that these behaviours can take place in front of a much wider, global audience, can be communicated very rapidly, and remain as a permanent record.

Taking into consideration the above points, YACSA's policy priorities for the area of cyber-safety are as follows:

- **Encouraging cooperative efforts between business, government, law enforcement and users to help create a safer, more secure online environment for children and young people**
- **Advocating for educational programs (both in and out of schools) to make young people aware of the safety risks when using social networking sites, and to equip them with safety measures and tools to help them manage their use of social networking sites**
- **Advocating for improved technology to be used to control who has access to these sites**
- **Supporting an information campaign to inform young people and adults of the possible dangers of social networking sites**
- **Advocating for Internet education and safety programs to include information about the possible misuse of technologies such as webcams that can be used in order to abuse and manipulate young people**
- **Empowering young people through education and media literacy**

Once again, YACSA is grateful for the opportunity to provide comment regarding the cyber-safety debate. Should you wish to discuss this submission further, please do not hesitate to contact the YACSA offices on (08) 8226 3080 or at [yacsa@yacsa.com.au](mailto:yacsa@yacsa.com.au)

Yours sincerely,

Sean Carey  
PRESIDENT