

MEDIA RELEASE

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Critical media literacy a life skill for children – ACU expert

Education and open communication with children continue to be crucial to protect young people online regardless of social media bans, an ACU expert has stressed on the eve of Safer Internet Day.

Digital literacies expert Professor Kathy Mills, of ACU’s Institute for Learning Sciences and Teacher Education, said knowing how to use digital media and the internet safely were critically important life skills for children.

“I would advise parents not to have a false sense of security because of social media bans for under 16s. Many of the online safety skills that kids need are required beyond social media sites,” she said.

“Digital media use, both online and offline, can be used for many productive, creative, educational, and social tasks. Digital technology is unavoidable for most age-groups, so it is about kids learning to thrive in a digital age.

“Developing the critical skills that children need is vital, gradually releasing responsibility to them to interact safely with digital tools as they mature.”

Professor Mills said the impact of online influencers and the evolving AI landscape were key areas warranting discussion and education.

“Talk non-judgementally with children about influencers and encourage them to look for influencers who promote positive values. They should be aware of filters, AI imagery, and other tools that are used to airbrush and generate content that is not reality. Teach them to be sceptical of unrealistic beauty standards and shallow content. They should ask, ‘How might the influencer benefit from sharing this content?’” she said.

“A key skill they need with GenAI chatbots and the internet is to read it critically. Teach them to fact-check like a professional fact-checker by reading horizontally – that means they should always compare what they read to three reliable sources. Teach pre-teens and teens to ask three questions, ‘Who is behind it, what is the evidence for its claims, and what do other sources say?’”

To coincide with global Safer Internet Day tomorrow, Professor Mills has compiled 12 key tips to help families with children at different ages and stages of online experience:

1. Teach children to keep personal information private (e.g. name, address, phone number, school, photos).
2. Encourage children not to share passwords, and to use unique passwords for different applications.
3. Make kids aware of the risks of multiplayer games and social media sites where interactions with strangers occur. Advise children to only accept friend requests from those they know and trust in real life.
4. Develop a good relationship with your children about digital use, so they are comfortable showing you what they’ve seen online. Be calm, reassuring and non-judgemental when they talk to you.

5. Teach children to be critically literate by monitoring and reflecting on their internet habits.
6. Teach children about online scams and phishing attempts, such as through text messages, internet pop-ups, ads, and email.
7. Model safe internet practices as a parent and talk about what you do online to keep safe.
8. Set up parental controls on applications (e.g. Net Nanny, Norton Family), especially for young children.
9. Encourage interactive screen time (e.g. coding their own games, creating animations) over passive screen time and interact with young children about what they are doing.
10. Encourage children to limit their online screen time to short periods and encourage physical activity.
11. Understand algorithms and teach children to manage algorithms (change your default browser settings). Algorithms learn from your past internet use to target advertising and may send you popular posts that are often popular for the wrong reasons (e.g. fake news, extreme content).
12. Encourage children to share any instances they encounter of cyberbullying. They should never share or redistribute images of friends online for any purpose.

Professor Mills is available for interview.

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