

Online safety is built on early understandings of digital life



Children are increasingly spending time online, with technology being used in the classroom and at home. **The Alannah and Madeline Foundation, Australian Federal Police** and **eSafety Commissioner** introduce a free, evidence-based online safety resource designed to support educators and families.

It is never too early to start educating young children about online safety, and the new early learning resource *Playing IT Safe* helps educators and families start this journey. A free resource developed for prior-to-school aged children, it provides an introduction to digital technology and online safety education through preventative messaging and a series of play-based activities. *Playing IT Safe* was developed collaboratively by the Alannah and Madeline Foundation, the Australian Federal Police (AFP) and the eSafety Commissioner as an early education program for those who work to support children to be safe online.

Playing IT Safe is a response to research that indicates young children are being introduced to and accessing digital technology and the internet from a very young age. The most important thing for parents, carers and educators is to start the conversation about online safety with children from an early age in a way that is appropriate to their stage of development. By creating rules for device use with children, supervising their access and modelling appropriate use throughout all stages of their development, we create a family culture around expectations of appropriate and safe technology use. *Playing IT Safe* is designed to help educators and families do that work.

As young children are going through stages of developmental thinking and building their understanding of concepts to make sense of the world around them, they learn about all types of ways to be safe—including safe online practices. As they develop understandings of the internet, privacy and how technology connects people they begin to understand the need for online safety and why we should keep safety in mind whenever we are online. *Playing IT Safe* is about helping children learn about digital networks and the way digital technology is used in the world around them, rather than teaching children how to use technology or what the best apps are for educators.

Research by the eSafety Commissioner (2018) shows that 81% of parents and carers with children aged two to five report that their child uses the internet. Most consider online safety important, but less than half (34%) seek online safety information for their child.

'I think Playing IT Safe is inspiring, thought-provoking and has so many useful resources ... it made me reflect a lot on my philosophy and practices.'

—Anh Nguyen, educator, New South Wales.

Playing IT Safe draws on existing evidence-based research and programs, including the *Early Years Learning Framework* and Early Childhood Australia's *Statement on Young Children and Digital Technologies*, to ensure established processes have been implemented to explore and test different aspects of the program. The co-chair of the Digital Policy Group that developed the statement, Professor Susan Edwards, was an advisor during the development and a group of 20 early childhood educators supported the design and testing of the resource.

Playing IT Safe has been developed using the pedagogical theory that suggests children learn through different types of play, for both digital and non-digital learning experiences. The activities are designed to incorporate one or more of the different play types including open-ended play, modelled play and purposefully framed play, following two principles: each play type is equally important; and while the play types need to be used in conjunction with each other, they can be used in any order or arrangement.

The activities for preschoolers will help them better understand passwords and learn how to respond to pop-ups and also encourage help-seeking behaviours, especially in relation to online content that makes them feel uncomfortable or scared. The activities for infants and toddlers will help them explore the characteristics of digital things and the ways they are connected that make them useful but can also pose risks.

For educators, the Playing IT Safe activities and resources are designed to guide and support practice, recognising

the importance of context, and that educators themselves bring different approaches and styles to their work. These activities serve as idea-starters—prompts to give you the confidence to start drawing out children's stories and experiences of digital technology and networks, in early learning environments.

The AFP reports that the Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation is continuing to see reports involving younger victims. If parents, carers and educators commence age-appropriate conversations when children begin using technology, it can set the foundation for their ongoing protection and make online safety another educational fundamental.

Educators can access Playing IT Safe or register their interest in a professional development opportunity at: www.playingitsafe.org.au.

Additional resources

The eSafety Commissioner's professional learning modules for early years educators, which detail how to use the Playing IT Safe resources in early childhood settings, are available from: <https://www.esafety.gov.au/educators/training-for-professionals/early-years>.

Early Childhood Australia's 2018 *Statement on Young Children and Digital Technologies* is available from: <http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/our-work/submissions-statements/eca-statement-young-children-digital-technologies>.

Reference

Office of the eSafety Commissioner. (2018). *Parenting in the digital age: eSafety 2018 national survey of parents of children aged two to seven years*. Retrieved from <https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/research/parenting-digital-age>.

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