Children go online younger and longer as broadband continues to grow, according to new research from the ABA and NetAlert.

Internet safety needs highlighted as cyber survey reveals kids online younger and longer

NetAlert and the ABA have found that children are online younger and longer with the growth of broadband. They also found that while Australian parents and children are overwhelmingly positive about the benefits of the Internet, nearly forty per cent of parents said that their children have had a negative experience when using the Internet at home.

Their joint report, *kidsonline@home*, the second of its kind, shows parents are increasingly picking up on Internet safety messages. However, because of the dynamic nature of the medium, the findings also highlight the need for a continuing focus on education programs to keep children safe in the online environment. The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, Senator the Hon. Helen Coonan, launched the report at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney.

'As children's use of the Internet grows through multiple channels, so too must the time parents and teachers spend educating them about online safety. While it is encouraging to hear that the safety messages are getting through, the survey's finding that nearly twenty per cent of children were exposed to pornography or had communicated with a stranger online highlights the need for ongoing education,' said Kaaren Koomen, NetAlert Director.

'The most effective way for parents to keep their children safe on the Internet is through education. Kids are now using a wider range of applications than ever before. Instant messaging, for example, is now used as a communication tool by 40 per cent of children. Safety messages are having an effect, but the research findings have lessons for the ABA and

NetAlert in shaping our community awareness programs,' said Jane Marquard, ABA Board Member.

Forty per cent of children reported that they had 'accidentally found a website their parents would prefer them not to see', while 23 per cent of children reported that they had 'been contacted or sent messages by people they don't ▶

Online activities at home among children aged 10–13 years
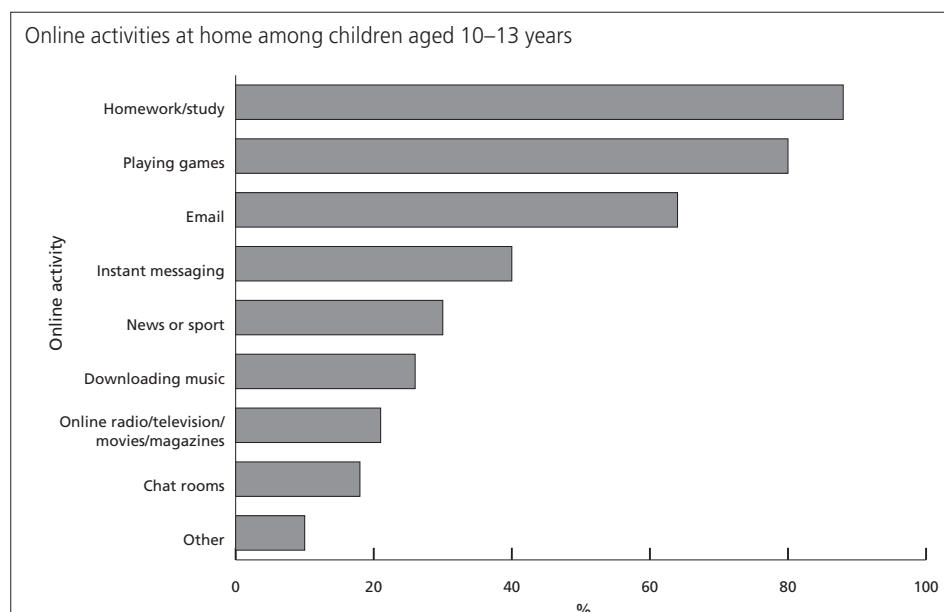
know'. Of those children who had accidentally found a website their parents would prefer them not to see, 42 per cent said the exposure was via a pop-up window. The most common cause of children being contacted online by people they didn't know was 'spam' emails (51 per cent).

The survey pointed to strong differences between parents' and childrens' concerns about online safety. Ninety-two per cent of parents mentioned an issue of concern about their child's use of the Internet. Sixty-three per cent of parents raised their child's exposure to pornography as an issue of concern, and 37 per cent mentioned that their child communicating with strangers online was an issue of concern.

When asked, 89 per cent of children mentioned 'at least one bad thing' that could happen to them when using the Internet. The most common issue of concern reported by children related to electronic viruses, hackers and spyware (26 per cent). Exposure to pornography and online communication with strangers were reported as issues of concern by 18 per cent and 20 per cent of children respectively.

Mobile phone use amongst children is high and increasing, with a quarter of 8 to 13 year olds now making use of mobiles. Parents' concerns about their children's use of mobiles generally relate to the costs of use, and not content issues. However this is likely to change as it becomes easier to access a wider range of content on mobile devices.

'With the rapid development of phone-based Internet access children may soon begin to face the same issues on their mobile phones - exposure to inappropriate content and communication with strangers - as they do on the Internet,' Ms. Marquard said.

In the coming months both NetAlert and the ABA will be

GOO... GOO... GOOGLE!

THEY ARE STARTING ON THE INTERNET YOUNGER AND YOUNGER

launching a series of initiatives to help educate parents, teachers, and children about Internet safety.

In June NetAlert will launch its National Road Show. The Road Show will visit schools, libraries, and community centres in each state and territory over the next two and a half years and provide training and education for parents and teachers.

The ABA will continue to roll out its online safety activity Net Detectives, and redevelop its safety website www.cybersmart kids.com.au.

NetAlert

NetAlert is Australia's Internet safety advisory body established by the Australian Government in late 1999 to provide independent advice and education

on managing access to and usage of the Internet. NetAlert operates a national help line, providing free Internet safety advice and resources for the community, and works closely with a variety of bodies, at both a national and international level, in order to promote the safety of children on the Internet. NetAlert's 'Netty's World' website, www.nettys world.com.au, helps young children learn about Internet safety through a range of interactive activities.

ABA

The ABA administers the co-regulatory scheme for Internet content established under Schedule 5 to the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992*. As part of the scheme, the ABA provides advice and assistance to families about a range of Internet safety matters, primarily through its Internet safety web site for families, www.cybersmartkids .com.au, and related printed resources. The ABA also operates a complaints hotline, which enables members of the public to report offensive Internet content,
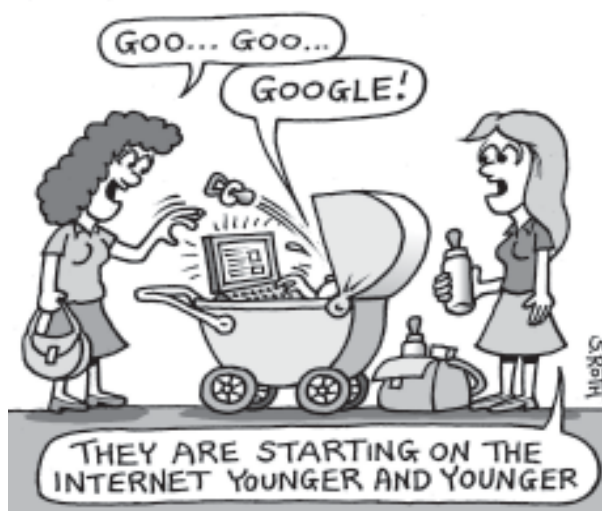
and works with the Internet industry in developing and registering codes of practices for ISPs and Internet content hosts. The ABA works with national and international bodies to raise awareness of Internet safety issues and provide parents with information that helps them supervise their children's Internet usage.

Research methodology

The study drew on both quantitative and qualitative methodologies in a three-stage approach. This approach allowed the ABA and NetAlert to interview 502 children and their parents from across Australia, to conduct two targeted focus group discussions and five in-depth interviews with parents and children in their homes, and to draw these findings together in the context of data from existing sources.

The research targeted the online attitudes and behaviours of children aged 8 to 13 and their parents. The ABA's and NetAlert's work in this area has indicated that children's Internet use increases significantly over these years. The research findings show that daily use of the Internet more than trebled between 8–9 and 12–13 year olds.

The study examined Australian families' Internet behaviours in relation to traditional uses such as web browsing as well as more recent developments such as instant messaging and mobile telephones. The inclusion of these newer technologies in the study allowed increasingly popular children's activities to be reported (such as the finding that 40 per cent

of children aged 8–13 were using instant messaging).

Key Findings

Usage

• *Broadband penetration in Australian homes has almost doubled since 2003. In the current study, 37 per cent of the family households surveyed had broadband connections.*

Broadband access was shown to have a significant impact on the frequency and duration of time spent online among family members, particularly children. Twice as many children with broadband connection accessed the Internet on a daily basis as children with dial-up access.

• *The most popular uses of the Internet for children were for homework/study (88 per cent), games (80 per cent) email (64 per cent) and instant messaging (40 per cent).*

Communication applications such as instant messaging were particularly popular among girls and older children (12–13 year olds) while entertainment applications such as games websites and music applications were particularly popular among boys and younger children (8–11 year olds).

• *Children's Internet use was viewed by many parents to be a personal activity,* particularly for online communication activities such as email and instant messaging. Children reported that many of their online activities were undertaken without the involvement of others. Instant messaging, for example, was used daily by almost one-third of children on their own.

Perceptions/experiences

• *Ninety-nine per cent of parents perceived the Internet to be of benefit to their children.* Both parents and children perceived the Internet to most benefit children's homework/study. However, parents more commonly perceived the Internet to be of benefit for their children's entertainment, and children more commonly perceived the Internet to be useful for communication.

• *Ninety-two per cent of parents reported an issue of concern about their child's use of the Internet.* Sixty three per cent of parents reported their child's exposure to pornography as an issue of concern (40 per cent of parents reported this to be the issue of most concern to them); 37 per cent also reported that their child communicating with strangers online was an issue of concern (22 per cent reported it as the issue of most concern).

• *Thirty-eight per cent of parents reported that their child had experienced an issue of concern while using the Internet at home.* Of these parents, 16 per cent reported that their child had been exposed to pornography and 3 per cent reported that their child had communicated with strangers online. Sixty-two per cent said there were no issues of concern.

• *Children's concerns about their Internet use differed markedly from their parents' concerns.* Eighty-nine per cent of children mentioned 'at least one bad thing' that could happen to them when using the Internet. The most common issue of concern reported by children related to electronic viruses, hackers and spyware (26 per cent). Exposure to pornography and online communication with strangers were reported as issues of concern by 18 per cent and 20 per cent of children respectively.

• *Forty per cent of children reported that they had 'accidentally found a website their parents would prefer them not to see'* (19 per cent reported that this had occurred a few times). Twenty-three per cent of children reported that they had 'been contacted or sent messages by people they don't know' (11 per cent reported that this had occurred a few times). Of those children who had accidentally found a website their parents would prefer them not to see, 42 per cent said the exposure was via a pop-up window. The most common cause of being contacted online by people they don't know was 'spam' emails (51 per cent).

• *Children reported taking action in relation to a negative online experience,* especially telling a parent (23 per cent of children) or avoiding the cause (24 per cent of children). Three-quarters of parents reported taking action in response to their child's negative online experience, including changing or imposing new rules or technical solutions ▶

Popular Internet applications for children aged 8–13 years, by gender
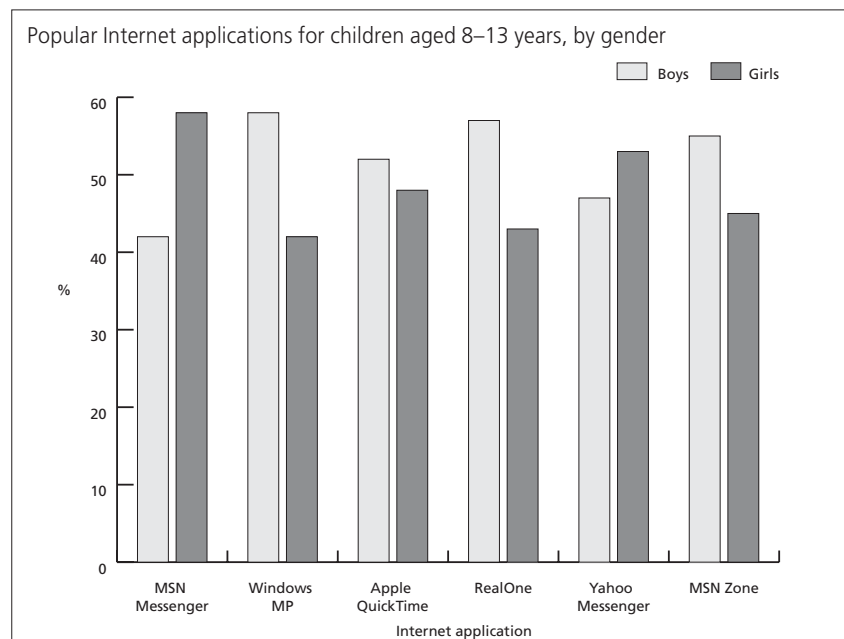
(such as filters). Parents discussed the experience with their child or used the opportunity to educate their child about how to avoid the experience in future.

Safety strategies

- *Ninety-two per cent of parents were involved in their child's Internet use in some way –*

through participation, supervision, education, rule-setting or monitoring. The most common method of involvement was supervision (two-thirds of parents reported exercising some form of supervision over their child's Internet use).

- *Parents' use of both behavioural rules and filter software has increased markedly.*

A far higher proportion of parents reported setting rules in relation to website access (73 per cent) and Internet activities (80 per cent) than in 2001 (58 per cent across both types of rules). Similarly, twice as many parents than in 2001 reported using filter software to block inappropriate websites on the home computer (35 per cent compared with 17 per cent). More parents were employing behavioural rules and utilising filter software on a regular basis than on an occasional basis.

- *Parents' use of more time-intensive forms of supervision decreased as their child aged.*

The proportion of parents of 12–13 year olds who directly participated in their children's online activities was half that of parents of 8–9 year olds; the proportion of parents of 12–13 year olds who monitored their children's entire activities was two-thirds that of parents of 8–9 year olds.

Safety information

- *A high proportion of parents (79 per cent) reported having received safety information in relation to children's Internet safety; 27 per cent of children reported having obtained such information.*

However, both parents and children displayed high levels of interest in obtaining information about a variety of children's online safety topics.

- *As was the case in 2001, parents expected Internet safety information to be provided through a number of channels,*

including schools, websites, and Internet service providers. However, parents' expectation that Internet service providers and government departments/agencies should play a key role in providing Internet safety information was more pronounced in the 2004 findings.

- *Few parents (4 per cent) had ever reported their children's negative online experience to a person or body.*

Almost half of all parents stated not knowing who they would contact.

Mobile telephones

- *Mobile telephone use among 8–13 year old children is high and is increasing.*

One quarter of children aged 8–13 make regular use of a mobile telephone and another 14 per cent of parents intend to provide their children with one in the next 12 months.

- *Currently, children aged 8–13 are predominantly using their mobile telephone for voice calls and simple message service (sms) texting.*

There is only minimal use of the type of mobile telephone features (such as Internet connectivity) that potentially give rise to the same content and communication concerns that are raised in relation to children's use of the Internet (such as exposure to inappropriate Internet content).

- *Currently, other than in relation to financial issues such as large bills, few parents reported an issue of concern about children's mobile telephone use*

and few parents were involved in their children's use of the mobile telephone. This appears related to the finding that very few children currently use the telephone for anything other than voice calls and sms texting (as above). Consequently, mobile telephone safety concerns and safety management strategies may change as children's mobile telephone usage patterns change.

Previous ABA research

The research builds on the ABA's 2001 study, *Internet@home* which surveyed a different demographic (households with children under 18 years, compared with households with children aged 8–13 in the current study). Some general observations have emerged, however:

- Daily use: in 2004, 37 per cent of 8–13 year old children were online daily. In 2001, only five per cent of 11 to 12 years olds were online on a daily basis.
- Issues of concern: in 2004, 92 per cent of parents surveyed mentioned an issue of concern relating to their children's Internet use. In 2001, this figure was 84 per cent.
- Parental action: in 2004, 73 per cent of parents reported taking some form of action in response to a child's negative online experience. In 2001, only 42 per cent of parents had taken protective action.
- Filter software: in 2004, 35 per cent of parents used software to filter inappropriate websites. In 2001, 17 per cent of parents surveyed reported using filter software.
- Rule setting: in 2004, 73 per cent of parents reported setting rules on their child's access to websites, and 80 per cent reported setting rules on what online activities their child can undertake. In 2001, 58 per cent of parents stated they set rules on where their child can go and what they can do online.

kidsonline@home
Internet use in Australian homes

Copies of kidsonline@home are available from the ABA, price $20, tel: 1800 226 667 or (02) 9334 7700, or view the entire report on the ABA web site, www.aba.gov.au/store/index.htm.