ESAFE SPACES

LIBRARIES TO HELP BATTLE CYBERBULLYING

#!@*#!

L ibraries ACT are pioneering a federal government pilot program to help prevent cyberbullying – eSafe spaces. This aims to develop libraries as places where young people can seek help to lodge a complaint, which can lead to the removal of cyberbullying material. HEATHER WELLARD talks to Australia's first Children's eSafety Commissioner.

Cyberbullying has become a significant issue for many young people as they interact through social media. A recent report shows around one in five young Australians aged eight to 17 experience cyberbullying over the course of a year. The report also found that one of the reasons for the increase in cyberbullying is that it is difficult to detect, the bullies are much less likely to face consequences and there is a lack of awareness of the potential effects of cyberbullying on victims.

Enter Australia's first Children's eSafety Commissioner, Alastair MacGibbon. He's responsible for online safety education for Australian children and young people, protecting them when they experience serious cyberbullying and managing complaints about offensive or illegal online content. His goal is to create an environment in which cyberbullying is truly unacceptable – because all kids deserve to be safe online.

The Commissioner needs to educate and inform the public that there is a comprehensive complaints mechanism in place to assist children who experience serious cyberbullying. Enter ALIA and the Australian Public Library Alliance, which have provided access to libraries to create a network where children can seek such assistance.

When the Commissioner presented his idea of a pilot program to the Australian Public Library Alliance meeting in Melbourne in July last year, all expressed a desire to participate. Libraries ACT volunteered to be the first library to have selected staff trained to help children and young people.

Mr MacGibbon said, 'An important aspect is creating the "spaces" where children can be "safe", not just online but also offline – spaces where advice can be easily found, and expert help and support is readily available. These are the key features of our new eSafe space program. Working in collaboration with ALIA and Libraries ACT, we have trained library staff in the detail of our new complaints scheme so they can help guide children and families who are experiencing cyberbullying. They can provide the on-the-spot advice that is needed, as well as assistance in lodging a complaint.'

> 'Libraries have long been considered a "safe and trusted space".'

He said he was keen to work with libraries because they are trusted spaces. 'Librarians are at the frontline – each day hundreds of children, parents and grandparents visit libraries, seeking not just information, but also educational opportunities, social activities and connection to the wider world. Libraries have long been considered a "safe and trusted space". Research into the bullying of young Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) people showed that libraries are seen as a sanctuary from bullying experienced elsewhere; they can create an inclusive and welcoming environment for all young people. My office, and the Cybersmart program, have had a long and positive partnership with libraries in Australia. Through partnering with ALIA to produce specific library-focused resources, our relationship with the Alannah and Madeline Foundation and the eSmart Libraries program, and now to our pilot of the eSafe space

program, we acknowledge the vital role that libraries and librarians play in the lives of their community.'

The Office of the Children's eSafety Commissioner has compiled some impressive resources for community use. The website has videos, brochures which can be downloaded, infographics and the online cyberbullying reporting mechanism.

Library ACT staff were formally trained by the Office's Senior Education Advisor, Kellie Britnell. The training covered the role and functions of the Office of the Children's eSafety Commissioner, the cyberbullying complaint handling process, a practical demonstration of how to use the complaint form, ways to assist children dealing with cyberbullying, and other helpful resources on esafety.gov.au. Trained staff now wear a special lanyard which says: 'This is an eSafe space, we're here to help'.

According to Sue McKerracher, CEO of ALIA, 'This is an excellent example of how public libraries can support federal, state and territory government initiatives. Councils provide a network of 1,500 public libraries across Australia that have over 112 million customer visits each year.'

The pilot will run for six months in 10 ACT libraries with the view to rolling it out to all public libraries across Australia through the ALIA Australian Public Library Alliance (APLA). The importance of this project is obvious because there is significant harm associated with cyberbullying. Several studies have concluded that it is more hurtful than name-calling and can lead to serious social and other problems later in life. This is because it

Office of the Children's eSafety Commissioner
Australian Government

How to report cyberbullying material

1 Report the cyberbullying material to the social media service

2 Collect evidence—copy URLs or take screenshots of the material

If the content is not removed within 48 hours …

3 Report it to www.esafety.gov.au/reportcyberbullying

4 Block the person and talk to someone you trust

If you are in immediate danger, call Triple Zero (000).
If you need to talk to someone, visit Kids Helpline online or call them on 1800 55 1800, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

is more likely to involve more exposure and humiliation, can last longer and can be more difficult to escape from. The Commissioner says this pilot is one of the first steps to encourage significant behavioural change.

HEATHER WELLARD
ALIA Communications Manager
heather.wellard@alia.org.au