

COMMENTARY

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Keeping our young people safe in the virtual world

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Safety online is a topic I am regularly asked about, including what content filtering system the school has in place, what is age-appropriate in terms of access to social media, and questions about the use of AI and the sharing of digital information.

Unfortunately, unchecked access to the Internet can mean that some young people are exposed to risks when they are online or using social media. Unchecked access to the Internet is like leaving your front door open and allowing complete strangers to enter and stay in your house.

I believe it's important that we build teenagers' skills and knowledge so they can independently identify and manage risks associated with their use of the Internet. For example, AI can be a really useful tool for research, but there are risks associated with its use, particularly around how images can be manipulated and shared.

At MAC, our Health Education studies emphasise that the online world can be both a rewarding and a stressful environment. We promote ways for students to keep themselves safe online, and show them how their parents, friends and school can help protect them.

When a student is using the school wifi, they are protected by the Ministry of Education's Network 4 Learning filtering. Trust is a big part of this because if a student uses a VPN or accesses the Internet using their own data, the school cannot exercise the same amount of control and protection.

Trust between parents and their children is also essential. Negotiating expectations around what can be shared and when, and how access to the Internet is managed is critical - it's essentially about setting the ground rules to ensure the user's safety. Having open conversations with young people about the risk of being exposed to upsetting content can encourage young people to talk to their parents if they have a disturbing online experience.

Parents and caregivers can take steps to protect their children, including checking the privacy settings of their child's social media accounts, turning off location sharing on social media platforms, and reviewing the content and image/s their child may have published as part of their online profiles.

There is a range of parental controls recommended by the New Zealand government site 'Keep it real online' and 'Netsafe', New Zealand's independent, non-profit online safety organisation.

We also have an expert pastoral care team at MAC to support our students and we encourage parents and caregivers to get in touch with us if they think their child has been exposed to the harmful effects of the Internet.

Useful resources

netsafe.org.nz/parental-controls/

[www.Keepitrealonline.govt.nz/parents/controls-and-settings/
mtaspiring.school.nz/resources-for-parents/](http://www.Keepitrealonline.govt.nz/parents/controls-and-settings/mtaspiring.school.nz/resources-for-parents/)

More information

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