2026 APPA National Conference

eSafety Commissioner – 1st September 2026

From playground to platform: building socially and emotionally safer schools and online communities

Who is eSafety?

The following resources are hyperlinked (hover over the text with your cursor).

eSafety's purpose is to help safeguard all Australians from online harms and to promote safer, more positive online experiences. We use research, evidence and experience to lead and advise on online safety issues.

eSafety website
What eSafety does
Subscribe to the eSafety newsletter

Newsletter content

eSafety Advisories and blogs
Key topics

eSafety training for schools, professionals and community

eSafety offers a range of online safety training programs free of charge. We promote online safety and help build relevant online safety skills for primary school aged children, educators and parents and carers.

Virtual classrooms for Years 3 and 4 and Years 5 and 6
Training for educators and youth-serving professionals
Webinars for parents and carers

Reporting

eSafety has substantial powers to protect all Australians across most online platforms and forums where people experience abuse or harm.

Report online harm
What you can report to eSafety

Dealing with fight videos
Report image-based abuse
Report forms
How to collect evidence
Flowchart and summary table of what you can report and how | eSafety Commissioner

The changing online landscape and emerging risks

According to parents and carers, **97% of children aged 3 to 10 have been online**, with 96% going online for fun and 71% using technology for learning. Children are first using digital devices (typically tablets) from around age 3 to 4, with first smartphone ownership typically occurring around age 9 to 11.

This reality means primary school is a **critical window** for building the foundations of safe online behaviour, well before the higher-risk adolescent years.

The evolving nature of harm

Online risks have shifted from an "occasionally connected" to an "always connected" world. Key emerging threats highlighted by eSafety include:

AI-driven environments: 78% of Australian children have used an AI assistant or companion; 22% used one to chat about their feelings or challenges, and 20% sought advice about their mental health or wellbeing.

Social media age restrictions are only one part of the landscape

Children continue to access risks through messaging apps, online gaming, generative AI tools and group chats, spaces that remain largely invisible to most adults.

Social and emotional learning as the foundation of online safety

The most important online safety intervention doesn't happen online

Children who feel a strong sense of connection and belonging, and who feel safe with trusted adults, are significantly more likely to disclose when something goes wrong online.

Social and emotional learning in primary school creates the neural foundations for:

- **Empathy**: the capacity to consider how actions affect others online
- **Self-awareness**: recognising when something online feels wrong

- **Responsible decision-making**: responding to risk, knowing who to turn and help-seeking
- **Social awareness**: responding to peer pressure and stereotypes

These are the skills that determine whether a child discloses, resists pressure or seeks help in an online safety incident. Importantly, children who have been actively encouraged to speak up are dramatically more likely to do so, 95% versus 81%.

The awareness gap

Research shows significant parental awareness gaps: **25% of parents did not know their child had shared their real-time location** with someone outside the family; 16% were unaware their child had used generative AI; and 30% of children aged 10 to 12 had communicated online with someone they do not know in real life. During the first three months of 2026, there was a **10% increase** in Australian children aged 10 to 12 hiding their social media use from parents, underscoring why regular communication with your child is so important.

The parental engagement gap

49% of parents report feeling worried, anxious or uncomfortable about their child being online, yet only 24% regularly seek information or advice on how to keep their child safe. Most are waiting for guidance to come to them. Over a quarter of parents cite barriers including not knowing how to start conversations, discomfort or lack of knowledge. Fathers and male carers are notably less likely to initiate online safety conversations, representing a specific gap that schools may consider.

The lasting impact of primary school leadership

The role of a primary school leader is about prevention, not reaction. It is about setting the tone, creating the culture and building the systems where children feel safe to speak up and adults feel confident enough to act. Skills developed in primary school directly shape how young people navigate the dramatically higher-risk online environment of adolescence.

Practical tools, resources and action planning

eSafety supports schools through three interconnected areas:

1. **Awareness of emerging threats** — keeping educators informed about new platforms and risks
2. **Practical tools and resources** — a suite of free, evidence-based materials
3. **Confidence in leading a positive eSafety culture** — building whole-school capability

eSafety resources for schools

Best Practice Framework for Online Safety Education establishes a consistent national approach that supports education sectors across Australia to deliver high quality online safety education.

The **Toolkit for Schools** includes over 40 guidance resources across four elements: Prepare, Engage, Educate and Respond. Specific resources include:

- Online safety self-assessment tool
- Activities for students to take the lead in online safety
- Responding to online safety incidents
- Tips for parent/carer education and engagement
- Student voice surveys and classroom activities

Kids: Primary school resources. Might Heroes adventures and Robo Raven and the Ancient Relics. An interactive game-based classroom resource for middle primary students, covering digital footprints, cyberbullying, help-seeking, critical thinking and media literacy, including identifying fake news and online scams.

Small acts, big impact — a virtual classroom resource for Years 5 and 6 focused on recognising stereotypes and peer pressure.

Parents: information, videos and resources for parents and carers including 'How to talk with 0-12 year olds", Family Tech Agreements and 'Easy-to-read advice sheets with translations'.

The eSafety Guide - provides information about the latest games, apps and social media, including how to protect your information and report harmful content

Professional learning for lower primary educators — four self-paced modules covering: using technology safely and responsibly; being respectful online; building resilience and help-seeking skills; and fostering early critical thinking

Upcoming free professional learning webinars for educators include:

- Connection, belonging and online risks (9 September 2026)
- Influencers, ideology and impact (16 September 2026)
- How AI increases online risks for children and young people (28 October 2026).

Upcoming free webinars for parents and carers include:

- Understanding and using parental controls (22 October 2026)
- Navigating screen time (11 November 2026)
- How AI increases online risks (19 November 2026)

Suggested action plan for school leader

Next week - Choose one resource from the Toolkit for Schools to share with your team

Next term - Plan one parent engagement activity

Next 12 months - Review and update school communications to reflect online expectations

References

eSafety Commissioner. *(2026). Balancing risk and reward: Parenting in the digital world. Australian Government.*

eSafety Commissioner. *(2026). Connected, curious, cautious: Children's engagement in the digital world. Australian Government.*

eSafety Commissioner. (2026). *Early days, early insights: Understanding experiences of social media age restrictions at the three-month follow-up.* Australian Government.

eSafety Commissioner. (2026). *Growing up online: Parenting young children in the digital age.* Australian Government.

eSafety Commissioner. (2026). *Talking to machines: Children's experiences with AI assistants and companions.* Australian Government.

Father-specific engagement strategies in parenting interventions | Australian Institute of Family Studies

Last updated: 1 September 2026