



Youth Digital Wellbeing



Research Report 2024

Digital Waitaha Charitable Trust

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Introduction

As students become increasingly active online, it is essential to help them navigate both the benefits and challenges of digital technology. According to the New Zealand Teens' Digital Profile: A Factsheet (2018), nearly one-third of teens spend four or more hours online daily, while 38% report two to four hours. Although this data is six years old, feedback from New Zealand primary and intermediate students during discussions with the report's authors suggests that online engagement has likely risen significantly since then.

With more time spent on devices and the blending of online and offline experiences, concerns about young people's wellbeing and safety in digital spaces have intensified. Our research was conducted with focus groups of students in school years 5 to 8 (ages 9-13) from Waitaha (Canterbury), Aotearoa New Zealand. We sought to explore young people's perspectives on online safety and wellbeing. Through thematic analysis, we identified key themes related to their online engagement, concerns, strategies for navigating risks, and areas where they seek guidance from parents, teachers, and peers.

This study forms part of an ongoing collaboration between Digital Waitaha and the University of Canterbury to create effective strategies and educational programmes for online safety and wellbeing, empowering youth to manage their digital wellbeing from the moment they are handed a device in an ever-evolving digital landscape.

Research Highlights

Our top three takeaways from this study are:

1

Students can effectively manage their digital wellbeing and safety but would benefit from structured strategies.

They demonstrated a proactive approach to digital wellbeing and safety (DWS) by using privacy settings, sharing false location information to protect personal information, and staying away from platforms where they engaged with random users.

Additionally, students value sharing and receiving advice from peers, for example, exchanging tips on verifying identities and managing digital challenges. This highlights their desire for self-protective behaviours and their willingness to seek help when facing online threats like scams or hacking attempts on popular gaming platforms.

Students understand online challenges decently well and often exhibit proactive behaviour in addressing them. However, they would benefit from more structured strategies to help them respond effectively and confidently to these challenges. Without explicit guidance, students may default to passive or reactionary responses, for example, quickly shutting down devices when uncomfortable situations arise, which may only temporarily remove the threat without resolving the underlying risk.

2

Students can recognise a range of online risks they may face.

Participants demonstrated a strong awareness of prominent online risks, including online bullying, privacy breaches, exposure to explicit content and receiving unsolicited naked photos on platforms. Participants expressed fears about sharing personal information online and apprehension over features that can track their location. They voiced worries about scams and catfishing incidents and recounted real experiences.

Research Highlights

continued

3

Students seek guidance and accountability from adults and tech companies.

Students clearly expressed a desire for structured support and expect adults and institutions to take greater responsibility in helping them stay safe online. They advocate for regular DWS training, appreciate parental guidance, and prefer when parents monitor app usage, enforce time limits, and review downloads. Additionally, students want tech companies to enforce stricter content moderation, especially on platforms where they frequently encounter inappropriate ads and explicit material. They also value safety tools, such as parental controls, and advocate for technology companies to adopt more rigorous measures for protecting young users from harmful content.



Youth Digital Wellbeing and Safety

Key Insights and Challenges

Research gaps

Digital safety and wellbeing are recognised as crucial for youth, yet current research remains limited in scope. Studies often focus narrowly on topics like healthy screen time and online bullying, with the broader spectrum of digital interactions young people encounter less frequently addressed. Where research does exist, it typically centres on secondary and, occasionally, intermediate students, with little attention to the experiences of primary-aged students. Although some data exists from adult perspectives—including those of parents, teachers, and industry experts—substantial gaps persist, particularly around the lived experiences of students' digital lives. For example, research has identified key concerns expressed by educators and parents about young people's access to inappropriate content, online harassment, personal data misuse, and a lack of awareness about online dangers (Martin et al., 2022). However, the understanding of youth perspectives in this area remains notably underexplored.

Youth voice is overlooked

Incorporating young people's insights, experiences, and voices within digital wellbeing research is critical, as they offer an authentic account of online challenges. While adult perspectives are valuable, they can only partially capture youth's qualitative lived experiences in navigating digital landscapes. The lack of youth-centred qualitative research restricts our understanding and limits the relevance of existing interventions. By engaging with students directly, we can ensure that DWS strategies align more closely with their real-world experiences, making these efforts more impactful and relatable.

Collaboration with youth has shown that their input helps researchers focus on topics that matter most to them and encourages the development of methods that diverge from typical adult-led approaches (Evidence Based Practice Unit, 2023). This partnership leads to a more in-depth understanding of youth wellbeing, enabling more informed decisions on service improvements that are genuinely responsive to young people's emotional health needs.



Youth Digital Wellbeing and Safety

Key Insights and Challenges

continued

Limitations of quantitative data

Research on youth online experiences is often hindered by limited methodologies and the assumption that digital interactions are mainly harmful. Large-scale surveys typically lack a youth-centred approach, focusing instead on risks while neglecting online engagement's diverse experiences and potential benefits (The Children's Society, 2022). This bias can obscure a deeper understanding of how young people navigate their digital lives and may reinforce adult preconceptions, overlooking complexities in online interactions and amplifying offline challenges. Addressing these gaps could enhance insights into how youth manage risks and seize opportunities online.

When parents or guardians are involved in surveys, the emphasis often shifts to the negative aspects of digital interactions, such as risky behaviours and online bullying. Additionally, students may feel uncomfortable discussing personal experiences in their parents' presence, leading to a failure to recognise young people's positive and proactive steps to ensure their digital safety and wellbeing. A qualitative approach encourages more in-depth conversations, allowing youth to share the positive and challenging aspects of their online experiences.



Youth Digital Wellbeing and Safety

Key Insights and Challenges

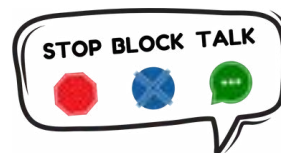
continued

Digital Waitaha Charitable Trust's STOP, BLOCK & TALK programme

The Digital Waitaha Charitable Trust developed the STOP, BLOCK & TALK® (SBT) for DWS programme in response to online safety concerns that Waitaha High School students raised, who felt they faced online challenges without sufficient adult guidance. Designed for students of all ages, SBT introduces a preventative digital wellbeing strategy accessible to everyone, from new entrants and older early childhood students to adults. The SBT strategy adapts as students' online interactions evolve. Delivered across schools, SBT educates young people about online safety through creative, interactive, and age-appropriate methods, incorporating discussions, relatable scenarios, and practical strategies based on students' lived experiences. The Digital Ambassadors initiative also empowers students to promote digital safety practices within their learning environments. This peer-led approach enhances programme effectiveness by fostering shared responsibility and providing a sustainable way to reinforce digital safety messages long after formal sessions.

Central to the programme are three simple yet powerful steps when faced with harmful or uncomfortable online content:

STOP engaging with the situation,
BLOCK the person or content, and
TALK to a trusted adult or friend for support.



These actions are designed to be easy to remember and implement, helping young people take control of their digital experiences while encouraging a safe and responsible approach to online interactions.



STOP, BLOCK & TALK is a registered trademark for use by Digital Waitaha Charitable Trust

Research Findings

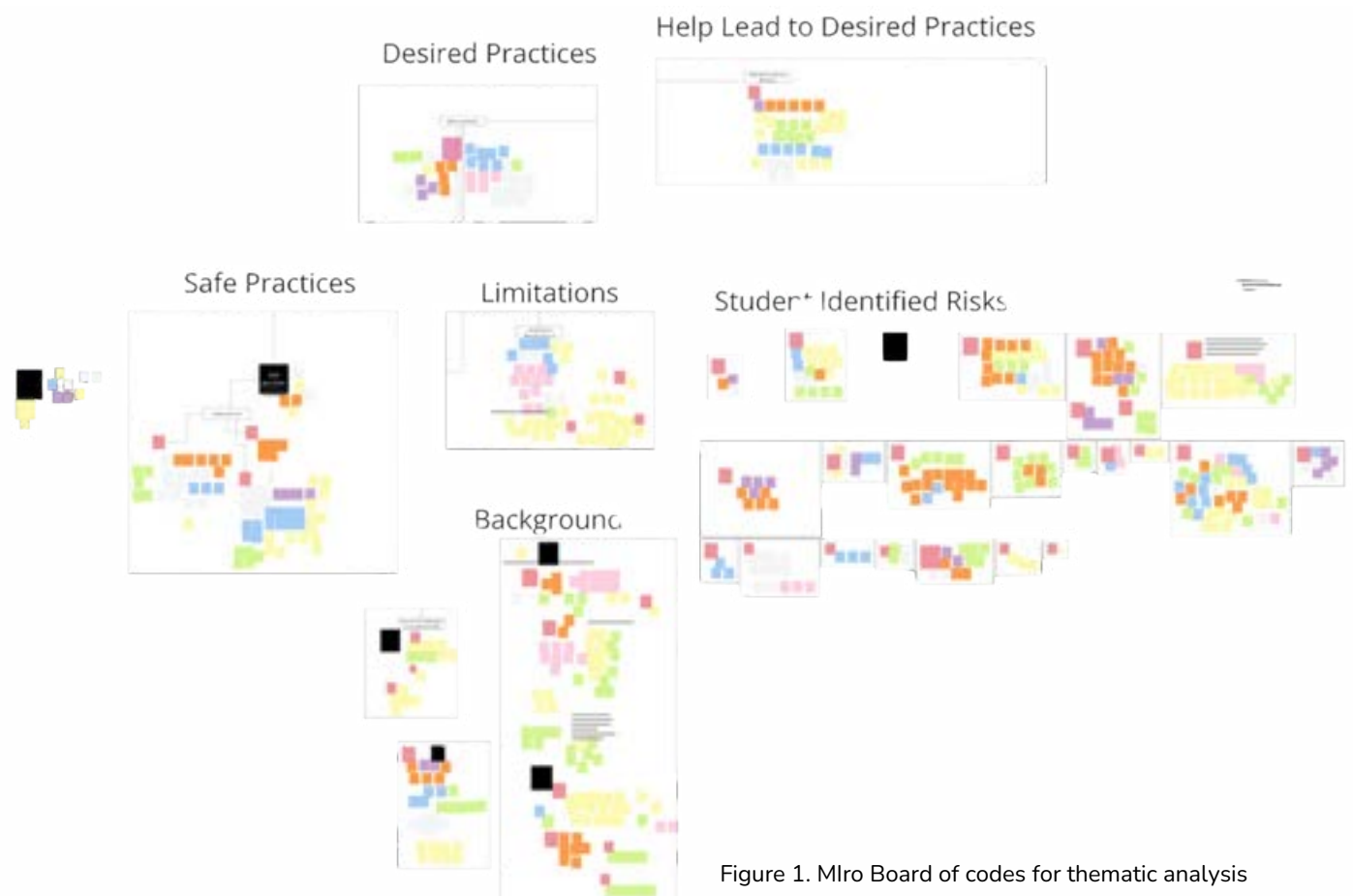


Figure 1. MLro Board of codes for thematic analysis

To ensure maximum anonymity, students participated in focus group sessions organised by school year—Years 5–6 or Years 7–8. The interviewer did not record individual details, therefore we cannot specify the gender or exact year level of each student, only their year group.

Student Insights and Practices on Digital Wellbeing and Safety

Group discussions offer valuable insights into students' practices regarding digital safety and wellbeing.

“

“I haven't gone on Roblox for a long time.”

“...you could have it every year so that you remember it and know what to do.”

“You can tell your friends [about STOP, BLOCK & TALK] so they know, and they can tell other people.”

“Yeah, we're definitely more cautious now, I'd say.”

“I say I live in China.”

“I have seen people who have two year olds, like four year olds on TikTok, which is insane. I don't think that's okay.”

“I care a lot about my privacy,”

“a bit scary”

“Don't get apps...that aren't good.”

“Whatever you put online can stay online forever,”

“Only talk to people you know.”

“It asks your parents, ‘Can this person be added...’”

“the mark you make when you're on anything digital”

“It's just comfortable to know that you have STOP, BLOCK & TALK.”

“If you swear on an app and someone's making a video of that... it's still up on there forever.”

“And when you sign up, you have to have your parents.”

”

Student Insights and Practices

on Digital Wellbeing and Safety

Privacy

Students from all groups acknowledged the significance of digital privacy and expressed a readiness to take measures to protect their information. This is evident in the ways they manage their locations on social media, employ privacy strategies to reduce risks, and maintain control over who can access their personal details.

In six out of seven groups, students emphasised the importance of protecting their private information, with some using protective measures such as sharing false location details. In a Year 5-6 session, one student remarked, **“I care a lot about my privacy,”** while another shared, **“I say I live in China,”** to obscure their location and ensure privacy.

Year 7-8 students expressed concerns about location tracking in apps like **Snapchat**, specifically the **Snap Map** feature, which reveals users’ real-time locations. While some students limit access to this feature for close friends or family only, others found it **“a bit scary”** to have their whereabouts visible.

Digital footprint

Students across all age groups showed awareness of their **digital footprint** – the trail of data one leaves behind while using the internet – and their lasting effects. One student explained it as **“the mark you make when you’re on anything digital”**, comparing it to a fingerprint. They acknowledged the permanence of online actions, with one noting, **“Whatever you put online can stay online forever,”** even if it’s later removed. Another student added, **“If you swear on an app and someone’s making a video of that... it’s still up on there forever,”** underscoring the risks of screenshotted or shared content without their control.

Did you know?

Snapchat was the most popular app mentioned across all focus groups.

Snapchat is a messaging app where users share photos, videos, and messages that disappear after being viewed. Known for its "Stories" feature which shows content for 24 hours,

Features:

Interactive filters – special effects that change the appearance of photos or videos.

Lenses – augmented reality effects that alter your face or surroundings in real-time.

The app includes **Snap Map**, which lets friends see each other’s location on a map in real-time.

Student Insights and Practices

on Digital Wellbeing and Safety

continued

Peer advice

Students in Years 5-8 enjoy giving peer advice on digital safety. They shared tips on caution, safety settings, and limits on social media use. This peer-to-peer guidance includes general advice on staying safe online and specific strategies, such as suggestions from year 7-8 students: **“Only talk to people you know”** and **“Don’t get apps...that aren’t good. Just know what you want and know what’s good.”** They are eager to look out for each other’s safety and wellbeing, highlighting a sense of collective responsibility.

Older students (Years 7-8) provide more detailed advice about specific safety tools, platform features, and the importance of adult guidance. For instance, they discussed the parental control features on Messenger Kids and suggested consulting adults for app choices. Their advocacy extends to concerns about inappropriate content, as illustrated by one student’s caution regarding **TikTok**: **“I feel like TikTok ads make it seem like it’s a similar ... to YouTube, but I saw someone seeing really disgusting inappropriate things. I have seen people who have two year olds, like four year olds on TikTok, which is insane. I don’t think that’s okay.”** This sentiment underscores their awareness of the dangers present in online spaces, further motivating them to share insights and protect their peers.

Overall, the students’ proactive sharing of advice and strategies demonstrates an active role in creating a supportive environment for digital safety. Their discussions reveal a commitment to safeguarding one another and a collective understanding that sharing knowledge can strengthen their peer group’s resilience against online risks.

Did you know?

Digital Footprint is the trail of data one leaves behind while using the internet. It encompasses everything from browsing history and social media posts to shared videos and comments, and it is often permanent—even if deleted, there is no certainty that someone has not already screenshotted or shared it elsewhere. Understanding digital footprints is crucial, as they shape online reputation, impact relationships, and affect opportunities in the future.

TikTok is a popular video-sharing app where users create, watch, and share short videos set to music, comedy, or other audio clips. The app offers a range of editing tools, special effects, and filters, allowing users to add creative elements to their videos. Known for its viral challenges and trends, TikTok is widely used by young people.

Student Insights and Practices on Digital Wellbeing and Safety

continued

Did you know?

Messenger Kids is a messaging app for children that lets them chat with approved contacts managed by their parents through Facebook. Parents control the child's contact list, approve friends, and receive activity reports. The app includes features like stickers, GIFs, and drawing tools while offering safety features such as activity reports for parents and filters to block inappropriate content.

App safety features

Students were able to identify safety features in apps like **Messenger Kids**. One student remarked, **"It asks your parents, 'Can this person be added...'"** highlighting the app's requirement for parental approval when adding new contacts. Another student added, **"And when you sign up, you have to have your parents,"** emphasising the importance of parental involvement in ensuring safety.

Students can navigate online risks with the right resources and guidance

With the right resources and guidance, students can better navigate online risks. Many students already recognise potential hazards, including online bullying, privacy breaches, and exposure to inappropriate content. However, the findings suggest that gaps in their awareness of specific digital challenges still exist.

For example, one student shared an incident: **"My friend got stuck in a server with a bunch of people who were being incredibly rude and asking really personal information."**

The interviewer asked, **"What did your friend do?"**

The student replied, **"She tried to leave and ended up shutting down her phone."**

This exchange reflects a challenging experience where the student's friend felt uncomfortable with rude behaviour and intrusive personal questions. Although she recognised the discomfort, her immediate response was to shut down her phone. This reaction highlights a gap in online safety strategies. While she could identify the issue, she may not have been equipped with more effective options, such as blocking or reporting users or adjusting her privacy settings.

Student Insights and Practices

on Digital Wellbeing and Safety

continued

Advocate for digital wellbeing and safety training

Students in every group found the SBT programme helpful, with positive feedback across all age groups highlighting its influence on their approach to online interactions and encouraging positive behaviour changes in device use.

DWS training for years 5-8 highlights essential practices using SBT. In years 5-6, students actively use SBT to protect themselves online, such as reducing time on specific platforms. One student noted, **"I haven't gone on Roblox for a long time,"** while another shared, **"You can tell your friends [about SBT] so they know, and they can tell other people."**

For years 7-8, DWS training reinforces caution, with students supporting annual sessions to stay updated on online risks. One student remarked, **"...you could have it every year so that you remember it and know what to do,"** acknowledging the need for ongoing education. Students also view SBT as a helpful reminder for safe online practices, with one saying, **"It reminds you a bit."** Many students report feeling safer after training, indicating a shift towards greater awareness and a proactive approach to online risks, as one expressed, **"Yeah, we're definitely more cautious now, I'd say."** Overall, the students demonstrated a strong consensus on the need for ongoing digital safety education, with one summarising, **"It's just comfortable to know that you have STOP, BLOCK & TALK."**

Did you know?

Roblox is an online platform and app where users can play and create games. It hosts various user-generated games in different genres, from adventure to simulations and role-playing games. Players can customise avatars, interact with others in-game environments, and use "Robux," the platform's virtual currency, to buy items and upgrades. Popular with young people, Roblox allows for creative play and social interaction, though it has faced concerns around privacy, in-game purchases, and exposure to inappropriate content.

Student Awareness of Online Risks

Digital Wellbeing and Safety

Students provided valuable insights into their online concerns and challenges.

“

When my sister was like ten, nine. She was playing Adopt Me and got scammed for an Adopt Me pet.

Actually, what's happened to some people, well some boys, they've met someone that says they're a 10-year-old girl online; turns out they're an 18-year-old man.

“I just wanna ask, has anyone else noticed how many gambling websites there are?”

“My friend... said that she had Snapchat, and this random guy sent a nude to her. ... she said that she felt uncomfortable and just – a bit yuck?”

“Because it doesn't censor anything. It's not good for little peoples' eyes. Little peoples' brains.”

“You have the urge to turn it off, but you just can't; it keeps drawing you in.”

“brain and eye damage.”

“You don't want to look like a dork.”

“On TV they can show us parts that we don't want to see. Some people could be ... um nude.”

“We're getting false information online, and then you tell that person, that spreads...”

“I guess it's kind of also, you're seeing other people's bodies. Like real fit and healthy and that makes you kind of wanna - Like insecure.”

“Just stop. Why post something, why say something bad when they're just gonna feel worse about themselves?”

”

Student Awareness of Online Risks

Digital Wellbeing and Safety

Online safety concerns

Across year levels, students voiced concerns about scams and catfishing, while those in years 7-8 also highlighted the issue of misinformation. This illustrates their awareness of the risks and consequences linked to online interactions. Each group showcased distinct approaches to addressing these challenges, reflecting their understanding of safety practices and the necessity for continued support and education.

Scammers and hackers

Concerns over scammers and hackers were widespread, with many fearing account compromises and scams targeting family finances. The impact of scam prevention training was evident, as students highlighted increased awareness of deceptive links and **phishing** attempts.

Catfishing

Catfishing was a significant issue, with younger students detecting inconsistencies in online identities. In comparison, older students described methods for recognising fake profiles, especially in social media and gaming contexts.

False information

Difficulty identifying false information was also discussed, and students doubted the credibility of some sources. They demonstrated some information-verifying techniques, though concerns about the spread of misinformation persisted.

In general, the students displayed an understanding of these online risks, using diverse strategies to protect themselves and expressing the need for continued guidance.

Did you know?

Phishing is an online scam where attackers impersonate legitimate organisations or individuals to trick people into revealing sensitive information, such as usernames, passwords, or credit card details. This is typically done through fake emails, websites, or messages that contain urgent requests or misleading offers.

Catfishing involves creating a fake online identity to deceive others. Perpetrators may use stolen photos and false information or impersonate someone else on social media, dating sites, or gaming platforms. According to Ryan and Taylor (2024), catfish perpetrators are motivated by various factors, including seeking entertainment, emulating an ideal self, desiring meaningful interaction, or financial gain. Victims of catfishing often experience a range of emotions, such as suspicion, love, depression, anger, embarrassment, and feelings of stupidity.

Student Awareness of Online Risks

Digital Wellbeing and Safety

continued

Mental and emotional wellbeing

Students' diverse concerns about online safety highlight their insights into issues such as inappropriate content, bullying, body image, addiction, and online reputation. They articulated their experiences with social media platforms, are aware of the risks posed by strangers and are developing insights into the challenges of managing their digital lives. Their reflections demonstrate an understanding of social media, highlighting their engagement and concerns about its impact.

Inappropriate content and contact

Students across groups shared concerns about inappropriate content and unwanted contact, especially on Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube and **Omegle**. A year 5-6 student recalled an incident where a stranger attempted to connect with their older sibling on Snapchat, highlighting how easily strangers can reach young users. On TikTok, students worried about the lack of content filtering, noting that it often displays disturbing content. Some students felt compelled to keep watching, showing the difficulty of disengaging despite discomfort.

Discussions about TikTok also revealed that, while students understand online safety, they still encounter unwanted material, like nudity or mature content, despite their category selections. Many suggested there should be age restrictions for accessing mature content, indicating growing awareness of its impact.

Did you know?

Chat roulette sites, like **Omegle**, randomly connect users for text or video chats with strangers. They can disconnect and find a new partner anytime. Although it was briefly taken down in 2023, it is now available again. While it provides a space for casual interaction, **Omegle** has faced significant criticism due to concerns about explicit content, child abuse, racism, extremist views, scams, and bullying (Internet Matters Team, 2023).

Serious concerns have been raised with **Omegle** due to the potential for adults to engage in inappropriate or even sexual contact with minors, whether intentional or inadvertent. The platform's lack of robust protections can encourage a culture of blame-shifting, where users deflect responsibility for inappropriate behaviour or exploit the platform's anonymity to justify harmful actions (Bradbury et al., 2024).

Student Awareness of Online Risks

Digital Wellbeing and Safety

continued

Explicit content

Explicit content was a significant concern, with students showing awareness of TikTok's content warnings. Younger students appreciated options to skip explicit videos, while older students in years 7-8 discussed accidentally encountering such material, often due to age misrepresentation. One shared that **"kids usually just fake the ages to get [the app], but they're not the right age for sensitive stuff."** A younger participant explained a friend's discomfort after receiving an unsolicited **nude**, and others reported managing these situations by blocking or reporting the sender. While students often try to address these encounters, many mentioned a lack of discussion with parents about them, revealing a gap in awareness between students and their families.

Chat roulette

Students also referenced platforms such as Omegle, highlighting the associated risks and instances of inappropriate behaviour. While younger students may not actively participate, they are aware of the platform because of influencers they follow on YouTube. Many students advised against using Omegle, recounting encounters with **"creepy"** older users and inappropriate sexual gestures. Furthermore, there were concerns regarding parents' lack of awareness of the platform's risks, emphasising the necessity for increased awareness and guidance around online safety.

Bullying

Students shared experiences and coping strategies. One student shared how deleting a TikTok post helped them avoid negative comments, indicating a self-protective approach. Another noted collective action within gaming communities, such as leaving games and reporting bullies. Students showed growing empathy and understanding of the harm bullying causes and expressed curiosity about the motives behind bullying. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok were highlighted as common sites for bullying, even if some students had not experienced it directly. These discussions underline the need for empathy and constructive online behaviour.

Did you know?

Nude refers to images or videos of individuals in a state of undress, typically revealing intimate or sexual parts of their body. These images are often shared through digital platforms such as messaging apps or social media, either voluntarily or, in some cases, without consent. Sharing **nudes** can have legal, emotional, and social consequences, especially when done without permission or in violation of privacy. The act of sharing such content raises concerns about consent, exploitation, privacy violations, and potential harm, such as online harassment or blackmail.

Guidance and Accountability are Essential from Adults and Tech companies

Students shared valuable insights into their beliefs about the roles adults should play in digital safety and wellbeing.



"Because they might tell me off."

"I wouldn't [tell them] either. Then you won't be able to play the game."

"It's like they don't really get what we're doing online, so they just say no to everything."

"Because they might not let you play that game again."

"Sometimes they just tell you not to do something, and then they just keep a secret of why you shouldn't do it."

"They tell you not to watch this, but then they watch it themselves in front of you..."

"Even if you search something [as a child]...like something inappropriate, you'll see it."

"You can choose the categories...but even though you haven't chosen that category, it comes up with all the weird stuff."

"When I'm playing a game, I get an ad for a gambling app, but the game [I'm playing] is rated like three plus."

"If you [have] lots of kids' shows...you shouldn't have ads in the corner for really inappropriate, like 18 plus websites."



Guidance and Accountability are Essential from Adults and Tech companies

continued

We asked students what they believed adults' roles should be regarding digital safety and wellbeing. They expressed a strong need for parents to be supportive allies in navigating the challenges of the online world. Instead of imposing strict rules that could create fear and discourage open communication, students want parents to provide guidance and understanding. This approach would help them feel comfortable discussing online issues. Additionally, students called on tech companies to adopt responsible practices to ensure that the digital spaces they use are safe and appropriate.

A desire for support and awareness

Students in one year, 5-6, group expressed concerns about swear words and how being sworn at made them feel, but they did not feel comfortable discussing it with their parents. One student noted, **"Because they might tell me off,"** highlighting their fear of reprimand instead of constructive conversation. Another added, **"I wouldn't [tell them] either. Then you won't be able to play the game,"** while a third remarked, **"Because they might not let you play that game again."** These responses illustrate their want for parents to approach such topics with understanding and support. Instead of talking to their parents, students discussed how they would probably take matters into their own hands, with one suggesting that instead of talking to parents, they would **"Swear back?"**

Discussions among students in years 7-8 centred around frustration with parental activities around digital safety and wellbeing. One student said, **"It's like they don't really get what we're doing online, so they just say no to everything."** This reflects the challenges older students face when parents implement restrictions without discussing the reasons behind their intentions. They feel it is a double standard, saying, **"They tell you not to watch this, but then they watch it themselves in front of you..."** Additionally, some students feel their parents keep secrets, as one noted, **"Sometimes they just tell you not to do something, and then they just keep a secret of why you shouldn't do it."** They seek guidance that acknowledges their experiences rather than imposing blanket rules.



Guidance and Accountability are Essential from Adults and Tech companies

continued

Tech company accountability

Students expressed concerns about tech companies' responsibility to provide safer digital spaces, particularly with inappropriate ad targeting and content filtering on platforms like TikTok and Google. Despite selecting preferences, students reported unwanted exposure to inappropriate material, with one noting, **"You can choose the categories...but even though you haven't chosen that category, it comes up with all the weird stuff."** Another shared that Google searches proved problematic: **"Even if you search something [as a child]...like something inappropriate, you'll see it."**

Ad content in children's games presented similar challenges, with complaints about gambling ads and misleading game previews in age-rated apps. One student pointed out, **"When I'm playing a game, I get an ad for a gambling app, but the game'[I'm playing] is rated like three plus."** There were also inappropriate ads appearing on platforms with children's shows, where another student noted, **"If you [have] lots of kids' shows...you shouldn't have ads in the corner for really inappropriate, like 18 plus websites."**

These insights underscore the need for tech companies to take accountability in filtering content effectively to create safer digital spaces. Additionally, parents can assist by investing in ad removal options on popular platforms. These perspectives highlight the need for a collaborative effort involving families, educators, and online platforms to foster positive and secure online environments prioritising young users' wellbeing.



Research Details

Goals

Our goal was to explore and understand students' digital wellbeing and safety (DWS) concerns, identify the key risks and challenges youth face online, and gain insight from a youth perspective on what they need to confidently navigate the online world. These insights will ideally be used to inform the development of effective digital safety strategies and educational programmes tailored for young users.



About the project

The study focused on year groups 5-8 and their online experiences and perceptions about their online activities. Students from Waitaha participated in the STOP, BLOCK & TALK (SBT) for DWS programme.

The programme empowers young people with practical strategies to manage online risks, challenges, and digital wellbeing. It aims to prevent online harm before it escalates by fostering awareness and providing students with practical tools.

Methodology

Approved by the University of Canterbury Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) - 2023, 52 students who participated in SBT between March and October 2023 were eligible to participate in focus groups. Selected students were given an information letter and consent form for parents to sign. Those with permission to join the group discussions did so during the time allocated by the school. Thirty-seven students contributed to 7 group discussions. A youth worker conducted the interview, and a school counselor or teacher was also available to support students who might feel distressed or concerned after the conversations.

Research Details

continued

Students were asked questions about what is important for young people to know about in their online lives, the digital safety issues they are concerned about, and any examples of negative online experiences they have had. Students were asked whether participation in the Digital Safety program had helped them or their peers deal with their online experiences, and if so, how. They were also asked how parents and adults could better support youth safety and wellbeing online.

These discussions were designed to provoke detailed responses about their online experiences and safety concerns. Conversations were recorded and analysed to identify common themes and patterns. The process of thematic analysis involves six essential steps: 1) Familiarising oneself with the data through repeated reading or listening, taking notes, and noting patterns. 2) Generating initial codes by categorising data segments with meaningful labels. 3) Developing themes by grouping codes under central organising concepts. 4) Reviewing the themes to ensure they accurately reflect the dataset and research question. 5) Defining and naming the themes for clarity and coherence. 6) Producing the report by integrating data extracts into a coherent narrative that links the findings to the overall analysis (Terry et al., 2017). This structured approach ensures a comprehensive exploration of qualitative data and supports rigorous interpretation.

Limitations to our research

We acknowledge that these insights are based on a small sample of young people aged 9-13 in one region of New Zealand. We do not claim that these findings are fully representative of the diversity of experiences young people face online across the country. However, despite these limitations, this research provides unique insights into the digital worlds of youth and captures their experiences in their own voice.



Youth Call to Action

Young people recognise that ongoing digital safety and wellbeing education is essential for safely navigating the online world's complexities. They believe consistent, updated guidance can make them more resilient to digital risks.

Students express a strong desire for proactive parental involvement through monitoring and setting limits on app usage and learning more about the online risks relevant to youth today. One student succinctly said, "Maybe if they learned more from us about what we actually do online, they'd understand better." This highlights a shared need for mutual understanding and collaboration between young people and their parents. Many students suggest that parents who are more informed and engaged can provide the support needed to avoid risks and encourage safe online habits.

Youth advocate for a phased introduction to technology, recommending that devices be introduced before high school and under clear parental supervision. This gradual approach aligns with research highlighting the importance of early digital safety interventions (Magis-Weinberg et al., 2023; Martin et al., 2022), especially when adults are primary influencers and before negative behaviours can become established (Bickham et al., 2021). As one student explained, "You're not quite sure what you're allowed to do if you're just given the device. It's just like, what do I do with this? How do I do it? And I need help so that I don't do anything wrong."

Another critical step is supporting proactive digital wellbeing strategies, such as SBT. When young people have tools to recognise and mitigate risks, they feel empowered and better able to maintain their digital wellbeing. Educational programs can further enhance their understanding of the potential stress and addictive nature of specific apps, encouraging balanced screen time and fostering a healthier relationship with technology.

Youth also stress that tech companies must be accountable for creating a safer online environment. This includes adopting responsible advertising practices, enhancing content moderation, and prioritising youth safety on their platforms. By ensuring that digital spaces are designed with the wellbeing of young users in mind, tech companies can foster a more secure digital landscape.

In summary, young people envision a collaborative approach to digital wellbeing—one in which parents support and guide them, tech companies take greater responsibility, and schools provide continuous education. By working together, parents, tech companies, and educators can ensure that young people have the tools and support to thrive in a safe, positive, empowering digital environment.



Every Voice Heard

This section delves deeper into students' voices around their online concerns, shedding light on their unique experiences and perspectives regarding digital engagement. While the main report highlighted key themes, this segment aims to provide a deeper understanding of students' risks in the online landscape and their motivations for using devices and engaging with digital content. By amplifying their insights, we hope to promote a greater awareness of the challenges and opportunities that shape their online interactions, ultimately supporting the development of effective digital safety and wellbeing strategies.

We omitted year groups when there was insufficient diversity between age groups or when too few students had unique insights to share. Additionally, we excluded responses presented above, those that were similar to others, in agreement with other quotes, or overly frivolous.



Online Engagement and Motivations

All students from Years 5-8 reported using at least one digital device outside of school and one form of social media. Snapchat was the most popular app used by all age groups, while YouTube was primarily favoured by Years 5-6, with Messenger Kids and TikTok also being popular. In the 7-8 age group, TikTok emerged as a favourite, along with Messenger, Messenger Kids and, to a lesser extent, Instagram. WhatsApp was primarily used for family communication.

Students reported using devices for various purposes, including socialising, entertainment, communication, collaboration, learning, and creativity. Many enjoy playing various games on their devices for fun and relaxation, often motivated by the prospect of gaining in-game currency while connecting with friends.

Motivations for social media use included the potential to monetise or gain popularity, with one student noting, **“So, you can become famous,”** and another explaining, **“And you get paid; if you get subscribers, you get paid.”** Ryan, an example of a successful young YouTuber who reportedly made **“\$49 million”** with a large subscriber base, was mentioned along with several other successful YouTubers. One student remarked, **“Being popular”** was a motivation to use social media, highlighting the value placed on social media popularity as a driving force behind their engagement with these platforms.

Furthermore, primary device usage varied, with students using smartphones for social interaction, computers for schoolwork and entertainment, and tablets for family activities.



“ Digital Footprint

Many students across year groups recognised the importance of maintaining a positive digital footprint, expressing concerns about how past online behaviours might influence their social standing or future employment.

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Whatever you put online can stay online forever.

”

Students in Years 5-6 demonstrated an understanding of digital footprints as permanent online marks that can affect their reputation and relationships. The idea of permanence was prevalent, with students noting that **“whatever you put online can stay online forever,”** even if it is deleted. They recognised that videos and comments are hard to erase, with one remarking, **“It will never come down.”** This understanding extended to social consequences; for example, one student explained, **“You can get hated comments and very mean comments”** if you post something negative. Another student acknowledged the risks of content sharing, saying, **“If you swear on an app and someone’s making a video of that... it’s still up on there forever.”** Despite this awareness, some younger students used humour to describe digital footprints, such as **“You step on your phone, and it makes a digital footprint.”**

In Years 7-8, students showed a more in-depth understanding of digital footprints and how it could impact their future. They recognised that browsing history and search terms often lead to targeted content and ads, with one student observing, **“If you searched up something... you’d start getting all these adverts.”** Their awareness extended to job prospects, with students expressing concern that negative behaviours could affect their employment: **“If you post that you party and stuff, then they probably won’t want you for jobs.”** Another added, **“Your online history, like from now... [could come up] when you’re applying for a new job,”** highlighting how actions today might impact their future. Students also recognised the natural focus on negativity, acknowledging that employers might look for negative aspects in their digital history: **“Most of the time, what people would look out for is the negative.”**

Young people are demonstrating a sound awareness of the implications of their digital behaviour, the repercussions of what is shared and how systems use their data.

“ Family Rules

We asked students in all groups about their family rules and parental involvement. Students highlighted a variety of family rules and parental involvement regarding device use and online safety, reflecting both structured and flexible approaches to digital wellbeing at home.

For younger students in Years 5-6, parental rules often emphasise time limits and content boundaries. One student shared, **“When I go on mum’s phone, she’s got one game that I’m allowed to play and she only lets me 20 minutes a day,”** indicating a structured approach to screen time. Additionally, safety rules often included software restrictions. As one student mentioned, **“We have something on our computer where we have to ask to download games and stuff,”** while another noted, **“Mum has a website on my phone, so it has certain boundaries,”** both of which demonstrate using authorisation and permissions to monitor online activity.

The rules became more complex among students in Years 7-8, reflecting a transition to increased digital independence while maintaining safety measures. Some students described app-specific permissions, including parental approvals, with one student explaining, **“On my phone, I have this thing where if I really want to get an app, I can push install and then I push send a request to get the app, and Mum and Dad have to approve before I can get it.”** This active request and approval approach provided a balance between independence and security.

Nightly restrictions were also a common rule for older students, as one student described, **“My phone turns off at nine and turns back on at seven,”** with another chiming in, **“Same with mine.”** This nightly device lockdown enforced by parents helped manage screen time and encouraged offline activities. For some, family rules around device location were also significant; as a student noted, **“Only rule is it can’t go in the bedroom,”** while others had rules against social media apps entirely. Rules for apps with parental monitoring, like Messenger Kids, were also common. One student shared that **“both of my parents are linked to my account, so they can find all of my contacts and see everything I’ve said to them,”** while also appreciating the option to control notifications, sharing, **“I can turn off notifications from people who annoy me quite a bit.”**

These varied family rules reflect students’ experiences with structured and proactive guidance in managing digital safety and wellbeing at home.

“
...Mum and Dad have to
approve before I can get it.
”



Peer Advice

Students shared a range of advice with peers on navigating online interactions safely and responsibly, reflecting their understanding of digital risks and proactive steps for protection.

A key piece of advice was to approach online information with caution. One student emphasised, **“Don’t always trust [everything] because some things might be fake, and then you can get too deep down,”** while another advised chatting only with people they know offline. They also highlighted the importance of choosing apps carefully, urging others to avoid unreliable or unnecessary apps that might pose risks.

Age misrepresentation was another topic of concern. **“Don’t lie about your age,”** one student warned, **“because if you, like, say you’re 15 when you’re 11, you can be shown content that is [inappropriate],”** stressing the potential dangers of accessing unsuitable material.

Parental guidance was a recurring theme. **“Get parent advice probably,”** one student suggested, with others supporting parental involvement as a way to enhance online safety. Students encouraged **“parent control over the device and stuff”** and recommended keeping social media accounts to a minimum if younger than 10 to reduce exposure to inappropriate content. One student remarked on the unpredictability of social media, saying, **“Sometimes it’s just like some people find [social media] way too much... and some stuff you find on there... is not actually appropriate.”** Another echoed the value of staying genuine online, noting, **“I would tell them not to try and be cool online, because sometimes it gets out of hand and they’ll start teasing you.”**

For added account security, students highlighted the importance of protecting accounts from misuse, considering possibilities like **“What if their siblings are playing on their account? What if some random player stole their phone?”** Students also provided advice on verifying online identities, especially for known friends, recommending strategies like asking specific questions offline, **“Hey, is your username...?”** and checking for other minor signs that could verify authenticity. In group voice calls, students advised caution when sharing personal information, as **“sometimes more than one person can hear what you’re saying.”**

This blending of caution, practical tips, and humour underscores students’ awareness of the complexities of digital interactions and their proactive approach to managing online safety.



*Don’t always trust
[everything] because
some things might be fake.*





Digital Wellbeing and Safety Programme Feedback

Students in all focus groups were asked about the digital safety training they had received. Many students expressed that the programme significantly enhanced their awareness of online safety, with the youth interviewer summarising their statements by stating, **“We’re saying doing this [SBT] programme helped you understand what to look out for?”** They acknowledged that the digital strategies introduced during the training were beneficial: **“I think some of the digital tech has helped me learn about some apps. How to make sure people can’t hack into you and things.”** Another student shared, **“I haven’t gone on Roblox for a long time,”** highlighting a tangible behaviour change influenced by the training. However, there were mixed feelings regarding specific resources from other digital safety sessions; for example, one student remarked, **“He didn’t protect me,”** referring to an obsolete Hector Protector app, indicating a gap between expectations and outcomes.

The training not only equipped students with practical strategies but also fostered a sense of community, as they articulated the importance of sharing knowledge with peers: **“You can tell your friends so they know, and they can tell other people.”** This collaborative spirit was echoed in their understanding that online safety affects everyone: **“Just a reminder that it’s not only you that it happens to. It’s not just one person.”**

While most found the training effective, some expressed uncertainty about their participation, with statements like, **“I don’t think I was here”** and **“I don’t know,”** highlighting areas where engagement could be improved. Many students recommended that digital wellbeing and safety education be held annually, suggesting that such reminders help reinforce the knowledge gained: **“I guess you could have it every year so that you keep that in mind.”** The emotional impact of the training was evident, as students reported feeling safer and more cautious: **“Yeah, we’re definitely more cautious now, I’d say.”**

They shared personal anecdotes about setting boundaries with peers, stating, **“Sometimes when my friends are like, ‘Have you seen this?’ And it’s like, I don’t like that. I’m just like, ‘No thank you. Please don’t send this to me. I don’t like it.’”** This illustrates how the training empowers them to navigate online interactions confidently. Overall, the students demonstrated a strong consensus on the need for ongoing digital safety education, with one summarising, **“It’s just comfortable to know that you have SBT,”** reflecting the need for sustained learning and support in an ever-evolving digital landscape.

Digital safety programs have helped students navigate these tumultuous challenges. They use strategies to look after themselves and create online and offline boundaries.



Privacy and General Safety

Concerns about posting images of others are also prominent, as a student shared, **“Some friends’ parents don’t like it when you post their stuff and friends’ faces.”** This indicates a growing awareness of consent and the implications of sharing content that involves others.

Responses to rude privacy intrusions demonstrate a range of coping strategies. A student described their friend’s distress: **“My friend got stuck in a server with a bunch of people who were being incredibly rude and asking really personal information.”** The friend’s reaction, **“She tried to leave and ended up shutting down her phone,”** illustrates the acute discomfort and need for self-protection in these online spaces. **“That’s probably the best way to do it. If you’re stuck and you can’t get out, just turn off the phone,”** another student replied, emphasising their instinct to disengage from uncomfortable interactions.



They might be able to find out where you live.



Year 7-8 students also demonstrated a strong awareness of maintaining safety by limiting personal information disclosure. They articulated strategies to keep themselves safe, including **“not sharing passwords, blocking people you don’t know, [and] not friending people you don’t know,”** underscoring a proactive approach towards online interactions. The notion of “safety” was frequently mentioned as a primary concern, with students emphasising the importance of **“just being generally safe”** to avoid risks associated with oversharing.

Additionally, students conveyed specific worries about the types of personal information that could lead to privacy breaches. Some warned that **“if you have too much information out,”** it might become vulnerable to theft, revealing their understanding of how excessive online sharing could be exploited. One student specifically cited concerns over location disclosure, explaining that **“they might be able to find out where you live,”** stressing a particular anxiety around the potential real-world implications of digital privacy lapses.

Overall, the insights from both age groups reveal an in-depth understanding of privacy and students’ challenges as they navigate their digital landscapes. They have learned strategies regarding how much and what to share in digital spaces.



Scammers and Hackers

Six of the seven focus groups highlighted concerns about scammers and hackers.

Participants expressed a range of anxieties, from the risk of hackers accessing personal information to the prevalence of scams targeting their families and themselves. When asked what they were most worried about online, many students succinctly said, **“Scammers.”**

For Year 5-6 students, there is notable anxiety about hackers accessing gaming accounts. One student recounted a troubling incident involving Roblox: **“My old Roblox account. ‘Give me your password and I’ll give you some Robux.’ So, I gave him my password... And as soon as I came back, it said reset password. [Then] I knew I got hacked.”** This story demonstrates how enticing offers can lure children into compromising their accounts. Another student shared, **“When my sister was like ten, nine, she was playing Adopt Me and got scammed for an Adopt Me pet.”**

Concerns extend to the broader issue of scams targeting their parents. One student expressed their worry succinctly: **“Then they get into my parents’ bank account or something.”** Another student highlighted the dangers of phishing scams, noting how their parents would receive emails from scammers pretending to be from well-known companies: **“My parents [received scam emails from] Like Microsoft. Amazon.”** A vivid account shared by another participant illustrates the direct impact of scams: **“Not so long ago, my [family member] was going to get scammed from [country].”**

Year 7-8 students also recognise the dangers of phishing and scams targeting family members. One student recounted a scam email received by their family member, highlighting the deceptive tactics of scammers: **“Like the scamming emails? And like telling her if she clicks on this link she wins three million dollars or something.”** Another student noted the frequency of scam emails targeting their family: **“My mum gets lots of emails saying she’s not paid her bill or something.”** One student shared a serious incident: **“Once Mum and Dad, their credit cards got hacked somehow... there were spending [at] random stores that weren’t even in New Zealand.”** Another recounted an attempt to exploit their sister through a phone call: **“Once my sister, she recently only just got her phone and she wasn’t allowed to buy anything... so it was**

Did you know?

Explicit content, privacy and safety, and scams and hacks consumed the most group discussion time across all groups, reflecting their deep-seated anxieties about navigating these challenges in the digital landscape.

“

Scammers and Hackers

continued

“

*[Student name] has
already got scammed.*

”

bad for the scammer because she hadn't actually ordered anything.”

The students' understanding of generational differences in recognising scams is revealing: **“I think it's a lot harder for the older generation to kind of see the difference in scams.”** This recognition suggests that older generations might be more vulnerable to online threats, as the students perceive themselves as more adept at identifying scams.

Additionally, the data reflects concerns over specific scams that their peers face. One student noted, **“[student name] has already got scammed,”** indicating the pervasive nature of these issues within their social circles. Scam advertisements were also highlighted, with one student expressing frustration: **“Most ads are just like scamming... there are so many ads that show you stuff that actually isn't in the game.”** This sentiment highlights a collective disillusionment with the deceptive marketing tactics prevalent in online environments.

The data also underscores how DWS training helps students navigate these challenges. One student stated, **“It kind of helped me recognise when something was fake or dodgy,”** indicating that they are developing skills to discern potential threats. Additionally, students shared experiences related to scam attempts through social media platforms, with one noting, **“I know someone who got links sent to them via Instagram. I know strangers will try and get you to click on links to dodgy [websites or accounts].”**

Overall, the data encapsulates the anxiety and apprehension surrounding hacking and scams across all age groups, highlighting their ongoing efforts to safeguard themselves and their families in an increasingly complex digital landscape. It demonstrates that young people are concerned not only about their digital safety but also about their families.

“ Catfishing

Catfishing was a concern raised in five of the seven focus groups. Participants expressed scepticism regarding the authenticity of online identities and the potential for misrepresentation, particularly among younger users. A complex explanation of catfishing was provided by a student who detailed how individuals might deceive others on dating apps: **“If someone says they’re something, but they’re not that age... They always send photos of people that are younger than them and different [from] them, and they sometimes use voice-changing apps too.”**

Year 5-6 students identified age differences based on typing speed, noting they were able to tell if an older person was pretending to be younger **“By how fast they type because people who are just like 20 and stuff they can type really fast, but old people can’t.”**

This story further illustrated their concerns: **“Someone could be faking to be Ariana Grande... They could say they’re like 25, and then when they send pictures they just put different pictures. If one of them is not lying, then when they go to meet up, they’ll just see someone super old.”**

Participants also referenced catfishing in popular culture, with one student sharing a story from an educational programme: **“I watch Beluga. Bobby is the cat. Bobby got catfished by a kitty cat and then Bobby started crying.”**

“

*Someone pretending to
be someone you know.*

”

Additionally, discussions around disguised identities led to comments such as **“What about like an old grandma trying to get on your website? That would be a catfish.”** The stereotype of catfishers being old, bald men were also mentioned: **“Especially from old men that are bald,”** or **“You could pretend you are like this guy, but when you try and meet him, he’s probably old and in his 80s.”** Another student assumed that individuals misrepresenting themselves online were likely men, stating simply, **“It was probably a guy.”**

“ Catfishing

continued

In the Year 7-8 groups, students identified specific indicators of catfishing. One student remarked,

“Asking you for your information,” while another noted that catfishers often lack straightforwardness: **“You can kind of tell they’re not very straightforward, and you can**

tell they’re hiding stuff.” Some students believe recognition of catfishing was intuitive, **“You get suss.”** Others described tactics used by catfishers to create false connections, such as pretending to know someone: **“I’m a friend of a friend,”** or, **“I know your mum.”**

“
Don’t believe everything you see.
Like if someone sends a photo, it
could actually be an old man.
”

Students shared hypothetical incidents involving catfishing, illustrating how deceptive online personas can lead to dangerous situations: **“Like people who get photos off of any other social media place and show people, ‘This is me,’ and put lots of information.”** General concerns over catfishing included one student stating, **“Someone pretending to be someone you know.”**

The issue of catfishing within gaming contexts was also mentioned: **“It’s pretty popular online that people find people on games like Fortnite, and then they’ll pretend that they’re someone else.”** They acknowledged the gravity of the issue, remarking, **“It’s kind of funny, but it’s kind of not that funny.”**

Peer advice on avoiding catfishing included cautionary tales: **“Actually, what’s happened to some people, well, some boys, they’ve met someone that says they’re a 10-year-old girl online; turns out they’re an 18-year-old man.”** Another student playfully warned, **“I’m a little girl. I mean, I’m a handsome young boy. Want a date?”** This humorous exchange highlights the need for scepticism towards online identities: **“Don’t believe everything you see. Like if someone sends a photo, it could actually be an old man.”**

Overall, the data underscores an awareness and concern regarding catfishing among students, emphasising the importance of critical thinking and caution in online interactions. While students often make light of this serious issue as a stress relief strategy, this does not negate the fact that many have adopted sensible scepticism in their online activities.



Stalking & False Information

While not as predominant among the groups, personal safety issues such as stalking, inappropriate adverts, and misinformation were raised.

Stalking

Stalking was a concern for students in 3 of the focus groups. **“Oh, stalking,”** one student remarked when asked about their online concerns, capturing a general worry about the risks of being monitored. Another added, **“I mean, I guess you could get stalked.”** Similarly, others expressed worries over **“people stalking them,”** mainly through social platforms like Snapchat, indicating a shared awareness of the need for caution when online.

“people stalking them”



False information

Students expressed challenges with identifying false information and verifying online identities, often feeling uncertain if **“the person online is who they say they are.”** To assess information accuracy, some used strategies like checking **“other things to see if they’ve got the same information”** or relying on trusted sources, though they noted that even **“Wikipedia... most of the stuff will be accurate, but sometimes you don’t know if it’s true or not.”** Concerns arose over the spread of misinformation, as one student explained, **“We’re getting false information online, and then you tell that person, that spreads...”**

“We’re getting false information online, and then you tell that person, that spreads...”

”



Inappropriate Ads

Students in two focus groups voiced several concerns about inappropriate advertisements, particularly on platforms like TikTok. One student cautioned about deceptive ads that claim to offer free items, saying, “...they say this [application] is free and stuff [when it is not].”



There's quite a few
different gambling ads...



They also discussed identifying features of untrustworthy websites: “A normal website like the Warehouse has ... easy-to-read links and fonts, but a sketchy one in my world is kind of hard to read and lots of links.”

Regarding TikTok, students critiqued the age appropriateness of ads: “I feel like TikTok ads make it seem like it's...similar ... to YouTube, but I saw someone seeing really disgusting inappropriate things. I have seen people who have two-year-olds, like four-year-olds on TikTok, which is insane. I don't think that's okay.”

They also highlighted miscellaneous inappropriate or confusing advertisements: “There's quite a few different gambling ads, and one that I've seen recently has been electric fireworks. I have no idea what it is, and it has nothing to do with fireworks from the ads.”

A student agreed, saying, “Yes! That say, ‘This is not a gambling website, but it is R18,’ and gambling websites, gambling websites, everywhere.” They were surprised at seeing ads for gambling apps while playing games rated for young audiences, like “Going Balls,” rated for ages three and up.

Lastly, students expressed awareness of gambling ad prevalence, asking, “I just wanna ask, has anyone else noticed how many gambling websites there are?” This highlighted a collective concern about the overwhelming presence of such ads in spaces intended for younger users.

Overall, their insights reveal a collective awareness and concern about the inappropriate nature of ads targeted at younger users and the need for better regulation in digital spaces.

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Inappropriate content and contact

Students across all focus groups voiced concerns over age-inappropriate content and interactions. One year 5-6 student shared an experience involving their older sibling on Snapchat: **“My brother, he uses Snapchat. My brother’s 14. He’s at high school. So, he uses Snapchat to text on his rowing group chat and text his friends. Some random person somehow added him, and [High School student] didn’t add her back, and she was trying to hook up [High School student], and she was like, ‘Do you want to hook up sometime? Where do you live? What’s your name? How old are you?’”** This exchange highlights the risks of online interactions, where strangers can quickly initiate uncomfortable conversations.

“

You have the urge to turn it off, but you just can’t; it keeps drawing you in.

”

Additionally, students voiced apprehension about TikTok’s unfiltered content. One student pointed out, **“Because it doesn’t censor anything. It’s not good for little peoples’ eyes. Little peoples’ brains,”** emphasising the concern that young users might be exposed to harmful material that could influence their perceptions and behaviours. This sentiment was echoed when discussing the emotional impact of inappropriate content, with one student expressing feeling **“disgusted, disturbed,”** and stating, **“You have the urge to turn it off, but you just can’t; it keeps drawing you in.”** This reflects a troubling aspect of content engagement, where even negative stimuli can become captivating.

In the context of TikTok, students also noted instances of discomfort with specific videos, reacting with laughter but indicating unease. One student stated, **“We’ve been learning about cyber safety,”** which suggests an awareness of the issues yet a struggle to reconcile that knowledge with the content they encounter. Discussions about inappropriate content sometimes led to humorous, albeit uncomfortable reactions, as seen in their laughter in response to **“people mooning”**—a term they used to describe nudity or suggestive behaviour.

“

Inappropriate content and contact

continued

Furthermore, there were specific concerns about TikTok's filtering capabilities, with a student stating, **“Like with TikTok, you can choose the categories and stuff that you watch. Some stuff, even though you haven't chosen that category, it comes up with all the weird stuff.”** This indicates frustration with the platform's inability to effectively manage inappropriate content, leading to the exposure of **“weird and awkward”** material that students felt was inappropriate.

The older students echoed concerns over inappropriate content, agreeing on an age limit for viewing such material, with one stating, **“I think 18.”** This consensus reflects their understanding of the potential harm inappropriate content can cause and their desire for clearer boundaries regarding its accessibility. They also expressed concerns about specific instances of **“weird pictures”** and **“weird content,”** indicating that their encounters online are not just occasional but frequent enough to warrant serious discussion.

“

Yeah. Roblox has been turning into a dating platform.

”

Students expressed concerns over inappropriate developments within online gaming platforms, specifically Roblox, which they noted has been evolving beyond its original purpose. One student remarked, **“Yeah. Roblox has been turning into a dating platform,”** highlighting the shift in the platform's content and use. Additionally, there were concerns about age restrictions and content regulation: **“Roblox is literally letting 17 plus verified developers make 17 plus verified dating games.”** This comment reflects unease among young users who encounter content on Roblox that may no longer align with the platform's initial focus on safe, child-friendly gaming. The presence of dating elements in a youth-centric platform underscores issues with moderation and raises questions about the appropriateness and accessibility of certain game content to younger audiences.

These discussions reflect a collective awareness of the challenges posed by inappropriate content and interactions in digital environments, highlighting the need for enhanced regulation and education around online safety.

“ Explicit Content

Students across all focus groups expressed significant concerns about explicit content, highlighting its prevalence and implications, placing it among the top three most discussed concerns. In the 5-6 age group, discussions included awareness of explicit content moderation: **“On TikTok, if you [search for] sex, it doesn’t show it, and when you click into it, it shows ‘This video might disturb some people.’ And you [can choose to] skip or watch now.”** Another participant shared insights on how their digital footprint is affected by watching explicit content, emphasising that **“when you’re watching something inappropriate like sex, this is what happens,”** indicating their understanding that viewing such material can lead to seeing more explicit content in their social media feeds. There were also moments of discomfort and humour as kids displayed unease through laughter in response to explicit TikTok content.

In the 7-8 year groups, emotional responses were shared regarding receiving unsolicited dick pics on platforms like Snapchat, where one student recounted, **“My friend... said that she had Snapchat, and this random guy sent a nude to her. ... she said that she felt uncomfortable and just – a bit yuck?”** This highlights the distress many students felt in these situations.

“
...this random guy sent
a nude to her...
”

Several examples of explicit content being sent without permission were also discussed, with a student sharing, **“I have a friend in the North Island... she was on a video call with someone she didn’t know... and really weird content that he showed.”** This led to her simply hanging up. Students also believe that people in the general population assume that dick pics disappear, with one student stating, **“People think they go away, but they don’t.”**

Students reported strategies for managing unsolicited explicit content, such as unfriending, blocking, or reporting senders, reflecting a proactive stance on digital safety. One student highlighted the role of parental involvement, sharing how their mother adjusted the family computer settings to limit exposure to inappropriate content on TikTok. Additionally, there was widespread frustration with the misuse of social media platforms, which students found irritating as it diverted these tools from their intended purpose of communication.

A recurring theme is the prevalence and normalisation of receiving such content, with one student noting that it is **“really common.”** Many students agreed with this statement.

“ Explicit Content

continued

This suggests a concerning desensitisation to the seriousness of unsolicited explicit material, which can negatively affect the recipients' mental health and self-esteem. Emotional reactions, such as feeling **“uncomfortable”** and **“grossed out,”** indicate that students recognise the distressing nature of unsolicited nudes, highlighting the need for greater awareness around this issue.

Students also demonstrated proactive coping strategies for managing unsolicited nudes, mentioning responses like **“unfriend, block, don't really pay much attention to it”** and **“probably report it.”** These actions show a degree of self-advocacy and awareness of their rights to control their digital experiences. However, there is a notable disconnect in communication between students and their parents; when asked, **“Do you think parents know about that stuff?”** students, in unison, said, **“No.”** This underscores the importance of open discussions about online safety between parents and youth about the implications of sharing explicit content.

Students in years 5-6 expressed various concerns about exposure to OnlyFans, highlighting a lack of understanding and awareness of the platform among their peers. One student simply stated, **“OnlyFans,”** suggesting that the mere mention of the platform elicits immediate recognition of its controversial nature.

Another quote from a student sheds light on how OnlyFans content can infiltrate social media: **“YouTube. TikTok. It just pops up.”** This points to the ease with which explicit material can appear across various platforms, emphasising the pervasive nature of such content in the digital landscape. The implication is that students frequently encounter references and videos of OnlyFans through YouTube and similar platforms, which could normalise the discussion around explicit content and its availability to younger viewers.

Overall, the discussions reflected a strong awareness of explicit content, its challenges, and the need for better communication and support from parents and peers.

“
OnlyFans
”

Did you know?

OnlyFans is a subscription-based online platform that allows content creators to share and monetise their work directly with subscribers. Although it can be used for various types of content, such as fitness tips, art, and tutorials, it is primarily known for hosting adult content. Creators can share explicit or adult-themed material with paying subscribers, with over 70% of the content being explicit or adult in nature (Wise, 2024).

“ Chat Roulette

Omegle was mentioned in three groups, with Year 5-6 students showing limited direct engagement but demonstrating awareness of the platform primarily through videos by influencers on YouTube, **“We see it on YouTube videos”**. Some students advised against using Omegle, with one stating, **“Don’t go on Omegle.”** This suggests an emerging awareness of the platform’s risks, even among younger students.

“

Don’t go on Omegle.

”

Concerns regarding the age appropriateness of Omegle usage were highlighted, with one student noting, **“It’s way too young for Omegle,”** about a friend’s sister who is about twelve years old and has used the platform. Explicit behaviour on the platform was a significant concern, as students mentioned that **“on Omegle TV they can show us parts that we don’t want to see. Some people could be ..., um, nude.”** They expressed discomfort with the content through laughter and mimicking inappropriate language, such as swearing. **“Sometimes you can find people being really naughty on Omegle,”** said a student, gesturing with his hands a sexual act to illustrate the actions he had seen a person do on the platform, then laughing uncomfortably.

Some students shared negative experiences, recounting encounters with **“super old”** and **“creepy”** individuals while using the platform. One student remarked, **“If you go on Omegle and you’re just scrolling through... you come across someone super old, and they’re creepy.”**

Despite the evident concerns, there was some uncertainty regarding parental awareness of the platform, with responses varying from **“No”** to **“Probably.”** The perception of Omegle as risky was highlighted by a Year 7-8 student: **“There’s sketchy apps, like meet strangers. Like Omegle and stuff like that.”**

Overall, the discussions reflect a mix of awareness, caution, and discomfort surrounding platforms like Omegle, particularly among younger users. They recognise the potential dangers of interacting with strangers online and the explicit content that may be encountered, underscoring the need for continued education and open conversations about online safety.

“Bullying

Bullying emerged as a notable concern in three out of seven focus groups, reflecting the pervasive nature of online harassment among students. Various responses highlighted the emotional impacts and the strategies students employ when encountering online bullying.

One student shared a personal strategy for handling negative comments on social media: **“I just delete. Because I posted a video on TikTok and they basically all just commented. It wasn’t that bad. So, I just deleted it.”** This reaction suggests a coping mechanism where removing the content serves as a form of self-protection against potentially hurtful remarks. It demonstrates the pressure students feel to curate their online presence and avoid the repercussions of negative feedback.

Regarding encounters with online meanness, another student remarked, **“People, not really being mean to me but [college] kids, they are not mean to me but there are some cool kids, people over there.”** This highlights an understanding of social dynamics, where students recognise that not all interactions are negative, yet there remains an underlying tension regarding peer acceptance online. This complexity indicates that while bullying may not be personally directed at them, students are aware of the broader context of online behaviour.

Proactive measures against online bullying were also mentioned. One student noted, **“They just left the game and reported them,”** suggesting a collective strategy within their gaming community to combat bullying. This illustrates that students are beginning to understand their agency in these situations and the importance of reporting inappropriate behaviour.

“*I just wonder what they get out of it.*”

The emotional toll of witnessing bullying was emphasised by an older student, who expressed concern about the impact on victims: **“Knowing it’s gonna make someone feel bad.”** This response indicates a growing empathy among students as they recognise the potential harm that online harassment can inflict on individuals.

Curiosity about the motives behind bullying was prevalent: **“Just stop. Why post something, why say something bad when they’re just gonna feel worse about themselves?”** Another echoed this sentiment: **“I just wonder what they get out of it.”**

“Bullying

continued

Such reflections demonstrate a desire to understand the psychological aspects of bullying, suggesting that students are grappling with the complexities of human behaviour in the digital age.

Specific incidents of bullying were cited, particularly on platforms like Instagram. One student described witnessing derogatory comments, saying, **“I’ve seen some things, like on Instagram someone will post eating out or something and then there’ll be people commenting, ‘You’re so fat.’”** This stark example illustrates the cruelty that can manifest online and the often unfiltered nature of social media interactions. Additionally, students noted, **“Even ... photos. Videos.”** This broadens the scope of where bullying can occur, highlighting that any form of personal expression on social media is susceptible to negative commentary.

“

You’re so fat.

”

Interestingly, some students expressed a perception of bullying on TikTok despite not having personal experiences: **“I feel like it is, but I don’t have TikToks though.”** This shows an awareness of the platform's environment and a recognition that bullying may be a common issue, even if they have not directly encountered it.

The presence of hate comments was also mentioned, with one student observing, **“Because people on TikTok or something, they’ll post a video and then there’ll be hate comments and stuff about the person.”** This reflects a broader culture of negativity that can thrive on social media, prompting students to question the motivations behind such behaviour: **“What are they getting out of making people feel bad?”**

Despite a few students claiming they had not witnessed bullying, others affirmed their experiences, stating, **“Yeah. Yeah, I have.”** This juxtaposition indicates that while bullying may not be universally experienced, it is a significant concern that resonates with many.

Overall, the discussions highlight the multifaceted nature of online bullying, encompassing emotional impacts, personal experiences, curiosity about motives, and the strategies students employ to navigate their digital environments. It underscores the importance of fostering a culture of empathy and support among peers while educating students about the implications of their online interactions.



Body Image

Body image emerged as a significant topic of discussion in two focus groups, revealing a range of feelings, experiences, and concerns among students. The insights reflect a growing awareness of the impact of social media on self-perception and the emotional toll of comparison.



*They're only showing
[what] they want
you to see.*



One critical point raised was the awareness of the selective representation often seen in social media. When discussing influencers who portray idealised bodies and lifestyles, the interviewer asked in one session: **“Do you think those influencers, I guess, who post their perfect bodies and perfect lives, do you think they should post the other stuff as well?”** The consensus among peers was affirmative, as they recognised that **“they’re only showing [what] they want you to see”** and that presenting a more balanced view, including both the highs and lows, is essential. This reflects an understanding that social media can create unrealistic standards and pressure to conform to specific body ideals.

Regarding health education, students noted the importance of discouraging comparison with others. One succinctly stated, **“Just that you shouldn’t be comparing yourself to other people.”** This advice highlights a proactive approach to fostering positive self-esteem among students and suggests that educational settings attempt to instil healthier perspectives on body image.

The students also acknowledged that discussions about body image and feelings are integrated into their health education curriculum. One participant remarked, **“I don’t feel I need to that often, but it’s probably way worse these days than before. We went over it in health.”** This indicates an increasing recognition of body image issues as a relevant topic among their peers, suggesting that students are becoming more aware of these challenges as they navigate their formative years.

The widespread nature of insecurities related to body image was echoed by several students, with one stating, **“Like, insecure,”** followed by agreement from the group. This collective recognition suggests that feelings of insecurity regarding body image are prevalent among students, potentially impacting their self-esteem and overall wellbeing.



Body Image

continued

“

feel insecure

”

A notable theme was the impact of seeing others' bodies, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy. A student mentioned, **“I guess it's kind of also, you're seeing other people's bodies. Like real fit and healthy and that makes you kind of wanna - Like insecure.”** This illustrates students' challenges in an era dominated by visual platforms, where constant exposure to idealised physiques can fuel self-doubt and comparison.

While some students acknowledged awareness of body image issues, others reflected a lack of direct experience among their peers. When asked if they knew friends who had faced such challenges, responses were predominantly negative, with one student a resounding, **No**. This could imply that while students are conceptually aware of body image issues, they may not have personal connections to individuals experiencing these difficulties.

Concerns about the prevalence of body image issues were discussed, with students affirming that such problems are indeed common. One student said, **“Totally”** and when the interviewer summed up statements by asking if they felt body image concerns were common: **“Yeah, I'd say so.”** This suggests that while direct experience may be limited, there is a recognition that body image challenges affect many in their age group.

The emotional impact of consuming content promoting unrealistic body standards was evident when students expressed insecurity in response to specific videos. One participant reflected, **“feel insecure.”** Another student voiced concerns about misleading online content: **“Basically what you believe because there's so many videos online saying that, ‘This is how you... I don't know, like, ‘Lose weight,’ and just making you feel insecure.”**

This highlights the negative influence that online media can have on body image, reinforcing the idea that students are grappling with the implications of the content they encounter daily.

In summary, the discussions surrounding body image in these focus groups reveal a complex interplay of awareness, insecurity, and the effects of social media. Students understand the importance of healthy self-perception and recognise the challenges posed by unrealistic representations online.



Online Reputation

Concerns regarding online appearance and perception are prevalent among Year 7-8 students. Anxiety about appearing foolish in the digital space is common, particularly when discussing the implications of sharing photos on social media. Students express apprehensions about how others perceive their appearance, highlighting the detrimental effects of social comparison. Additionally, this age group grapples with fears surrounding self-presentation, as individuals worry about being recognised and exposed in ways they cannot control or may not desire in the first place.

Students are increasingly aware of their online reputation and how it shapes their identity. The pressure to present oneself favourably on social media can lead to anxiety regarding appearance and public perception. One student succinctly expressed this anxiety, stating, **“You don’t want to look like a dork,”** highlighting the fear of being judged unfavourably by peers.



How they look and the way that other people feel about them.



The concern over how they present themselves online is pronounced. One student noted worries about how others perceive their online presence: **“If sent a photo out on social media or something... kind of ... how you present yourself online, like what other people are seeing [about me]?”** This reflects a broader anxiety about their appearance, the potential for misrepresentation, and how others perceive them. Students are acutely aware that their online image can affect their social standing and self-esteem. Another student stated they had anxiety around **“How they look and the way that other people feel about them”**, further emphasising the intertwined relationship between self-image and the opinions of others.

The pressure to conform to idealised standards, often set by influencers, can create feelings of inadequacy: **“Most of the time, it’s all of that, like caring about what other people think, and a lot of the time on social media, people see influencers, and they think that they’re not good enough.”** This highlights the detrimental effects of social comparison, which can lead to anxiety and diminished self-worth.

“

Online Reputation

continued

Concerns about self-presentation extend beyond simple aesthetics. One student articulated their worries about how their profile picture might be perceived: **“I guess...you had a profile picture or something, what it would look like.”** This signifies careful consideration of how they curate their online presence, as they know that any misstep could affect their reputation.

“

*what other people say
and think*

”

Additionally, the students voiced apprehension about facial recognition and exposure, indicating that **“people seeing [your] face and [you]”** could lead to unwanted attention or judgment. The anxiety surrounding public perception is further emphasised by a student’s reflection on **“probably how they see you, like your appearance online.”**

Moreover, students recognise the importance of thoughtful communication in maintaining their online reputation. They expressed sensitivity to public opinion, noting that **“what other people say and think”** shapes their online identity. This awareness underscores the need for students to engage in mindful practices when communicating online, as their words can contribute to their overall reputation.

“Addiction

In two focus groups, students expressed concerns about screen addiction, particularly related to television and social media: **“My brother’s addicted to the TV,”** highlighting how excessive screen time affects family interactions. Students displayed self-awareness regarding their habits, acknowledging signs of addiction, such as continuous usage and neglecting responsibilities: **“You know when you’re addicted to it when you keep using it.”**

“*My brother’s addicted to the TV.*”

Health concerns were also raised, with students recognising that addiction could lead to **“brain and eye damage.”** They acknowledged the challenges of reducing screen time, with one remarking that boredom often ensues when devices are taken away, having created a cycle of dependency. While some students suggested alternative offline activities, like **“touch grass”** or **“read a book,”** they ultimately indicated that these strategies might be challenging to implement in practice due to their admitted addiction to screens.

Generative AI was used to reframe academic language to make it accessible and engaging for the general public.





Final Thoughts

Young people today face a wide range of challenges, some familiar but in digital form such as "stranger danger" and "bullying"—and others entirely new, like scamming and digital addiction. Despite these pressures, young people are surprisingly savvy about the risks they encounter. They demonstrate critical thinking and employ various strategies to protect themselves and each other, showing a level of media literacy that often surpasses that of many adults. As parents, whānau, and educators, supporting and preparing students for this evolving digital landscape is essential. This report not only aims to highlight pressing digital wellbeing issues but also to reinforce confidence in young people's understanding and capability. Young people invite us to collaborate as allies, urging us to engage with understanding and to support their journey through the online landscape without judgment.

Resources & Support

Commonsense.org/education

Commonsense Education

Help teachers thrive in a digital world. A non-profit aimed at enhancing the wellbeing of children, youth, and families through reliable, research-based information, uniquely involving youth in content reviews.

digitalcivicstoolkit.org

The Digital Civics Toolkit

Resources for educators to support young people to explore, recognise, and take seriously the civic potentials of digital life. Based on research and work from [MacArthur Research Network on Youth and Participatory Politics \(YPP\)](#).

Presspause.co.nz

Press Pause Mission

Helping adults understand, recognise and respond to rangatahi concerning sexual behaviour.

digitalwaitaha.org.nz/books

Digital Waitaha Charitable Trust offers three significant resources:

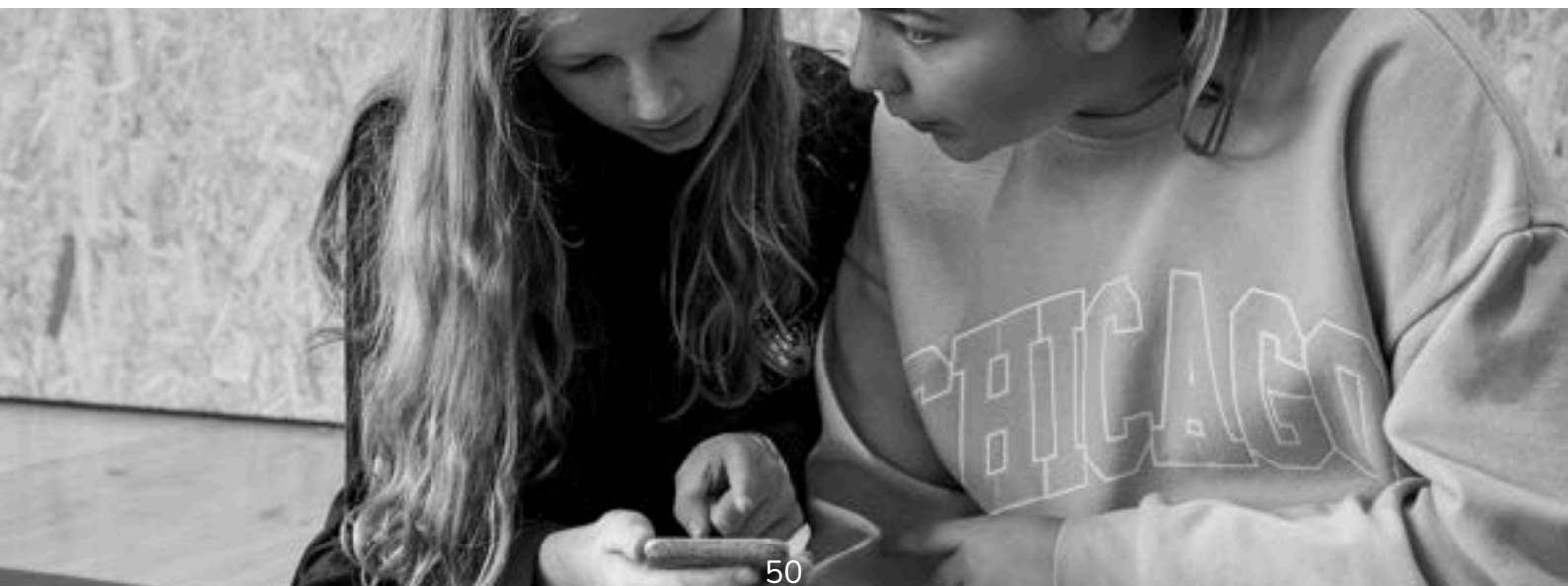
Orange Book: Digital Wellbeing and Safety Youth Workbook designed to teach children the STOP, BLOCK & TALK strategy and promote safe digital practices for their online wellbeing.

Blue Book: A Whānau Guide to Digital Wellbeing and Safety, offering families strategies to teach STOP, BLOCK & TALK and insights to support digital safety, helping manage online interactions at home effectively.

Green Book: The Digital Shield booklet serves as a comprehensive guide to building strong protective measures for digital usage and understanding the associated online risks.

netsafe.org.nz

Submit an online harm report. Digital safety resources for all ages.



About Us

Neysa is the lead researcher and lead facilitator at the Digital Waitaha Charitable Trust. Originally from the United States, she is a mother of two children and brings over 20 years of experience as a former IT professional. She began her career as a full-stack developer, understanding the importance of building a comprehensive skill set across all areas of the field. Neysa is a keen researcher of digital safety and wellbeing and is deeply committed to helping individuals become responsible and safe digital citizens. Her passion lies in keeping children empowered online, enabling them to maximise the benefits of the digital world while avoiding its dangers.



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Cheryl is a Professor and Head of the School of Educational Studies and Leadership and co-director of Te Puna Rangahau i-Ako, the Digital Education Futures Lab at the University of Canterbury who has lived and worked in South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. Her research is centred around digital equity and inclusion and the role digital technologies play in enabling or inhibiting students' participation in learning. As a mother to two children who have grown up with digital technologies, she feels it's essential to develop a healthy and critical awareness of both digital opportunities and challenges.



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The Digital Waitaha Charitable Trust.

Established in 2021, Digital Waitaha is dedicated to promoting safe and responsible digital device use and empowering individuals to manage their digital wellbeing and safety. The Trust champions initiatives that foster individual agency and strive towards digital equity. With tailored programmes for various age groups and demographics, the Trust's key offerings include the STOP, BLOCK & TALK for digital wellbeing strategy, Digital Ambassadors, Whānau Workshops, Ask a Digital Expert, the Digital Shield programme and the Web Wise Wanderers podcast.



Te Kaupeka Ako | Faculty of Education

Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha | University of Canterbury

Offering specialised programmes in Teacher Education, Educational Studies and Leadership, and Youth & Community Leadership, the Faculty includes national and international research leaders in multiple domains of educational study. This includes but is not limited to Child Wellbeing, Educational Leadership, Digital Education, Language and Literacy, Philosophy of Education, and Inclusive Education.

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