

Protecting your kids

Personal Safety Education for Parents



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We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the ACT, the Ngunnawal people. We acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region.



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Foreword

This booklet provides key skills, concepts and strategies to promote personal safety for children and young people. Drawing on the concepts of the Protective Behaviours program, this information can empower children of all ages to deal with difficult, unsafe or abusive situations. This booklet aims to inform you about how you can help children develop skills to be able to talk to a safe, trusted adult about anything in their lives.

The Protective Behaviours program has a number of important goals about safety. We want children to speak up and speak out about their safety. We want them to talk to us and other identified safe adults in their lives, whether they are at home, at school or in the community. We want children to build their confidence in sharing what is happening in their lives and to tell someone when they are worried or scared, as well as when good things happen. We need to teach our children to build respectful, healthy relationships across all ages.

We know that sexual abuse happens across all ages, genders, races and cultures and there are things we can all do to prevent abuse from happening. Children with disabilities are at greater risk. Support is available in the community for education, prevention and support if an incident has happened to a child or young person.

Throughout the ACT, Protective Behaviours training is run in child care centres and public schools for teachers and parents, run by school psychologists. Get in touch with your school and ask about a training session. Preventing child abuse is a community responsibility and all adults have a part to play in acting protectively for children and young people and creating a safer community.

What can parents do?

This section provides a framework in which to understand what steps parents can take to protect their child or young person and includes how to start to have safe conversations about personal safety. It is parents who have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of their child and the decisions affecting their child. The following sections cover important concepts from the Protective Behaviours program.

Parents are in a unique position to help their children identify their feelings, talk about their bodies and talk about feeling safe. Conversations can be started from an early age and can help establish strong communication throughout adolescence. It is never too early, or too late, to start the conversation.

Any information given to children must be **developmentally appropriate** for their age, that is, children must have the ability to process and understand it. The balance between giving them age appropriate messages and not scaring them is an important one.

Some children find it harder to speak out and it is important to start early so they know **they can talk about anything no matter what it is**. We want children to build their confidence in sharing what is happening or when they are worried and to give them a voice.

Start with small ideas and build up gradually over time, adding more detail as appropriate. Before talking with your child, first consider the messages you want to share with them. It is often a good idea to start early rather than to wait for them to ask questions, or to hear ideas from other children.

Seek teachable moments during everyday situations, to share your messages and values about personal safety.

Demonstrate good listening skills and establish open communication channels with your child. This means, taking the time to listen to what your children have to say. Give them your full attention and let them know you are interested. Manage your reactions so they know they can talk to you, and trust you. Let them know that they can talk with you about anything no matter what it is.



Have smaller conversations often, conversations are not one offs. As your child grows and develops the conversations will expand and grow with them as they become more capable of understanding age appropriate messages. Make time to talk and let them ask questions about anything even if it feels uncomfortable.

Develop body safety rules to empower your child and discuss them regularly. When a child knows their safety rules about safe and unsafe touch they are more likely to be able to say no to inappropriate touch and tell a protective adult.

Encourage your child to respect themselves and others. Respect means that they can understand another's wishes and it shows that they care about them and their choices about their body. It involves being able to say no and is about learning about the idea of **consent**.

Be aware of signs that your child is being harmed or is behaving differently and seek out someone to talk to if you are worried. Learn more so that you can help your child, identify risks and support and inform other young people.

As parents, we can't be with our children all of the time, but we can **help them develop protective behaviours and personal safety skills**.



Talk about safety

Teach your child that...

We all have the right to feel safe, all of the time.

What does safe mean? The experience of feeling safe may be different for each person. It can be thought of as a continuum, moving from feeling safe through to feeling unsafe. Sometimes feeling scared when taking risks on purpose is okay, such as being on a rollercoaster and knowing it is temporary. Being adventurous is to be encouraged, along with learning about making safe choices.

Talk about the difference between safe and unsafe. When things are safe, children and young people feel that they have some choice and feel comfortable and have some control. When someone is feeling scared and unsafe, there are steps that can help to feel safe again. Sometimes this means asking for help. It is important to use the language of safety to ask questions and express any concerns.

Can your child identify when they are taking a positive risk that makes them feel scared? When is it fun to be scared? Are they making a choice to risk on purpose? Can they identify what is an unsafe risk?



Help your child identify their early warning signs

It is important that children can identify in their body when they are feeling unsafe or scared. Children can be encouraged to notice when they have body signals such as butterflies in their stomach, jelly legs, a sore tummy or when they feel like running away.

Children can be encouraged to pay attention to their feelings and where in their body they feel their **early warning signs**. Children may notice their early warning signs when they feel unsafe, when being told a secret, or when around particular people or in a particular place. This is when they need to tell an adult even if it might embarrass or upset someone.

By talking about these feelings and naming them, children can begin to understand the full range of emotions including being happy, sad, scared, excited, frustrated, disappointed, worried, safe or unsafe. Parents can accept all of these feelings and provide reassurance and understanding. It is important that parents don't tell children not to be scared or that it is silly to feel scared. Teach them to trust their gut reactions and their intuition and that 'uh oh' feeling.

Parents can help children use strategies for calming down. Help your child think about what helps them feel better, such as taking deep breaths, hugging a favourite toy, counting to 5, visualising a favourite place or doing a physical activity like bouncing on a trampoline.

Where children feel unsafe and notice their early warning signs, that is when they need to get help.

Identify your child's safety network

Identify a network of up to five adults who your child trusts and feels safe with and who they can talk to if they get their early warning signs.

For many people, adults and children alike, the people we confide in most often are our immediate family members – the people we live with. They can be a great source of comfort and support, but sometimes they can also be the people that can cause pain or distress. Also, we know that parents can't be with their child at all times, so children need people outside of the family who they can talk with.

We can talk about anything, no matter what it is, with someone we trust.

Encourage children to identify safe adults in addition to those they live with to go on their safety network. People in a child's network can be used to share good news as well as calls for help. We want children to develop persistence in asking for help until they feel safe again. If one adult on their network is not available, then a child can keep on trying another until their early warning signs are gone.

The activity of identifying safety network adults can help assure children they are supported and are part of a connected community. Feeling supported by this network enables children to participate in life with energy and enthusiasm. Children can ask adults to be part of their network and can also be encouraged to re-think their network if circumstances change or people move away.

Practice ‘What ifs’

Problem solving skills can be used to equip our children to make decisions and act if needed. By exploring different situations and the various options available to the child, they can develop confidence and improve their skills. Practice problem solving by using ‘What ifs’. In thinking through situations with children, parents can practice being great listeners. These discussions can help to reinforce the ideas of the child’s personal network and recognising early warning signs.

Discussing ‘What ifs’ is a useful way to talk with your child about what to do when they feel unsafe. Do they know where to get help? Do they have a back-up plan with their friends? Does your family have a safety plan, and have you spoken about it recently? ‘What ifs’ are for parents too.

‘What if’ situations can be posed for children of different ages, for example:

- > What if a child was bullying them at school, what could they do?
- > What if a child was hurting their friend, what could they do?
- > What if someone came to the door when an adult wasn’t at home? Do they have to open the door and talk to them? Who could they call to check what to do? Is there a list of phone numbers for them to access?
- > What if someone showed them a rude picture or asked to take a rude photo of them?
- > What could your child do if a stranger asked them to go with them? Discuss who do they think it would be okay to accept a lift from. Perhaps you could have a family code word, and if someone doesn’t give it then the child needs to say ‘NO’ and get to safety.
- > What if a child asked them to play a kissing game, a hitting game, or asked them to pull down their pants?
- > What if they get that ‘uh oh’ or creepy feeling about someone?
- > What if they were at a sleepover and felt unsafe?
- > What if someone at high school offered them alcohol or drugs, discuss what could they say and do?
- > What if they are going to an unsupervised party or a party where you don’t know the parents? What could they do if they started to feel unsafe?
- > What if a new girl/boyfriend wanted to become intimate? Could they say no? Who could they talk to?
- > When would it be suitable to call the emergency 000 service?

With open communication between you and your child or young person, they may be more likely to come to you or someone on their network when they are feeling unsafe and have the ability to ask for help when they need it.

Remember ‘What ifs’ are for parents too so that if you are concerned about your child you can ask someone on your support network or seek professional help with your school psychologist or health service.

What if someone was worried about an adult around their child?

What if someone thought their own child was involved in unsafe play, what could they do?

What if your child’s behaviour had changed and become more sexualised?

Encourage being assertive

It is important to teach children to be assertive and to use assertive body language and a strong, loud voice. Children need to act confidently through their body language e.g. making their bodies tall and open, with their shoulders down, their back straight and their head up. This is important even when they may not feel confident on the inside. Encourage a child to use a regular voice, loud enough so it can be easily heard.

Talking about being assertive and sometimes 'breaking the rules' in a personal emergency can also be effective. Children need to understand that if they feel unsafe, or get their early warning signs, it is okay to say NO, even to an adult, and get to safety and tell a safe adult around them to help. Sometimes they need to tell secrets, especially when they are unsafe ones. Did you know that children who are more assertive are less likely to be bullied or abused?

Teach children that they can say no, and it is about giving consent about their body. Everyone needs to ask for their consent about their own body boundary. Consent means you have said YES. It is about having respect around body boundaries and respecting others' choices about their body. This requires patience, confidence, practice and role rehearsals. The more children practice being assertive and confident, they are more likely to build up their bravery to speak out.

Talk about personal safety concepts and body safety

Public and private - It is important to teach children the difference between public and private, in terms of places, behaviours and body parts and online. Generally, 'public' is for everyone and 'private' is just for you. Talk about what is acceptable behaviour in public and private places.

Private body parts are the areas under swimmers and include the mouth. Reinforce that children are the bosses of their own bodies.

No one can see or touch their private parts without their permission. Doctors and dentists may need to examine children, and they must seek permission first.

It is okay for a child to say NO to unwanted touch.



Understanding their body - Encourage children's natural interest in their bodies and teach them the correct names for all their body parts. If inappropriate touching happens, they are more likely to make themselves understood and be able to get help. If you can speak about their body comfortably, it will make it easier for children to share their concerns and ask questions. It is also important to have these discussions before children learn different ideas in the playground or from other social settings.

Remind children that:

Different types of touch - There are different types of touch such as loving, accidental, hurtful, confusing and unsafe. It is a good idea to have rules about touching made explicit. These rules relate to how children touch others and how they can be touched themselves. Identify touches that are loving from people we know and love e.g. backrubs, high fives, sitting close whilst reading and hair brushing. Encourage children to openly discuss how their body feels when kissing or hugging a relative for example. Remind them that if they are confused about a touch, they need to tell someone.

Body safety rules can be devised. Have a discussion with family members and come up with a list of body safety rules that can be displayed and discussed.

These might include:

- > My body belongs to me
- > It is not okay for someone to ask to touch my private parts or ask me to touch their private parts
- > My mouth is private too
- > It is not okay to take rude pictures
- > We don't keep secrets in our family only surprises
- > You can play with your clothes on and...
- > There should never be secrets about touch

Secrets and surprises - Talking with children of any age about secrets is valuable. It is useful to look at the difference between safe secrets and unsafe secrets, particularly in terms of how they make someone feel. Safe secrets usually have a happy outcome and are kept for a short time. Unsafe secrets are actions or behaviours that are dangerous and may involve being told to keep the secret for a long time. These may involve a threat that something bad will happen if you tell. Families have different approaches to secrets. Some have 'no secrets, only surprises' like for birthdays.

There may be times when an adult or older child uses tricks, shame, threats or bribes to get a child to keep a secret. In these situations, children need to tell someone on their adult network and persist until an adult really listens. Children can also be encouraged to check with a trusted adult if they are not sure whether a secret is safe or unsafe and if they feel confused about a touch that feels nice.

Are these safe or unsafe secrets?

- > What present you are getting someone
- > Seeing someone steal
- > Where your family hides their spare house key
- > That someone is hurting you
- > Your friend is having a surprise party
- > Being invited to a birthday party
- > Your brother's secret friend on the internet

Safety in public places can be discussed with your child e.g. using public toilets and getting changed at the swimming pool. Remind your child not to go off alone and always ask an adult if they are scared or feeling unsafe in public. Always walk to school with others and stay away from the road and unfamiliar people in cars. Check whether an adult knows where they are, and can they get help if needed.

Discuss personal boundaries

One way of helping children understand safe and unsafe behaviour, as well as the idea of personal boundaries, is to talk about the concept of 'Circles' or personal boundaries. Through the use of six coloured circles, the ideas of personal, physical, emotional and psychological boundaries are illustrated.

The child is at the centre of the circle; they are the most important person. The child gives permission to who is allowed to come into their private space, to touch them and assists to develop their personal boundaries. This is giving consent and means that you have said YES.

Private space is for me. Someone needs permission to enter my space.

Cuddles and kisses are for close family.

Friendly hugs are for close friends or family.

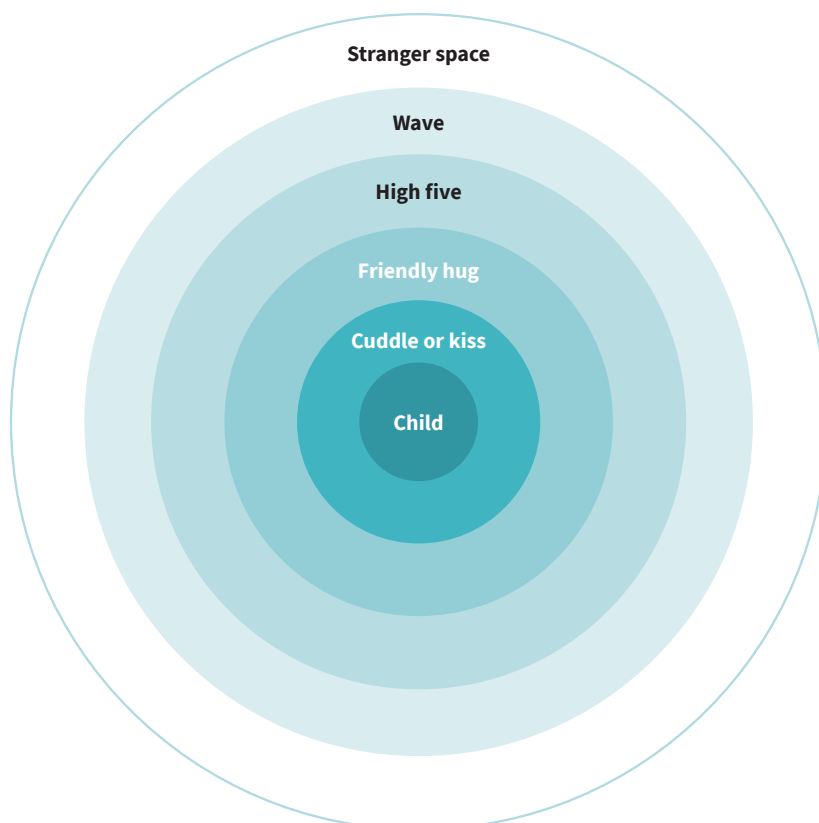
High fives are for other friends, family and teachers.

Waves are for familiar faces in the neighbourhood or school.

Strangers are people the child doesn't know. Most are kind and would never harm a child, however we need to practice safety around them. Teach your child never to give out personal information to a stranger or go with them even if they are nice and to always ask you first.

The key messages for children are that different behaviour is appropriate in different settings. Also, that people may move in towards the centre of their circle over time. It is hoped that by talking about personal space, children will feel more able to talk about issues that may arise or if a boundary-crossing incident happens.

Personal Boundaries and the Circles



Staying safe online

There should be clear rules set by families for children and young people about how to be safe online as well as open discussions about family expectations of appropriate online behaviour and use of mobile phones. Remember that being online is PUBLIC not PRIVATE.

Some parents set limits on the time spent on online devices or on the types of activities that are okay. Information that children have access to must be age appropriate and developmentally appropriate. Also, research has shown that it is often safer to set up devices in commonly used spaces, such as a kitchen or lounge room rather than a child's bedroom.

It is also important that children are aware of the risks of being online such as online grooming, identity theft and scams. Some people online are not who they seem to be. Children and young people need to understand the importance of not sharing personal and private information and have an awareness of how their actions can inadvertently provide such details. Any discussion about risks can be coupled with a discussion about what to do if they feel unsafe online or see harmful images that give them their early warning signs. They need to know who to talk to if they see something unsafe or feel at risk online. Through building healthy relationships and open lines of communication with trusted adults on their network, children will feel more comfortable to seek help if an online problem arises.

We need to build children's self-confidence and problem solving skills whilst online.

Some tips for online activity are:

1. Remind children not to give out private information online e.g. name or address, phone number, school address, sports club information or financial details. Sometimes this can be hard, so if in doubt, check.
2. Encourage children to stand up for their friends.
3. Discuss what a digital footprint is, and what can happen when people share private pictures or messages.
4. Encourage children to talk about what they do online, whether it is with you or a trusted adult on their safety network.
5. Remind them that it's okay to make mistakes online and learn from them.
6. Discuss what cyberbullying is and talk about different types of strangers online.
7. Ensure children stay away from websites that are not for kids.
8. Question what you see online and practice 'what ifs?' for different scenarios.
9. Sit down with your child and share in some of the online activities.
10. Consider an online cyber agreement with your child or young person.

Understanding the different types of abuse

Physically abusive behaviour refers to any non-accidental physically aggressive act towards a child or young person. Physical abuse may be intentional or may be the result of excessive physical discipline. It can be a single act or repeated acts. Such behaviours include hitting, slapping, shaking, burning and kicking. Children who have been physically abused may flinch when approached by an adult or not be able to give an explanation for their injury.

Sexually abusive behaviour refers to any unwanted sexual activity between a child and an adult or older person, including older children. Sexual abuse includes comments, physical contact, voyeurism, exhibitionism and exposing or involving the child in sexual activity and pornography. Sexual abuse is harder to detect and often secrets and threats are involved to keep the silence. The signs are more likely to be emotional or behavioural rather than physical. Parents might notice sexualised behaviours not matching their child's age and development.

Neglectful behaviour refers to a failure by a parent, caregiver or person who has parental responsibility to provide the basic requirements for meeting the developmental needs of a child. It can cause significant harm to their wellbeing and can impact on their social, psychological, educational and physical development. Neglectful behaviours include a failure to provide adequate food, shelter, clothing, supervision, hygiene or medical attention.

Emotional abuse refers to inappropriate verbal or symbolic acts and a failure to provide adequate non-physical nurture or emotional availability. Psychologically abusive or neglectful behaviours include rejecting, ridiculing, ignoring, isolating and verbal abuse and belittling of a child or young person. A child can struggle emotionally however this may not be linked to emotional abuse.

Exposure to **family violence** is generally considered to be a form of emotional abuse that causes harm. With this in mind, witnessing family violence refers to a child being present (hearing or seeing) while a family member is subjected to abuse. A child can learn to distrust adults, become clingy, defiant, rebellious and can withdraw and lose interest in normal activities.

Self harm refers to when a child or young person deliberately hurts their body. It can be a way for a child or young person to deal with stressful events or when they are having strong and difficult emotions. Self harming behaviours can include cutting, burning or hurting their body. It is often done in secret.

What if someone has noticed a child with sexualised behaviours? Parents need to be aware of the normal stages of **healthy sexual development**. *'Is it Normal? Understanding Your Child's Sexual Behaviour'* (by Holly Brennan and Judy Graham, 2012, Family Planning Queensland) is an excellent resource. If concerned about potentially harmful sexualised behaviours, it is important to discuss this with a professional.

For further information about the indicators of abuse, plus the Mandatory Reporting requirements in the ACT, refer to the 'Keeping children and young people safe: A shared community responsibility' booklet from the ACT Child and Youth Protection Services (2017).



Responding when a child discloses something

There may be times when your child discloses something that may have impacted on their safety and involves inappropriate touching. It may be about your child or another child or young person's personal safety. It is not easy to know how to respond because an adult may have their own feelings of shock, guilt, shame, anger and sadness and sometimes disbelief.

Whilst it can be challenging, you need to stay calm and manage your feelings when responding. This will reassure and support the young person that they have done the right thing in telling and they are not to blame. It may also help them to trust that they can tell you other things now or in the future. Managing your response includes being aware of your facial expression, tone of voice, volume and your body language.

Stay calm, show support

It is also important to be supportive and help create a safe space for the child after they have told you. They are relying on you as the adult to keep them safe and to stop what is happening.

Remember that children and young people need to know that you will believe them. Then, they need to know how you are going to act. Unless it is an emergency situation, the first step is likely to be getting advice about how to support the child after a disclosure. Parents may need to seek help from professionals so they know how to best respond and provide ongoing support.

You can provide a supportive response to a child or young person by:

- > listening carefully and not quizzing them
- > telling them you believe them and that you are willing to help
- > validating and acknowledging their decision to tell
- > talking about their courage in telling you
- > not making any promises that you cannot keep, e.g. that you will not tell anyone
- > telling them that the abuse is not their fault and they are not responsible for it
- > being gentle on yourself and seeking your own support

Disclosure of abuse

- > When a child or young person discloses that they have been abused, they may be feeling scared, guilty, ashamed, angry and powerless.
- > A child rarely lies about sexual abuse. Their disclosure is a message that they want the abuse to stop.
- > After supporting them to disclose, let them know what you will now do, which is often seeking advice about what should happen next and how to keep them safer.
- > Remember that sometimes children also look to protect their parents from personal pain or will check out whether an adult can manage hearing their story before telling.
- > Be the adult the child needs and provide a safe space to talk.

Parents need to act protectively to keep kids safer

What are signs of grooming?

This is how some adults or older children gain the trust of vulnerable children and their parents in order to sexually harm or abuse a child. Grooming is never the child's fault and the child or young person is never to blame. It is often a subtle but deliberate process. It can be difficult to think that a person who grooms is someone we know or someone who is trusted by the community. The earlier we recognise the signs of grooming, the sooner we can act protectively. Some types of grooming behaviours are:

- > Someone showing an unusual interest in a child and creating a special friendship in person or online.
- > Isolating the child or young person from protective adults and spending an unusual amount of time with a child.
- > An adult testing the boundaries or breaking body rules e.g. playing with kids, tickling, touching or hugging children.
- > An adult who invades a child's personal space e.g. in the bathroom or when getting changed.
- > Someone making a child or young person responsible for keeping secrets by using threats, tricks, coercion, bribes and other types of persuasion e.g. providing gifts, lollies, offering drugs/alcohol or offering pornographic material.
- > Someone who gradually sexualises a relationship with a child e.g. makes sexual jokes, takes sexual photos or shows a child or young person sexual material.

The sooner we recognise potentially harmful situations the better protected our children and young people are. So be alert to the signs that something is not right and be aware of changes in your child's behaviour. Remember that if someone appears too good to be true, they usually are.

Family safety plan

It is recommended that individual families devise a safety plan, to initiate discussions about safety and come up with agreed rules and expectations. These may change over time as your child develops.

Who makes it?

Everyone in the family can contribute.

What goes in it?

You could include:

Strategies such as 'if something happens on the way to school, go straight to school and tell'.

Scenarios such as 'never open the door when mum and dad aren't home'.

Responsibilities such as 'it is everyone's responsibility to keep the spare key safe and its location private'.

Code Word such as 'your mum asked me to pick you up from school and they have to tell you the family code word e.g. RAINBOW'.

Resources such as when and how to call the Police. Children need to know their full name and where they live and how to call 000.

What then?

Keep talking about it. From time to time, something might prompt you to start discussing the plan. This is a good time to check it is still relevant and that your children remember what you've agreed upon, and you can add new things as they grow.

Need more information?

Protective Behaviours ACT

For more information about the program and how to help keep your child safe.
www.pbact.com.au

Parentline

A free telephone counselling service to parents and carers to discuss any issue regarding bringing up children and family relationships.

02 6287 3833

parentline@parentlineact.org.au

Kids Helpline

A free 24-hour telephone counselling service for children and young people aged between 5 and 25.

1800 55 1800

Lifeline

Free 24-hour telephone crisis support service.

13 11 44

Child and Youth Protection Services

To report abuse and discuss a concern in the ACT

1300 556 729 (General persons line).

childprotection@act.gov.au

Child At Risk Health Unit (CARHU)

Based at the Canberra Hospital, the unit provides examinations, education, consultation and therapy for children and their families/carers where there are concerns of child abuse and/or neglect.

02 6244 2712

OneLink

OneLink provides information and connections for support services in the ACT, including services for families and young people

1800 176 468

www.onelink.org.au

The Office of the eSafety Commissioner

Committed to empowering all Australians to have safer, more positive experiences online.

For information and reporting see: **www.esafety.gov.au**

ThinkUKnow

A partnership between the Australian Federal Police, Commonwealth Bank, Microsoft and Datacom. It is a free, evidence-based cyber safety program for parents, carers and teachers and students, and provides tools to create a safer online environment for young people.

For resources and information see: **www.thinkuknow.org.au**

