

insights

Is your child's brain ready for the online playgrounds?

by Martine Oglethorpe



Every week I spend time with teachers, students and parents helping them understand technology and the digital world, and present strategies to manage devices at home and at school. Ultimately, I want to ensure they are kept safe online and have the ability to thrive in this world, whilst reaping the many benefits the technology has to offer.

I am certainly not against technology, against social media or against video games. In fact, I see great benefits to incorporating them into our lives and the lives of our children. What I am against however, is the handing over of the devices with full access to the internet when there is little understanding of the potential harm and little to no safeguards.

We have all heard the stories, seen the headlines and clicked on the alarming clickbait. Stories of grooming where the young and vulnerable are lured away from their screens and in to the clutches of some paedophile. Yes those stories are out there, and while still a small minority of cases, the consequences are devastating. And aside from the grooming, there is the exposure to so much inappropriate, pornographic content that young people are being inadvertently sent via social networks and gaming platforms. Recent reports of a young girl finding herself in a sex chat room in the kids gaming platform Roblox is just one of mention.

What happens when kids find themselves in dangerous or perverted circumstances is usually the result of playing in playgrounds that they are just not cognitively and socially and emotionally developed enough to handle. When we place a child in an adult space, where adults are hanging out, (many of whom don't have their best interests at heart), we are asking them to make decisions and judgements and think in the critical ways that they are simply not equipped for.

In my student sessions we discuss how easy it is to be someone else online and how we can better arm ourselves with the skills and thinking to make accurate judgements about someone's identity. When I show them a picture of a made-up avatar with a picture of Justin Bieber and I ask them to tell me how they would know if he was the real deal, I get the same responses every time. Every single time from kids as young as 8 right through to those hitting their teens, I am met with suggestions such as "I would just ask him the name of his first song he wrote, not the one he released as not many people would know that". Or "I would ask him the name of his first pet?" Or "I would ask him things that only really hard-core fans would know and ask him to tell me really quickly before he had time to google it".

Every week when I do this exercise I am reminded that they are just not there yet. Their brain development is just not at a point where it can accurately make these decisions and come to the right conclusions. It isn't because

they are naïve, or stupid, it is simply because they haven't been on this earth long enough, and their brain has not had the chance to grow and learn and think in ways that are beyond what we are expecting of them.

Now, as I said I am not against kids playing in some of these places *but* it must be done with absolute supervision while they are young. That means finding out about the platform they are wanting to hang out in. Finding out how you can make it as safe as you possibly can. Find out what settings to put in place and what 3rd party software you may need to look at to keep things under control and away from curious eyes.

If you are deciding to allow your child to have a device, search the internet, open a social media account or to play an online game, make sure that while you must certainly be teaching them the skills and thinking they will need, you cannot rely on that teaching alone. So, check age guidelines and if you think your child can manage and you are prepared to put in the time with them, then you must:

Play that game: have a go with at playing that game even if it is driving you crazy. You may just have some fun, enjoy some bonding and most importantly be able to have the most relevant conversations about any themes, content or possible dangers that may be found while playing.

Go to the settings: Always, always, check out what is available in the settings to make the experience as safe and user friendly as possible. This is where you can select who can contact your child, who can see their content, what content they can see, who can comment to them, what they can say, what words or phrases they can hear etc.

Google the potential risks: Understand some of the risks that have been associated with the game or app so you know you are doing all you can to avoid that risk.

Connect with your child: Talk to your child about what they like to do. We don't always have to be lecturing about what not to do online, but we can certainly be speaking about the positive elements and how we can encourage them to find ways to enjoy the good rather

Watch them in this playground: Just as you would when they first take off the training wheels, or first make it on to the skatepark, we watch to see how they are going. Check to see if they are learning from past mistakes, to see if they have a back-up plan, to warn if you need to and to help them get back up again should they fall.

We don't send our kids to adult movies when they are young because they don't have the cognitive development to process much of that content which may well be inappropriate. We don't send them to the city alone full of strangers and expect them to navigate on their own and make decisions about unfamiliar people and surroundings. And so too, we must not hand over the digital world without both the teaching, guidance and connection, as well as the safety strategies, the boundaries and the research to know that they have the ability to remain safe and make the best decisions for themselves in the online world.

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Martine Oglethorpe

Martine Oglethorpe is an accredited speaker with the Office of the eSafety Commissioner and has presented to numerous parent groups, schools and teachers. She is a speaker, counsellor and educator with a passion for building resilient kids in a digital world. Contact details: info@martineoglethorpe.com.au, themodernparent.net, facebook.com/themodernparent