

**Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.**

**"Access to Education"**



**Submission to the Consultation**

**on the**

**New Online Safety Act**

**from the**

**Federal Council**

**of the**

**Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.**

**ICPA (Aust)**

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**Contact:**

**(Mrs) Suzanne Wilson  
Federal Secretary  
ICPA (Aust)  
122/8 Gardiner St  
DARWIN NT 0800  
[FedSecretary@icpa.com.au](mailto:FedSecretary@icpa.com.au)  
Phone: 0418 830 214**

**Contact:**

**(Mrs) Alana Moller  
Federal President  
ICPA (Aust)  
Star of Hope Station, 5090 Pioneer Rd  
CLERMONT QLD 4721  
[FedPresident@icpa.com.au](mailto:FedPresident@icpa.com.au)  
Phone: (07) 4983 5353**

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), welcomes the opportunity to comment on the new Online Safety Act. ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary, apolitical parent body representing geographically isolated students. This encompasses rural and remote children from early childhood through to tertiary. ICPA (Aust) recommends that consideration of the unique circumstances of geographically isolated students and their families need to be considered in any Online Safety framework.

For some rural and remote children, online access is an essential tool through which they receive their education. Many geographically isolated students must study by distance education, from kindergarten upwards and often these educational programs depend upon access to online platforms and technology in order to be delivered. It is therefore imperative that these children have online access, which is safeguarded, however is suitable to provide them with the requirements they need for their education. It needs to be recognised that geographically isolated children are required to participate in considerable amounts of online activity to complete their education yet need to be protected in so doing.

Many geographically isolated children also face the unique challenge of having to reside away from home to attend boarding school in the upper years of primary school onwards. Online access for these children is beneficial for them to be able to maintain contact with their families who remain in the remote areas they come from. For this reason, being able to access online resources can be valuable for these children. However, they need to be able to do this in a safe environment. Rural and remote students living away from home for schooling do not have their family support network or guidance close at hand and geographically isolated families rely heavily on boarding school staff to watch over and care for their children. When at boarding school, rural and remote students often encounter a large number of students with vastly different amount of social experience than themselves and it can be difficult for them to interpret the many new situations that they face. At present, there are no online safety resource tools designed specifically to address the unique needs of rural and remote students who have limited access to outside social experiences when they are at home in their early years of learning and many of whom later leave home to attend boarding school as young students with family, friends and their support network often hundreds or even more than a thousand kilometres away. ICPA (Aust) recommends the establishment of online safety resources which specifically address the need of rural and remote families and students in gaining information, knowledge and understanding of online safety and cyberbullying.

Given the nature of online use by geographically isolated children, ICPA (Aust) feels that it is essential that any Online Safety Act recognises these unique circumstances and provides ways in which children can be protected, while still being able to have access to essential education and other opportunities that having online access provide.

To meet the expectations of the Isolated Children's Parents' Association, ICPA (Aust) the new Online Safety Act must be able to:

- i) Protect isolated children from online dangers and cyberbullying
- ii) Support parents and In Home Care educators, who may not have the knowledge or resources available to them to educate and protect children from online dangers and cyberbullying
- iii) Facilitate the development of educational resources and support service providers to deliver online safety and anti-cyber bullying education to rural and remote children
- iv) Support schools and boarding schools in protecting children when they are away from home.

ICPA (Aust) welcomes the new Online Safety Act expanding the cyberbullying scheme and providing additional measures to protect Australian children from cyberbullying. The rural community is all too aware of the potential impact of cyberbullying. The suicide of the bush girl, 14-year-old Amy 'Dolly' Everett in January 2018 left country people reeling and was largely attributed to cyberbullying. While online platforms allow students to access educational resources, to maintain contact with their family while away are school and likewise their friends while they are in remote areas, unguarded these platforms can and have had disastrous impacts. It is essential that mechanisms be in place to protect all children against these challenges.

ICPA (Aust) also believes that it is essential that those who reside in geographically isolated locations are given equitable education, resources and support as their non-remote counterparts to assist in dealing with online issues that can or may arise. Opportunities need to be made available especially for families and their children to learn how to use online platforms correctly and safely and to enhance their digital skills. It is imperative that parents and carers of children are given every opportunity and are supported to be aware of and understand the online environments that their children may be accessing.

ICPA (Aust) welcomes any commitment to ensuring and enhancing online safety, especially for children. Online access is an essential tool for many geographically isolated children due to its ability to provide educational platforms not otherwise available to these students and also to allow students who must leave remote areas to study, to maintain contact with their families. It is for these reasons that any Online Safety framework needs to recognise that for these children, online access is often a useful tool, however, equally there needs to be procedures and plans in place that safeguard these children within their online activity.