alannah & madeline foundation

Ground Floor, 387 City Road
South Melbourne VIC 3205
Postal address
PO Box 5192
South Melbourne VIC 3205
Phone 03 9697 0666
Email info@amf.org.au
ABN 96 514 115 810
alannahandmadeline.org.au

What Parents and Carers Say About a Digital Duty of Care, 2026

The Alannah & Madeline Foundation (the Foundation) engaged Lewers Research to consult parents and carers of primary students about the promised Digital Duty of Care. Their response was clear: families support this reform, but the vision must be followed by decisive action. Government must establish a strong, enforceable duty requiring online services to prevent foreseeable harm and put children's safety and best interests at the centre of how their products are designed and operated.

As one parent said, '*We can supervise and educate our kids but we can't realistically monitor every conversation, search, game or piece of content they encounter online. DDC [digital duty of care] should put greater responsibility on online services to design their platforms with children's safety in mind from the beginning rather than expecting parents and children to carry all of that themselves.'*

We engaged families of primary students because children in this age group are prolific users of digital technologies, at a vulnerable stage of development, and often disregarded in public policy debate. Through in-depth qualitative consultation, we heard from 59 parents and carers from diverse backgrounds across Australia. This report sets out the key findings and the actions needed to bring the Digital Duty of Care to life.

Parents' and carers' messages to Government

Parents and carers work hard to keep their children safe online, but they cannot and should not be expected to carry the responsibility alone. It is extremely difficult to monitor children across multiple high-risk platforms, each with different settings and design. As one parent said, *'I can set rules or parental controls, but can't watch everything my children see or do online'.*

From parents' and carers' perspectives, the greatest risks to children online come from inappropriate content and interaction with other users. Parents and carers see social media and gaming platforms as the riskiest and least-trusted online services, followed by other services that permit user interaction.

Generative AI, including chatbots, is also emerging as a major risk in the eyes of parents and carers, particularly in generating fake content and threatening children's development through reliance on AI tools.

Parents and carers believe stronger regulation is long overdue. They welcome the Digital Duty of Care, but they want reform that changes platform behaviour, not a framework that relies on voluntary compliance. They call upon Government to place a clear, proactive obligation on online services to prevent harm before it occurs. More specifically, parents and carers want to see five changes:

1. **Require online services to proactively detect and rapidly remove inappropriate content, AI-generated deceptive content, scams, predatory users and bullying behaviour before children are harmed.**
2. **Mandate genuinely child-safe digital environments, with robust age assurance, age-appropriate content and high-risk features switched off by default.**
3. **Ensure parents and carers can access simple, consistent, centralised information and safety controls across platforms, rather than navigating a fragmented system service by service.**

4. **Back the Digital Duty of Care with independent oversight, transparent reporting and penalties substantial enough to change corporate behaviour when services fail to protect children.**
5. **Bring generative AI and AI powered services fully within the duty, addressing children's exposure to features that encourage dependence and to misleading, age-inappropriate or abusive content.**

While parents and carers support the promise of the Digital Duty of Care, many doubt it will deliver without clear obligations, credible oversight, honest communication, and consequences for non-compliance. Their scepticism reminds us that legislation must be enforced, up-to-date, and free from loopholes.

As one parent said *'The Digital Duty of Care could help protect children by requiring online services to prevent foreseeable harms. However, its effectiveness will depend on strong enforcement, clear responsibilities and keeping pace with emerging technologies.'*

Methodology

A qualitative 'online community' methodology was used to consult parents and carers about their perceptions, attitudes and expectations of the Digital Duty of Care. A diverse sample of parents or carers of primary school aged children was selected to take part in the online community and answer up to two hours of activities designed by Lewers and the Foundation. A total of n=59 participated. Participant breakdown:

- Location: 61% of participants (36 people) were from metropolitan areas. 39% of participants (23 people) were from regional or rural areas.
- State / Territory representation: NSW / ACT: 32% (19 participants), VIC / TAS: 31% (18 participants), QLD: 20% (12 participants), SA / NT: 8% (5 participants), WA: 8% (5 participants).
- Gender: 63% of participants (37 people) were female. 37% of participants (22 people) were male.
- Age: 61% of participants (36 people) were under 45 years of age. 39% of participants (23 people) were aged 45 years or older.
- Cultural and linguistic diversity: 25% of participants (15 people) spoke a language other than English. 10% of participants (6 people) identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. 64% of participants (38 people) were non-CALD.
- Children's age groups: 37% of participants (22 people) had children in Prep to Year 3. 39% of participants (23 people) had children in Years 4 to 6. 24% of participants (14 people) had children across both age groups.
- Household income: 7% of participants (4 people) reported a household income of less than $50,000. 27% of participants (16 people) reported a household income of $50,000 to less than $100,000. 27% of participants (16 people) reported a household income of $100,000 to less than $150,000. 37% of participants (22 people) reported a household income of $150,000 or more.
- Work status: 85% of participants (50 people) were working full-time or part-time. 15% of participants (9 people) were not working, including those undertaking home duties.
- Education: 41% of participants (24 people) had completed secondary education and/or TAFE/vocational training. 59% of participants (35 people) held an undergraduate or postgraduate qualification.

Percentages are included to illustrate the views of participants; they are not statistically generalisable to all Australian parents and carers. Full findings available upon request.

Families cannot carry the burden of online safety alone

Parents and carers take their responsibility to guide and protect their children online seriously, but they cannot manage all the risks embedded in platform design, content systems and user interactions.

The overwhelming message was that stronger protections for children are urgently needed. While a small number of participants raised concerns about adults' freedoms online, there was a clear overall wish for children's safety to be addressed much better in service design and operation. Comments included:

- *'I think the role of digital companies is that they should build safe platforms for our children, have effective age checks and parental controls, and they should act promptly to reported harmful content or behaviour.'*
- *'While I want my children to enjoy the benefits of technology, I strongly believe that this bill needs to place huge responsibility on online services.'*
- *'As a parent we need all the help we can get our children are growing up with all new technology AI and the games they are developing are very addictive. The companies that create these services need to be more responsible for the content and interactions our children are having online.'*

Government must require services to prevent children's exposure to content and contact harms

Parents and carers identified exposure to inappropriate content – including violent, sexual or criminal content – and harmful contact with other users, particularly predatory adults and cyber bullies as the most serious online risks. They also raised concerns about misinformation, deepfakes and scams. Families cannot manage all these risks after children have been exposed; preventative action by Government and services is needed.

Design features may not be 'visible', but they powerfully shape risks to children

Although the majority of parents and carers did not raise specific, explicit concerns about design features of online services, their accounts still made clear how design creates and amplifies risks to children.

- *'I have less trust in social media and gaming platforms because they involve user-generated content, interaction with strangers, targeted algorithms and potentially addictive features.'*
- *'Roblox I don't trust. Even though just recently they made age restrictions the predators still manage to try and groom/talk to kids. Getting rid of direct messages would stop predators talking to our kids and encouraging them to give out private details. Maybe the duty of care could erase messages, it's not needed anyway.'*
- *'My biggest concern is the inappropriate popping ads, short and disappearing contents, recommended content, all this can lead a child knowing what he or she is not intended to. Also ads of body image looks, especially on female body.'*
- *'I don't trust Facebook, Instagram and Tik Tok because kids can easily interact with strangers, access inappropriate content and harmful material. I worry about grooming, bullying, scams and privacy.'*

To address such concerns, the duty of care would need to counter risks which occur through design features which serve to maximise children's engagement with other users and with content and advertising.

Many parents and carers want high-risk features switched off by default for children, rather than expecting families to find and change complex settings. Support was strongest for disabling content recommender systems (69%) and endless feeds (61%), followed by feedback features (49%), time-limited features (45%) and logged-in features (43%).

The duty must address rapidly emerging AI risks

While a small number of parents and carers saw value in children using AI under supervision, most identified significant risks. Their concerns were centred on two areas that the duty must address: children's exposure to false, misleading or inappropriate content via AI, and children becoming dependent on AI, undermining their cognitive development and critical thinking.

Some parents and carers identified a further serious risk: AI chatbots can present themselves as trusted companions, encouraging children to form emotional attachments or rely on them for support. Parents and carers also warned that chatbots can reinforce unhealthy attitudes and encourage harmful behaviours.

- *'Privacy risks, inappropriate content, misinformation, manipulation, and the children becoming too dependent on AI instead of talking to parents, teachers or friends.'*

- *'AI giving inappropriate or false information, encouraging unsafe behaviour, collecting personal information, or children becoming too dependent on AI.'*
- *'The chatbot interaction can become lengthy, addictive, and feed into mental health problems and delusions.'*

Parents and carers expect the Digital Duty of Care to apply clearly to AI services, calling for effective age assurance and age-appropriate restrictions. Some wanted certain types of content and 'flagged words' (eg. suicide, drugs) to be prohibited. Others wanted parental controls built in. Their ideas included:

- *'Ideally the Bill will enforce the screening of AI language and stricter patterns of behaviour (of even possible), kind of a multilayer filter that doesn't just answer immediately'.*
- *'…build strong safety measure in place for children, safer default settings, age-appropriate content filters, clear warnings, parental controls and easy reporting of harmful AI content. ... AI companies should minimise errors and clearly warn users that AI can be wrong'.*
- *'Is there a way of the AI companies being able to put parameters in for [generating child exploitation material] to be stopped on their platforms? I think the government should put regulations in place within this bill to ensure that ai companies do not make this sort of activity even possible'.*

Children's best interests over commercial interests

For parents and carers, prioritising the best interests of the child requires online services to:

- Apply effective age assurance from sign-up or first access and provide age-appropriate content for children, not inappropriate or harmful content.
- Put child safety ahead of profit by investing in effective safeguards and prohibiting targeted advertising and in-game purchasing pressure directed at children.
- Prevent and rapidly disrupt harmful interactions with children, particularly from predatory adults.

They also called for online services to:

- Adopt age-appropriate privacy protections including prohibiting location and behavioural tracking and minimising the collection of children's data.
- Provide effective, easy-to-use parental controls and reporting tools.
- Actively moderate harmful content and behaviour, respond quickly to reports and remain accountable for outcomes.

Parents and carers appreciated services that made deliberate child-safe design choices, naming YouTube Kids and Messenger Kids as positive examples.

Parental tools must be simpler, stronger and consistent across services

Almost two in three participants said they currently used a tool or service feature to monitor and limit their children's online activities. A further one in five had used one previously, while 10 parents and carers relied instead on supervision and time limits.

Some did not know 'how or what tools to use' or 'get confused with all of the settings and features'. Safety should not depend on families having the time, confidence or technical expertise to navigate complex systems.

When asked what their ideal user empowerment tool would include, the most desirable features for parents and carers were control over content (what children can see), conduct (who they can contact), screen time (enforced limits) and reporting of issues for the online service to take action on.

Their preferred solution was 'a simple, centralised parental control dashboard' that could link to all services their child uses. It should allow families to set consistent screen-time limits, filter content, block contact, restrict other users and switch off high-risk features such as endless scrolling. Parents and carers prioritised:

- age-appropriate access that is tailored to children's developmental stages and cannot be easily bypassed
- blocking of strangers and direct-chat functions
- customisable content filters, including keyword controls
- enforceable screen-time limits
- advertising-free experiences, particularly with no gambling advertising
- simple reporting pathways, prompt action and clear feedback to parents and carers about outcomes
- strong privacy protections, collecting only the minimum information necessary to check a child's age.

Public trust depends on visible enforcement and measurable results

Parents and carers support the promise of the Digital Duty of Care, but many feel unsure whether it will succeed. Only 29% of participants expected the Bill to be very or extremely effective. Their concerns reflect the speed and scale of technological change, low trust in tech companies (only 17% believed online services would implement the duty effectively), and weaknesses of past reforms. For example, many were worried and frustrated by the continued presence of social media in their children's lives following the age delay.

Participants wanted online services to conduct regular risk assessments, and some felt these should be backed by third-party audits and public sharing of findings. Parents and carers also wanted clear public communication about the progress of the duty by official sources and impartial independent experts.

For parents and carers, success would mean less harmful content, stronger and simpler parental controls, faster removal of inappropriate content and conduct, and proof that complaints and breaches lead to action.

- *'I would want to see platforms actually face penalties when they fail to protect children. Clear investigations, meaningful fines, and public reports showing what action was taken.'*
- *'…clear guidelines that companies need to follow and the government / regulators audit or at least audit companies over X size … So in the news, I would want to hear there are tough guidelines, fines if they don't comply and monitoring by government or independent bodies of some sort'.*
- *'It would be great to see complaint volumes and outcomes published but what specific information will be shared? A list of 'safe' 'supported' platforms and one of "no go" platforms? Risk ratings for each platform?'*
- *'It would be nice to know as an everyday citizen what is expected of online providers so that if I do come across something that I feel is suspicious or not compliant, how can I report that?'*
- *'I would more like to see an example of a service before and after the bill so I can see the actual changes and what they would look like. Take Instagram for example what exactly will change?'*

These comments show that public confidence must be earned: through timely, visible and effective action by services and regulators, clarity about services' obligations, proof that non-compliance leads to real consequences, accountability by decision-makers, clear communication with the public, and pathways for families to seek redress for systems failures.

Ultimately, Australia's Digital Duty of Care will be judged by outcomes, not intent. To understand the outcomes, it is vital to engage meaningfully with parents, carers, children and young people (including those who face disproportionate online risks), enabling them to play a role in shaping and evaluating the reform.

The Foundation would welcome the opportunity to discuss these findings and the practical steps needed to deliver meaningful and lasting change.

Please contact:

Sarah Davies AM, CEO, sarah.davies@amf.org.au
Ariana Kurzeme, Director, Policy & Prevention, ariana.kurzeme@amf.org.au
Dr Jessie Mitchell, Manager, Advocacy, jessie.mitchell@amf.org.au