



The Secretary
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Dear Madam Chair and Members of the Select Committee,

SAFT Submission to the NT Parliamentary Select Committee on Youth Suicides in the NT: Aboriginal young people and the improper/unsupervised use of new technologies

Our young organisation was formed as a key recommendation of the 2010 Board of Inquiry into the Child Protection System in the Northern Territory: *that the NT government fund the establishment and ongoing work of an Aboriginal peak body on child and family safety and well being and child protection and that this peak body would support the process of the development of Aboriginal child and family well being and safety and child protection agencies.*

I was appointed CEO of the peak body in July last year. The name of our organisation is SAFT (pronounced "safety") which means Strong Aboriginal Families Together. At the heart of our future success, most importantly, will be in ensuring that Aboriginal people are involved in decision making and taking action to protect and support our own children and young people. We therefore greatly appreciate the opportunity to share some of our concerns with you related to Aboriginal youth and their possible misuse and abuse of new technologies and the potential link to suicide and other negative activities.

'Cyber bullying' is a term used to describe an extended form of traditional bullying, the key difference being that the 'weapon' used involves new technology such as mobile and "smart" phones or the internet particularly through social networking sites. The effect on many young people to being cyber bullied is similar to that of traditional bullying. It can involve the public humiliation or embarrassment of a child or young person across a wider audience, but the bullying behaviour can be more invasive as the perpetrator/s can infiltrate the victims' home and privacy through the use of the internet and the mobile phone. It has emerged as a growing global trend over the past five years and has been identified as one of the possible links to increasing rates of youth suicide, depression and low self esteem, withdrawal and self harm and increased levels of alcohol and illicit drug abuse.

Globally, studies have shown rates of cyber bullying are the highest in Australia and the United States affecting an estimated 9 to 13 percent of teens and pre-teens. All forms of bullying are significantly associated with increased suicidal thoughts and incidents of self harm among young people but research has shown that cyber bullying victims are almost twice as likely to attempt suicide compared to youth who have not experienced cyber bullying.



To address this concern, psychologists, counsellors, and primary care givers must continually monitor the online and offline behaviours of children and young people to reinforce the good and regulate the bad. These kinds of checks and balances are not consistently occurring in regional and remote areas of the NT.

Developing and maintaining social networks and contacts within Aboriginal communities are important for maintaining cultural connections and a strong cultural identity. Recent Victorian based research indicates that sustaining these networks means that the Aboriginal community is amongst the highest users of mobile phones and associated technologies, including Facebook.

Children as young as 4 but predominantly between the ages of 10 – 15 are open to being led into complex social situations that require adult reasoning – long before they are ready. The phenomenon creates a situation where children and teenagers are determining the rules of engagement themselves and the result is a potentially unsafe environment that is devoid of basic social courtesies and ethics.

In September 2011, over one thousand students in urban centres around Australia participated in cyber-safety activities during National Child Protection Week. The theme of the week - *'Play your part to keep children safe'* – focussed on the important role primary caregivers have in helping to protect children from abuse through new technologies. This initiative highlights the fact that there is an increasing mainstream awareness of the problem nationally but there is clearly a need to extend this awareness and to develop a culturally appropriate education program aimed at NT Aboriginal children, young people and their families.

In November 2011 SAFT gave a presentation to Anyingyinyi Congress in Tennant Creek and took the opportunity to consult with a broad range of organisations and individuals in the region. We received advice that there are a number of alarming problems with the improper use of new technologies including:

- The link to increased levels of aggression and harassment. We know that the explosive incident at Yuendumu last year in which a South Camp youth murdered a West Camp youth was inflamed and exacerbated through the use of Diva Chat. Diva Chat is commonly used to incite community violence and “cyber payback” is becoming an increasing problem.
- There is at least one recent example of a young Aboriginal girl who took her life due to cyber bullying via Facebook. She was from Galiwinku and was staying at Shalom College in Townsville. We know that the Federal Police have since held workshops at schools with boarders in recognition of the issue of cyber bullying and the impact on young lives.
- There was a recent incident on Tiwi Island involving primary school aged cousin brothers. One “de-friended” the other via Facebook resulting in the offended child attempting to attack him with a tomahawk and the family becoming involved and the violence having a ripple effect.





Through little one's eyes

- The prolific use of sexting and the sending and receiving of explicit “in house” pornographic images and video footage of children and young people to their peers and even more disturbingly, to adult sexual predators. Smart phones with SD memory cards are able to download libraries of explicit material from the internet and transfer material to dvd players and ipods. These memory cards are small and easily hidden as well as being highly transportable. Tribe.Net is renowned as the server favoured by paedophiles and one of the primary tools used to access, exchange and transfer child pornography.

We understand that concerns have been raised in a number of areas of the NT including Galiwinku, Yuendumu, Santa Teresa, Maningrida and Alice Springs. We have also been advised that the urban Town Camps have been massively impacted. However, you have only to survey a Telstra map online of NT remote regions with voice, picture, TV, video & broadband coverage to appreciate the potential scope of the problem and the need to investigate further. We know that even in places where there is very limited or no network coverage like Papunya, - that large amounts of phone credit is purchased from the local stores giving some indication of the extent of usage of new technology.

A study (*Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Survey: Cross, 2009*) of 2,200 urban Australian families in internet usage conducted in June last year found:

- 13 percent of Australian children surveyed have experienced cyber bullying and of those surveyed, almost one in six 6-to-9-year-olds and one in five 8-to-9-year olds have experienced cyber bullying. The problem gets worse as the children get older.
- Australian children average 3.9 hours online each week and 60 per cent of Australian 6-to-9-year-olds use some kind of social network.
- Forty-four per cent of Australian children under 10 communicate with their friends on the Internet but 58 per cent of parents and caregivers surveyed are still not fully-informed nor understand their children's online social networks.

These statistics should raise alarm bells over the potential misuse of new technology. However, to date there has been no research into the patterns of the use of social networking sites and smart phone applications among NT remote Aboriginal children and youth and we believe it is desperately needed. We also advocate for culturally appropriate educational awareness programs aimed at combating cyber bullying and highlighting other potential dangers associated with the use of new technology to be run consistently in all regional and remote schools. We know that the Australian Communication Media Authority (ACMA) run mainstream education programs but they are not accessible or suitable for children and families on NT communities.

SAF,T strongly recommends that the NT Government support and fund a comprehensive research project to investigate how and why Aboriginal children and youth use new technologies and what affect this is having on families and communities in order to develop evidence based approaches to addressing





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this growing problem in the longer term. We would welcome the opportunity to partner with an appropriate research agency such as the Menzies School of Health on a collaborative project.

I conclude by reiterating that although there are a large number of existing education programs, support services and websites offering information and tips on using social networking sites safely, dealing with cyber bullying and online grooming and how to use mobile phones securely; there is nothing currently available that is culturally appropriate and accessible to Aboriginal children and young people in the NT particularly in regional and remote areas.

There are increasing concerns related to Aboriginal children and youth and the potential for the improper/unsupervised use of new technologies and with your support, we hope to lead the way in researching and developing solutions collaboratively with Government and non Government agencies. The situation requires urgent action and we are keen to act proactively as soon as possible. In this way we will not only be able to reduce incidents of cyber bullying and youth suicide but could potentially address cyber payback and incitement to violence and issues related to child safety including sexting and child pornography.

Yours sincerely

Josie Crawshaw
CEO
SAF,T (Strong Aboriginal Families, Together)

16 January 2012

