'We're all guilty of using technology as the digital babysitter'

By Konrad Marshall

This story is part of the July 30 edition of the <u>Good Weekend.</u> July 30, 2022 — 5.00am

Australia's eSafety Commissioner, Julie Inman Grant.

Julie Inman Grant leads the world's first regulatory agency designed to keep people safe online, after an influential career working with US Congress, as well as in senior positions at Silicon Valley giants Microsoft and Twitter.

But she's also just a mum, albeit one who understands better than most the pressures parents face in keeping their kids out of harm's way online. "My daughter is 16 years old," says Australia's eSafety Commissioner, "and I knew that the world was going to be very different when she was about three, and was more interested in playing with my phone than she was playing with a doll."

Fast-forward to her current experience with 10-year-old twins, and the challenge feels even bigger. "They say, 'Mum, every kid except for us has a phone.' And … they're just not ready yet," she says. "They just don't have the cognitive ability to self-regulate, to deal with the content, conduct, and a whole range of other things that we need to prepare them for."

The need for parental oversight has never been greater. Forty-two per cent of two-year-olds have access to a digital device, she notes, and by the time they turn four, it's up to 94 per cent. If that's not alarming enough, on the latest episode of Good Weekend Talks, Inman Grant details the kind of content that comes through her office; live-streamed terror attacks, the flaying of Mexican drug-cartel victims, cyber fraud, cyberbullying, online image abuse and grooming.

She knows exactly where the latter can lead, having viewed disturbing content personally and tracked the data. "We had 21,000 reports last year of illegal content, the vast majority of which is child sexual-abuse material."

Compounding this threat, the pandemic has left families more precariously placed to deal with digital harm. "Parents were desperate during the lockdowns to do their own jobs, to home-school their kids, to keep them entertained," she says. "And my sense is that parents – as a survival mechanism – had to be more permissive with technology. But there are basic steps you take to protect your family."

Tips for child safety

Talk about rights and responsibilities:

Your kids might be young, but you can still share an early message to "be safe, be kind, ask for help, and make choices". When children reach school age it's time to teach "the four Rs": respect, responsibility, building digital resilience and honing critical reasoning skills. "Because we can't hover over them 24/7. We need to talk to them about what could happen in age-appropriate ways."

Set limitations early:

Consider a family technology agreement (find an example at esafety.gov.au), and come up with a plan for your household, whether an hour a day or two, then stick to that agreement. "We know that when children actually sit down with their parents and talk about the rules and restrictions, they're more likely to follow them."

Make sure kids use technology in open spaces:

"We're all guilty of using technology as the digital babysitter, but some of the worst things that my investigators are seeing now online is kids being coerced into creating and self-producing child sexual exploitation material in the privacy of their bedrooms and bathrooms. And in some of them, you can hear parents calling them down for dinner in the next room."

Have conversations early and often:

Just as you might ask how school or musical practice or footy training went, you should ask whether there's any drama online – making sure to react calmly however your kids respond. "It's letting them know that they can come to you, and you're not going to engage in device denial, and that you're going to help them through anything."