Insights Report: Online safety and opportunity for disabled rangatahi

Community engagement and pilot workshops

Introduction

All is for All was awarded a grant from Internet NZ to complete a series of community and stakeholder engagements. This grant built on a previous workshop that All is for All delivered with Internet NZ.

The grant was to understand the gaps and educational needs of young people with learning disabilities and neurodivergence to be safe and confident online and on social media.

This report outlines the context in which this work was undertaken and summarises previous work done by All is for All and other organisations in this space. It also outlines the methodology for engagement and insights gathering, as well as limitations for this project.

The report then analyses the insights gathered by theme, before highlighting the process, learnings and outcomes of the pilot workshops and discussing next steps and opportunities for future work in online safety for young disabled people.

All is for All would like to thank Internet NZ for funding this mahi. We would also like to extend our gratitude to the New Zealand Down syndrome Association, Explore Wellbeing NZ and Autism NZ for their collaboration and support with the insights gathering element of this project.

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Context

In 2024, a successful pilot workshop (*Content Creator Workshop*) was delivered by All is for All and supported by Internet NZ. It aimed at upskilling young disabled individuals in content creation and online safety, with a view that these topics support equitable online access and participation, aligned with Internet NZ's core belief that everyone should be able and empowered to participate fully online. The workshop included sections on social media management, creating quality digital content, and managing personal brands, alongside crucial education on online safety topics such as managing disability-related questions, online predators, and privacy. A follow-up session was held a few weeks after to check in with participants and answer any follow up questions.

The programme successfully engaged 10 young disabled people and five support workers / parents, with 100 percent of surveyed participants finding the workshop engaging and 75 percent learning something new about online safety. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, highlighting the workshop's motivational impact and the benefits of connecting with others.

Two key learnings from the workshop were:

- Education about internet use that is accessible to disabled people is needed.
- There is an opportunity to support young disabled people to develop content creation skills as a way to access opportunities.

Recognising the success of the pilot programme, a new piece of work was then commissioned by Internet NZ, which is the work this report is focused around. By commissioning this new piece of work, Internet NZ sought to further strengthen and expand accessible workshops to communities requiring support for equitable internet use.

This project had a focus on community engagement to gather insights that would enable an understanding of the gap in young disabled people's knowledge of social media and online use, particularly for those with learning disabilities and neurodivergent individuals. These insights would be used to improve the pilot workshop programme and create a blueprint for service delivery in the future, so this work can continue supporting young disabled people and their whānau.

Methodology

This section covers how insights were collected to inform the pilot workshop development and the completion of the service blueprint. A mixture of methods was used to engage different people within the disability community to understand their perceptions of the risks and experiences of being online for young disabled people and how valuable training or education would be, and who it should be directed at.

The objective was to explore the perspectives of young disabled people, their family, whānau, carers, and staff of disability organisations around whether a gap in knowledge exists for young disabled people being safe online and if education existed to help close the gap, who should receive it and what it should cover. This exploration was necessary to confirm the hypothesis that there is a gap in knowledge and education for young disabled people with learning disabilities and neurodivergence.

In speaking with the disability community, we identified three key audience segments:

- Disability organisations that work with young disabled people who have learning disabilities or neurodivergence.
- Family, whānau and carers of young disabled people who have learning disabilities or neurodivergence.
- Young disabled people who have learning disabilities or neurodivegence.

For the disability organisations, we selected five that either worked with young disabled people who have learning disabilities or young people who are neurodivergent and reached out to them via email to invite them to meet with us to discuss the project and share insights.

We heard from and interviewed three organisations, which were:

- Autism New Zealand

- The New Zealand Down Syndrome Association
- Explore Wellbeing NZ

The interviews were completed in December 2024 online, with a transcript being recorded to capture the conversation and inform the analysis accurately.

A survey was another mechanism applied for data collection; the survey was designed to gather information about their perceptions about online safety and to test the relevance of a workshop amongst participants. The survey was targeted at friends, families, whānau, and carers of young disabled people with learning disabilities or neurodivergence, and the young people themselves.

Following the survey, we hosted a focus group with young disabled people with learning disabilities and neurodivergence to ensure their perspectives were adequately captured, as the survey data skewed heavily towards the perspectives of parents and caregivers.

The survey was launched in early 2025 and was live for over six weeks. It was promoted via email to All is for All's networks and online using social media and community groups. In total, 137 people completed the survey that was hosted on SurveyMonkey.

A combination of descriptive statistics, correlation statistics and thematic analysis was used to interpret the data from all methods. Descriptive statistics were primarily used to understand the results, and correlation statistics were used to identify if there are any specific patterns in the data of the survey. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the open-text questions on the survey as well as the interviews and focus group data.

Limitations of this work

There were some limitations to this work, including;

- We were unable to have the survey translated into accessible formats like Easy Read due to timeframes and budget considerations. This impacted the number of people with learning disabilities who engaged with the survey, but was mitigated through the focus group that was held with this population group.

- We were only able to engage with three organisations, of which only one works with people who have learning disabilities, so those insights skewed heavily towards people with neurodivergence. Additionally, the insights will not be representative of the wider disability sector in which many organisations operate to support these population groups.

Insights by theme

The internet and social media are central to young disabled people's lives.

The internet and social media are integral to the lives of young disabled people, and they are used for various purposes, including communication, entertainment, education, and self-expression.

Survey data indicated the prevalence of internet use, with approximately 81 percent of participants reporting daily internet use. Participants in the focus group also reported using various social media platforms, such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook, daily. For some, the results reflected that social media is a source of happiness, connection, and a means to share their talents and passions.

The organisations that engaged in the data collection acknowledged the importance of the internet for social connection and access to information. This is particularly important for the autistic community, with organisations highlighting the internet's integral role in facilitating access to support services for disabled people.

The focus group discussion highlighted the vital role of social media in the disabled community, particularly in building a sense of identity. For example, one participant found joy and connection by sharing and engaging with music online. Another participant expressed that social media is how she keeps in touch with her friends. This is particularly important given that disabled people endure significant barriers when socialising offline.

One focus group participant stated, "socials is literally my life", which provides direct evidence of the central role social media plays in her daily routine.

Social media is a double-edged sword, providing both positive and negative experiences for young disabled people.

While social media offers connection and self-expression, it's crucial to acknowledge the complex emotional landscape it creates for young disabled people. The focus group discussions revealed a range of emotions associated with internet use. Participants spoke not only of positive feelings like happiness and connection but also of negative emotions such as fear, vulnerability, sadness, and the emotional toll of cyberbullying. For example, one participant expressed feeling "scared" due to the risk of stalking and bullying. Another participant's experience of a friendship ending due to social media highlights the potential for online interactions to cause significant emotional pain. These nuanced emotional experiences underscore the need for online safety initiatives to address the psychological impact of positive and negative online interactions. All rangatahi may be in need of such supports, but disabled rangatahi may need particular, accessible supports and services.

Using specific social media platforms can shape the nature of online experiences. Participants in the focus group frequently mentioned using platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. While these platforms facilitate connection and creative expression, they can also present unique challenges. For example, concerns have been raised about stalking and negative interactions specifically on Instagram and TikTok because of aspects of the platforms functionality. Understanding these platform-specific dynamics is essential for developing targeted safety strategies and support resources.

The organisations involved in the community engagement also recognised this nuance, acknowledging the internet's potential for fostering connection and independence while simultaneously emphasising the risks of manipulation, grooming, and unsafe situations.

The survey data further illustrates this mixed picture by quantifying the prevalence of both positive and negative online experiences. Forty percent of respondents said they had experienced online bullying, while 26 percent said social media had negatively impacted their mental health. By comparison, 39 percent reported positive impacts from social media on their mental health, and 69 percent of respondents felt it helps them feel connected to others.

Young disabled people may be at a greater risk of experiencing bullying, scams, exploitation, and other online harms.

Young disabled people often use online platforms to seek friendships and social connections, which can make them more susceptible to those who might take advantage of their desire for connection. The lack of digital literacy and awareness of online risks can leave young disabled people ill-equipped to protect themselves from these dangers. For example, one participant's parent recalled their helplessness in the face of online harassment, stating, "We did not know how to report some of those because if you get, say, 40 or 50 likes to a negative comment, we actually didn't know how to deal with that," highlighting a critical gap in knowledge that exacerbates the risk.

The focus group participants provided insights that demonstrate the impact of online bullying. Participants shared personal experiences of receiving hurtful comments and being targeted with derogatory language. One participant's fear of stalking and bullying, expressed in their statement, "What makes me feel bad about internet and social is I'm actually kind of scared by it, because people stalk you, people are mean to you, and always like, Oh, they bullying you," underscores the emotional toll these experiences take. These incidents highlight the ease with which online platforms can be weaponised to inflict harm.

Beyond bullying, the data also reveals vulnerability to scams, potential exploitation, and other online risks. Autism NZ told us that autistic individuals are more vulnerable to manipulation and believing what they are they are told, which increases their risk of falling victim to online scams. The organisations also expressed concern about young disabled people being lured into unsafe situations. Explore noted the risks associated with accessing dating and friendship apps and meeting people in potentially dangerous situations.

The survey data indicates that 40 percent of respondents reported experiencing online bullying, and 52 percent expressed concerns about scams, identity theft, and impersonation. This highlights the prevalence of these issues within the community.

Education is crucial for building digital resilience and promoting positive online engagement among young disabled people and their families.

The data demonstrates that education and support are essential tools for empowering young disabled people to navigate the online world safely, confidently, and positively. Participants in the focus group expressed a clear desire for education focused on building "digital resilience" – the ability to protect themselves from online dangers, manage interactions effectively, and use social media in positive and self-affirming ways.

The need for this empowerment is underscored by the prevalence of negative online experiences, with focus group participants sharing accounts of cyberbullying and harassment. These experiences highlight the need for education that equips young disabled people with practical strategies to respond to and, crucially, to prevent harm.

The organisations involved further emphasised the preventative role of education. They believe that providing tailored instruction, including for parents and caregivers, young disabled people can develop the skills and knowledge necessary to avoid risky situations and harmful interactions.

This proactive approach aims to foster digital independence and reduce the risk of online exploitation, grooming, and misinformation. Direct requests from focus group participants for guidance on topics ranging from social media account management to recognising online deception further reinforce the demand for accessible and relevant educational resources.

Education should encompass not only safety measures but also guidance on how to create positive online experiences. This includes fostering skills in content creation, building supportive online communities, and using social media for advocacy and self-expression.

The survey data reveals that many respondents use the internet and social media for positive activities such as learning new things (79%), connecting with others (69%), and advocacy. This highlights the importance of education in facilitating and maximising these positive aspects of online engagement.

Education should be ongoing and adaptable. The online landscape constantly evolves, with new platforms, trends, and risks emerging regularly. Therefore, educational initiatives should provide ongoing support and updates to ensure that young disabled people and their caregivers stay informed and adapt to these changes.

Parents and caregivers are important in bridging the gaps and fostering collaborative approaches to digital literacy and online safety.

Parents and caregivers play a crucial role in supporting young disabled people's online safety; however, this role is often complicated by their lack of knowledge and skills in navigating the digital world. When young disabled people encounter challenges online, their support people may find themselves ill-equipped to provide practical guidance, highlighting a significant gap in digital literacy and preparedness. This necessitates a strong emphasis on parent education and active involvement in online safety initiatives.

Survey data confirms that parents / caregivers are the primary source of support for many young disabled people when using the internet, underscoring the importance of equipping them with the necessary tools and knowledge.

The tension between young disabled people's desire for online independence and parental safety concerns is a recurring thread throughout the data. In some instances, a digital literacy gap exists, where young disabled people possess greater technical skills and online savvy than their parents, making effective supervision and guidance challenging. This can lead to situations where young disabled people conceal their online activities from their caregivers, potentially increasing their vulnerability to harm, particularly in contexts like online dating.

The organisations involved frequently encountered families seeking assistance in understanding how to best support their young disabled people online, further emphasising the practical need for parental guidance.

All the organisations interviewed emphasised the importance of parental education and active involvement, acknowledging parents' difficulties in comprehending and addressing online risks.

The evidence highlights key issues, including parents often feeling inadequately prepared to address online safety challenges and a digital literacy gap that can hinder their ability to supervise and guide their children's online activities effectively. This can result in young disabled people feeling constrained by parental limitations, leading to a lack of open communication about online experiences.

These findings strongly advocate for interventions that comprehensively address young disabled people's and their parents' knowledge and skills, fostering a collaborative approach to online safety.

Accessibility and inclusive design best practices should be employed to tailor programmes to meet the diverse needs of young disabled people.

Programme design and delivery should be carefully considered when creating opportunities to promote online safety amongst young disabled people and their family / caregivers. The success of future programmes of work hinges on tailoring education to meet the specific needs and preferences of disabled young disabled people and their family / caregivers, and should consider the following:

- Ensure programmes are accessible to individuals with diverse disabilities, including physical, sensory, learning, and neurodivergence.
- Recognise and address different learning preferences, such as visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile.
- Adapt communication methods to suit various needs, including non-verbal communication, alternative and augmentative communication (AAC), and language differences.
- Foster a supportive, respectful, and inclusive atmosphere, encouraging active participation and open communication.
- Separating programme audiences to create safe and inclusive spaces for sharing, e.g., parent-only sessions or sessions tailored for those with learning disabilities only.

The focus group interactions provided valuable insights on the importance of relevance and engagement. The participants' willingness to engage in a discussion about online safety suggests that they found the topic relevant to their experiences. While participants didn't explicitly state "visual learning" preferences, their engagement styles demonstrated the value of incorporating diverse modalities.

One participant's connection to music and sound suggests that multimedia elements could benefit some, while another's enthusiasm for creating and sharing videos points to the potential of hands-on, creative activities. The participants' interactions with each other also highlight the importance of peer interaction and fostering a sense of community within programmes.

The organisations interviewed offered detailed programme design and delivery recommendations, drawing on their experience working with young disabled people.

Explore, for instance, emphasises the importance of programme structure, suggesting modular designs and flexible scheduling options to accommodate different learning paces and preferences. They recommend offering choices between "big chunks in a few days" and "two hours every week for six weeks," recognising that "Spreading out the sessions allows for time for them to apply the learning".

NZDSA highlights the significance of delivery modalities, advocating for a combination of "in person, or hybrid - start in person, and then follow up sessions online" to maximise accessibility and engagement. They also stress the need to consider practical factors such as transportation barriers and optimal timing for parent involvement, suggesting "Weekend and evenings".

Engagement strategies are also a key focus. NZDSA emphasises the need to tailor session lengths to attention spans, recommending "Online sessions should be no more than 60-75 minutes" to prevent fatigue. They also advocate for incorporating elements of fun and informality, such as "making the start of the session fun, informal" and including "regular breaks, fun activities and informal socialising" to maintain participant interest.

The survey data strongly indicates the demand for learning programmes, with 79 percent of respondents expressing an interest in attending an online safety workshop. Additionally, respondents signalled 82 percent support for programmes tailored for disabled people and 76 percent support for programmes tailored towards parents and caregivers. There was a relatively even split for delivery method preference, with 49 percent favouring online workshops and 44 percent favouring an in-person workshop.

Pilot Workshops

Based on the information we collected as part of the community engagement and our previous work in early 2024 on the *Content Creator 101* workshop, we made the following assumptions about the next phase of pilot workshops.

- We assumed that young disabled people are already highly engaged with the internet and social media for various purposes, including communication, entertainment, education, and self-expression, with a significant majority using the internet daily.
- There's an assumption that while these platforms offer positive experiences like connection and identity building, they also present a "double-edged sword" of negative experiences, including fear, vulnerability, sadness, cyberbullying, stalking, scams, exploitation, and mental health impacts.
- We assume there is a critical need for education to build "digital resilience" and equip young disabled people with practical strategies to prevent and respond to harm, including guidance on account management and recognising deception.
- There's a strong assumption that parental and caregiver involvement is crucial, given their role as primary support and their potential gaps in digital literacy, necessitating education and collaborative approaches for families.
- A specific workshop for parents is assumed to be necessary, recognising their crucial role as primary support for young disabled people online, often complicated by their lack of digital literacy and the need to bridge the digital gap with their children.
- We would also assume the importance of accessibility and inclusive design, tailoring content and delivery methods to diverse needs, including

different learning preferences and communication styles, with flexibility in scheduling and format.

Based on these assumptions and the insights from our community engagement phase, we decided to host two online pilot workshops, one with parents, whānau and caregivers and one with young disabled people with learning disabilities and neurodivergence.

Learnings from the Pilot Workshops

From the pilot workshops, we learned that there is a significant need for online safety education for both young disabled people and their parents / caregivers, confirming our assumption that specific workshops for parents were needed.

For parents and caregivers, 10 confirmed registrations attended the workshop, with 50 percent caring for disabled individuals under 18 and 60 percent specifically caring for young people with learning disabilities. All surveyed parents and caregivers reported learning something new that they didn't know before the workshop, and specifically something new about online safety. 100 percent reported feeling more confident in supporting their child online. Participants also reported that they had learned new strategies to help their child be safe online and to identify bullying, grooming, and manipulation.

The workshop was highly engaging and accessible for parents, with 80 percent very satisfied and 20 percent satisfied with the overall experience. Feedback indicated the thoroughness, good pacing, and relevance of the content.

In future, we would consider the timing of these sessions to be outside of the work day, allowing more parents and caregivers to attend outside of work hours, making the time commitment more achievable.

For youth participants, three attended the workshop, with 67 percent identifying as neurodivergent and 33 percent having a learning disability. All surveyed youth learned something new about online safety and felt more confident being online. They also learned new social media strategies and understood the importance of being mindful about shared information. The workshop was found to be engaging and accessible for their disability needs.

While 50 percent learned new strategies to identify and manage online bullying and scams, the other half did not, indicating a need for further focus in these areas. Participants reported that their favourite aspects included meeting new people with similar disabilities and learning about online safety together.

Suggestions for improvement included inviting more people to learn. These learnings generally confirm our assumptions about the need for online safety education, the dual nature of online experiences, and the crucial role of education in building digital resilience for both young disabled people and their caregivers.

Timing is another learning for the youth workshop; these are likely best delivered out of school hours or during the school or university holidays to best capture young people’s availability.

Opportunities

Based on the pilot workshop insights and community engagement, there are several opportunities to improve the programme in the future.

Tailoring content for youth.

While all youth participants learned new online safety strategies and felt more confident, only 50 percent learned new strategies to identify and manage online bullying and scams. This suggests an opportunity to deepen content in these specific areas, perhaps with more interactive scenarios or detailed examples.

More content or workshops that focus on specific platforms.

Future workshops could dedicate more time to specific platform settings, privacy controls, and reporting mechanisms for popular platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook.

Curating resources to accompany workshop materials.

Some parents specifically requested a list of apps or programmes for security and online safety. Providing curated resources, including recommended apps, tools, and reputable websites for online safety, would be highly beneficial.

Ongoing support and refresher sessions.

The rapidly evolving online landscape suggests a need for continuous learning. Future iterations could include follow-up modules or refresher sessions to address new trends, risks, and platform updates.

Wider participant outreach.

The youth workshop saw three attendees from six registrations, while the parent workshop had 10 attendees from 14 registrations. Exploring new outreach strategies could increase participation rates.

Recommendations

For other organisations considering hosting similar workshops or undertaking this type of programme of work, we make the following recommendations.

Prioritise accessibility and inclusive design.

The pilot workshops demonstrated 100 percent accessibility for both youth and parent participants. Any new organisation must commit to designing and delivering programmes that meet diverse disability needs, learning preferences (visual, auditory, kinesthetic), and communication methods, fostering a supportive and inclusive atmosphere. This includes considering aspects like plain language, captioning, and potentially New Zealand Sign Language.

Actively engage parents and caregivers.

The data strongly supports the need for dedicated parent workshops, as all surveyed parents felt more confident and learned new strategies to help their disabled children online. It is important to recognise parents as crucial partners and provide them with the knowledge and tools to bridge digital literacy gaps.

Focus on practical, implementable strategies.

Participants, both youth and parents, highlighted learning new strategies they could implement immediately. Emphasise actionable advice and hands-on exercises that participants can readily apply to their online interactions.

Acknowledge the dual nature of online experiences.

The current programme implicitly recognises the positive and negative aspects of social media. Future programmes should continue to address both the benefits, like connection and self-expression, and the risks, like bullying, scams and exploitation, comprehensively.

Consider modular and flexible delivery.

A few parents enjoyed the short breaks in between sections, suggesting that breaking down content into manageable chunks and potentially offering flexible scheduling options would enhance engagement and learning retention.

Conclusion

This report underscores the critical role the internet and social media play in the lives of young disabled people, serving as vital platforms for communication, entertainment, education, and self-expression. While offering significant opportunities for connection and identity building, these online spaces also present a "double-edged sword," exposing young disabled people to risks.

The insights gathered through community engagement and pilot workshops confirm a strong demand for tailored educational initiatives. These initiatives are crucial for building "digital resilience" – equipping young disabled people with the skills to navigate online dangers, manage interactions effectively, and engage positively with social media.

Key learnings from this project emphasise the importance of dedicated parent/caregiver workshops, flexible and modular delivery methods, ongoing support, and deeper content on specific platforms and risk management.

Moving forward, it is essential to prioritise accessibility and inclusive design in all online safety programmes, actively engage parents and caregivers as crucial partners, focus on practical and implementable strategies, and acknowledge the dual nature of online experiences.

By addressing these areas, future initiatives can continue to empower young disabled people and their whānau to participate safely and confidently in the digital world.