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MEDIA RELEASE

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Are we creating a future generation of narcissists with short attention spans?

1 June 2020, Centurion. A permanent selfie pout, scattered attention span and overdeveloped thumbs. Will this be the defining features of our generation? For decades the nature versus nurture debate has raged, but the overwhelming evidence in this digital age seems to point to nurture fast overtaking nature, as caregivers of children globally face an uphill battle against the potential harmful effects of digital technology.

As South Africa commemorates Child Protection Week 2020, and marches towards Youth Day in June later this month, we find ourselves immersed in the reality of social distancing. At this time the reliance on the internet and social media to remain socially connected has seen technology's grip on our citizens deepen to new levels. From streaming movies for entertainment, to attending school online – the digital space has many positive selling points. However, we still need to guard against the threats that it poses, especially for the young and vulnerable.

A digital device makes many people feel untouchable as it removes the element of face-to-face interaction. The same restraint that someone might feel in person seems to dissipate when they post hurtful, prejudiced or violent content online. Especially amongst the younger generation, the consequences attached to actions committed in a digital world seems less real. We see this especially in the rapid spread of cyberbullying and cybermisogyny. According to a study by Ipsos, a market research company, South Africa features in the list of countries with high awareness levels of this scourge. South Africa ranked fourth among countries where this problem is acknowledged; only ranking below Sweden, Italy and Chile among the 22



countries surveyed. This is encouraging since awareness and acknowledgement of a problem is often the first critical step to resolving it.

Online harassment is just the tip of the cyber iceberg amongst our children, that cuts to the heart of respect for individual human rights. Viral videos showing violence against children, ***sometimes*** perpetrated by their caregivers as well as other children, is on the increase in the country pre and during lockdown. More concerning are the images of child sexual abuse materials (CSAM) and sexual conduct, circulated by our youth on peer-to-peer networks as well as social media - without regard for the damage induced, both reputational and psychological. ***“The internet has no firewall for patriarchy”***, says Oupa Makhalemele, the Film and Publications Board (FPB) acting Research Manager.

Sexual predators find an anonymous home on the internet, where it is easy to build a persona that is very different from reality, that can be used to exploit others. ***‘Stranger danger’*** is a mantra that caregivers should be teaching their children in the real as well as virtual world.

The FPB conducts a convergence survey every two years to assess the extent to which the classification guidelines used by the FPB to assign age ratings to content are aligned to public sentiment. Our recent top line results show that more than 35% of parents do not monitor their children’s online presence. This means that our children are left exposed to potential perpetrators, predators and cyber bullies. Children are not psychologically or emotionally equipped to deal with this kind of trauma and need to be educated on the risks faced when online.

Internet service providers have their own community standards for the use of their products and services. Parents and caregivers are encouraged to familiarize themselves with these, and to ensure that their children maintain these guidelines by monitoring their digital and social media activity.



As we enter the fourth industrial revolution, the regulation of content in the digital space will become more critical. For the time being, parents and caregivers are our first line of defence that our children have against the permanent damage that can be inflicted in the digital realm.

Online circulation of information/images/videos creates a digital footprint that is difficult to erase, and the psychological effect of these images can be very damaging, as we have seen from cases of revenge pornography and cyber bullying. The Internet never forgets.

An “Always On” digital presence is an affliction that affects not only children and youth but adults as well. When adults conduct Twitter wars or indulge in slandering others from the “safety” of an online persona what example are they setting for an impressionable youth? When parents bury themselves in virtual games or spend hours on social media instead of giving attention to the needs of children what behaviour are they modeling?

This Child Protection Week and Youth Month the FPB calls on parents, caregivers and community activists to step up and be the moral compass that our children need to steer successfully through a digital world.

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Notes to the editor

The objective of the Act of 1996 is to regulate the creation, production, possession and distribution of films, games and certain publications, and more recently certain online content. This is done to provide consumer advice to enable adults to make informed viewing, reading and gaming choices for themselves and children in their care; to protect children from exposure to disturbing and harmful material and from premature exposure to adult experiences, and to make the use of children in, and the exposure of children to pornography, punishable.

Paramount to the mandate of the FPB is the protection of children. Protecting children under the Act is a proportional balancing of the rights afforded in the South African Constitution and Bill of Rights against the right of the child. The protection of children as enshrined in the Constitution and Bill of Rights includes physical, mental, emotional, spiritual or moral harm to be protected from maltreatment, neglect, abuse or degradation. It further ensures that children's best interest are of paramount importance in every matter concerning a child.