

## Dogs 'n' kids



### The benefits of growing up with pets

Pets are an integral part of our lives as Australians. In fact over 80% of Australians have an animal companion at some period in their life. Pets are important in children's lives both for the enjoyment that they bring now as well as role rehearsal for future adult activities. The relationship between children and their pets is special and comforting. Sometimes pets are even ranked higher than certain kinds of human relationships for comfort, esteem support and confidants. Some benefits of pet ownership have been identified in areas of child development, family harmony and even health.

#### **Child development**

Having a relationship with a pet can help develop such skills as:

- Nurturing skills
- Responsibility
- Empathy
- Caring attitude
- Communication.

Studies have shown that children with pets:

- Have higher self esteem
- Have improved social skills
- Are more likely to be physically active, and less likely to be overweight or obese.

#### **Family harmony**

Pet ownership also has a beneficial effect on family harmony. Research shows that families with a pet:

- Spend a lot more time interacting
- Have a basis for fun activities and friendly conversation including the important topics of life

#### **Health**

The relaxation and relief from stress provided by animal companionship also yields health benefits for parents. In comparison with their pet-less counterparts, pet owners:

- Have a decreased risk of cardiovascular disease
- Have fewer minor illnesses and complaints
- Visit the doctor less often

Whilst owning a dog can be a delightful family experience and has enormous benefits for the

child and the family, parents need to be aware of the risk of injury from dog bites.

### Who is at risk of injury from dog bites?

Dog ownership within a family brings with it the risk of dog bite. Around 10,440 people each year attend hospital emergency departments in Australia for dog bite injuries. Children under the age of five are most at risk of dog bite injuries and are most frequently bitten by their own family dog or by a friend's dog, usually in or around the home. Incidents are commonly triggered by a child's interaction with the dog such as playing or approaching the dog while it is sleeping or eating. There needs to be close supervision at all times when dogs and children are together.

Young children are often bitten on the head, face and neck because of their height in relation to the dog's height. The hand, fingers and lower leg are also a common area to be bitten in children. Dog bites can lead to infection, permanent scarring and disfigurement. There can also be symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder. If bitten by a dog, the child may require a tetanus booster and other medical care.

### Minimising the risk of dog bites by reducing common dog – child potential conflicts

#### Always supervise children around dogs

Supervision of dogs and kids together is an essential factor in reducing injuries caused by dogs. You cannot prevent an incident if you are not there. Supervision ideally means one adult for the dog and one adult for the child.

However parents cannot be in two places at once, so if you are unable to appropriately supervise them together then separate the dog and child at this time. For example, put the dog outside or in a different room if you are not in the room where the children are playing. Or have the dog or child follow you when you leave the room so that you know where they both are at all times. Supervision will allow you



to form the ground rules and teach both the child and the dog what is appropriate and safe behaviour. Remember to reward both the child and the dog when they behave correctly.

#### Play around dogs

Many dog bites occur when children are playing around dogs. Sometimes young children can unintentionally be rough and unrelenting. They may be unaware that their behaviour is annoying or threatening to the dog. Their high pitched squeals and uncoordinated attempts at showing affection can concern the dog, causing it to act defensively or trigger a chase response. Discourage rough, inappropriate play, as this may over excite, upset or hurt the dog. Explain that a dog should never be hurt or teased. Teach children to call you rather than remove or reclaim a toy by themselves from a dog as the dog may become possessive of a toy.

#### Sleeping dogs

Teach children not to approach a sleeping dog. When suddenly awoken or aroused from sleep, humans have been known to behave defensively, that is to strike out. Dogs when suddenly woken may behave in much the same way if they are frightened. Dogs should not be disturbed when sleeping. However if you need to wake the dog up, call the dog from a distance to allow it time to become oriented.



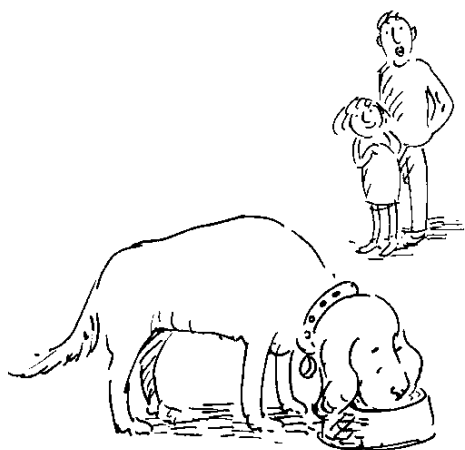
Children should be taught not to approach a sleeping dog.

Provide the dog with a bed that is separated from noisy high-activity areas. This will minimise the risk of unintentionally waking the dog. The dog needs a place, such as a crate or kennel, where it can get away if it is tired, not well or does not want to be cuddled.

## Feeding dogs

Children should be taught not to approach a dog that is eating or gnawing on a bone.

Feeding the dog is an 'adults only' activity. This is because correct nutrition is important and also dogs may become protective of their food or bones. Teach children to call you rather than reclaim dropped food themselves from a dog. Some dogs may be taught to accept interference with their food from the time the dog enters the house as a puppy. This requires the owner to teach the puppy that it is ok if someone approaches while it is eating or its food is removed. One way to begin this training is to put your hand on the empty food bowl. If the puppy is happy and does not show signs of concern or aggression, such as growling, add a tasty treat to the food bowl and reward the puppy with verbal praise and possibly a pat. This should be repeated many times until the puppy actually looks forward to people approaching the food bowl. This training should continue throughout the dog's life but even so,



the dog should be separated from children when it is eating.

## Learning how to get along together

For our interactions to be pleasurable, dogs, children and adults need to learn how to approach and communicate effectively with each other. This will help to prevent misunderstandings and conflict. Supervising children and dogs together and teaching both children and dogs how to behave around each other are the keys to preventing dog bites.

## Important dog behaviour to recognise

Dogs have a special way of communicating with each other and humans. A dog's body language may give us clues about how a dog is feeling. Some dogs perceive eye contact or staring as a threat or challenge.

A dog should be left alone if it:

- Lifts its lips
- Growls
- Backs off
- Raises the hair on its back.

## Teaching children how to interact with dogs

Children learn most effectively by 'doing'. Many of a child's life skills, such as crossing the road, grooming and eating are learned from the parent, with the child modelling the desired behaviour. Telling children 'don't...!' will not give the child the necessary information or skills to perform the correct behaviour. Children need to be shown how to interact appropriately with dogs; they need positive messages and role models.

Model the desired behaviour with the child. Tell them what you are doing and why you are doing it.

## Approaching a dog

Children should be taught not to approach a dog without adult supervision.

Whether the dog is familiar not, your child should always ask their parent or carer if they want to pat a dog.

The next step is to always ask the dog owner for permission to pat the dog. Only when they say it is ok to pat the dog then proceed to the next step.

Teach children to never approach an unfamiliar dog, even if it looks friendly

If the dog does not know you or your child then the owner of the dog must introduce any new people to the dog. The dog owner should communicate with the dog so that the dog understands that contact with a stranger is about to happen and it is not a threat.

Even if it is a familiar dog, you still need to closely supervise your child. Use the dog's name as you approach it and speak softly.

There should be at least one adult per child and one adult per dog. This is regardless of how well you know the dog.

The dog's owner should hold, pat and speak to the dog to reassure the dog that this contact is pleasurable while the parent initially shows the child what to do and then guides the child through the correct actions. Showing children the correct actions is essential when young children are learning the skills of interacting with dogs.

Show the child how you do it first using your hand then repeat it using their hand.

The dog should be approached on an angle, not from the front or rear. Move slowly and calmly and always be gentle.

Curl your fingers into a fist and slowly extend the back of your hand and allow the dog to sniff it. Being faced with an open palm may be threatening for a dog. Gently pat the dog under the chin or the side of the chest. Do not pat on the top of the head or the shoulders as again this may be threatening for the dog.

At this point, before your child is involved, determine if the experience has been good so far, judge whether both the child and the dog are calm and content to be involved and establish if it is safe to proceed. If either the child or the dog is not relaxed and willing, then do not persist. If the dog doesn't sniff the hand or if it backs away, do not attempt to pat it. Depending on the experience you may or may not decide to try again with this dog at another time.



If you proceed, curl your child's fingers into a fist as you did and hold and guide the child's hand to repeat the action that you have just done so the child can feel the dog's warm fur by stroking under the chin or on the chest.

Praise the child for being involved and demonstrating the correct actions. Also praise the dog for being calm and compliant.

Don't assume that once the behaviour has been demonstrated, the child will remember the correct order, appropriate place to pat the dog, or action required. The skill may need a longer period of assistance before the child is fully able to demonstrate the skill. Only once the child begins to consistently correctly pat the dog, and the dog is calm and relaxed with the contact, may the parent modelling be gradually withdrawn, but always supervise the child's and dog's interactions closely. Young children need constant and close supervision when in contact with dogs. Young children do not have the skills or understanding of how to interact with a dog appropriately. The child may have no concept of the pain they may be inflicting on a dog when they handle it roughly and they may not be able to recognise the early signs of concern or aggression from the dog such as lip lifting or growling.

### What to do when approached by an unfamiliar dog

Children are easily excited. A common reaction in their excitement is to run and squeal. This behaviour can frighten a dog that may only be curious, or the dog might want to join in the fun.



When approached by an unfamiliar dog, children should be taught to stand like a statue with their arms by their sides and hands in a fist or hands tucked into their armpits and importantly, not to scream. It is most likely that the dog will sniff the child then walk away. However, it is important to instil in children the importance of not making eye contact with the dog. Teach children to look at their own feet when approached by a dog, until a relationship has been strongly established. If knocked over by a dog, teach children to curl into a ball, stay quiet and wait until it goes away.

Children should be taught to leave an unfamiliar dog alone and to tell an adult who may be able to deal with the dog appropriately.

### Introducing a new dog into a household with a child

It is ideal to choose a puppy that has already had friendly experiences with children such as in the breeder's home. If accepting an older dog then you need to gain as much information about the dog's life as possible and assess the response of an older dog to children before accepting it into your home. Temperament testing may be available from the place of adoption or it may be best to have a veterinarian or qualified animal behaviourist assist you with this assessment. Temperament tests are not foolproof but they will help give you an indication of the dog's responses to everyday situations. Prior to the arrival of the dog, children should understand that the dog is a living and feeling animal and not a toy. It can be beneficial to allow children to have positive, well supervised socialisation experiences with other dogs, prior to bringing your new dog home. The dog must always be treated gently and quietly. When introducing your new dog and your child follow the information found above in *Approaching a dog*.

Sometimes the dog will want to be left alone, for example when it is sleeping or eating.

The child should be encouraged to take on age-appropriate responsibilities such as grooming or keeping the water dish full. However you still need to make sure this is being done competently as ultimately you are



responsible for your dog. Older children can learn to teach their dog good manners such as 'come' or 'sit' on cue.

Teach your child that an adult should always be present when they are in the company of a dog.

As dogs and children both vary individually, it is impossible to identify an age for children to accept responsibility for themselves around dogs.

### Introducing a child into a household with a dog

Young babies and children should never be left alone with a dog.

A new baby requires an enormous time commitment from parents in order to feed and nurture the infant adequately. The time spent with the baby is time that might otherwise have been spent with the family dog. If any adjustments to the dog's routine are likely, gradually introduce the changes, for example the amount of time to be spent with the dog, where the dog will be fed, sleep etc. Ideally the dog should have regular, safe exposure to children throughout its life.

Prior to the arrival of the baby, gently introduce 'child like' contact with the dog, for example stroking and gentle pulling of the ears, tail or paws. The dog should be rewarded for being relaxed and accepting the contact. The dog should be taught how to gently accept toys or food from an adult's hand after an appropriate verbal cue such as 'take'.

Rewarding a dog with praise when the baby is in its presence creates a positive association for the dog. Shouting at the dog or locking it

outside will create a negative association for the dog. Interaction between the dog and adults should not be exclusive to times when the baby is asleep. Taking your child with you when walking the dog is one way to create a positive association between the two.

The dog should get used to the sound and smell of a baby before you bring the baby home. While the baby is still in hospital, bring home something that smells of the baby and allow the dog to sniff it. There are numerous CDs available that have the sounds of babies crying and children playing that can be used to help the dog learn that these are noises that are just a part of life.

Babies and dogs need strict and close supervision at all times. Make sure the dog does not have any unwanted access to the baby, such as whilst on the floor or in the baby's room. There may be changes that need occur in your home such as which rooms the dog is allowed access. Begin this prior to the baby arriving. Make sure that the dog cannot enter these rooms unnoticed by closing the door or using an unbreachable door barrier.

As your child grows you can follow the information found above in *Learning how to get along together*.

## As dogs and kids grow up

As children grow up with a dog, hopefully the relationship between them becomes one of love, mutual respect and understanding of each other's needs and behaviours. However, as a dog gets old, is unwell or if in pain the behaviour of the dog can change. Situations such as moving house, visitors or other changes to the dog's environment can also cause a dog to feel unsettled. If a bitch is pregnant or has puppies she may feel tired, sore and protective of her babies. Be aware that her behaviour may be different from what you may be used to. Treat her gently and allow her space to be a mother. Be aware and make the appropriate changes such as increasing supervision of dogs and kids, separating them if you need to and communicating with your children so that they understand what is occurring.

If you are concerned about your dog's behaviour then seek help immediately from your veterinarian.

## Responsibilities of dog owners

### Choosing the right dog

Your dog may be part of your family for 15 years or more so choosing the right dog is very important. It is worth taking that time to carefully consider the factors that will make sure your family and your dog are well matched. You should not purchase a breed of dog simply because it is 'in fashion', or if the breed has been featured in a popular film or television show. This could lead to the dog and the family being unhappy and may lead to dogs being surrendered to animal shelters or abandoned. It is an offence to abandon an animal.

Even though each breed has been selectively bred for different characteristics, such as activity level, each dog is an individual. Crossbreeds vary even more in their characteristics. To choose the dog that will be suit your family needs best, some things to consider are:

- The expected activity level of the dog.
- Any known breed problems such as genetic disorders.
- How much time each day can you dedicate to exercise?
- Do you have children or expect to in the future?
- Will your dog be a working dog or a house dog?
- How much time might be required for grooming?
- What is your budget for dog food and maintenance?
- What size of dog is most manageable for you?
- How much time would the dog spend alone?
- Who is likely to be the main carer of the dog?
- How big is your yard?
- Why the breed was developed?

Please be aware that there are restrictions on keeping some breeds.

Any dog is capable of biting. Small dogs may inflict small wounds; larger dogs inflict larger wounds. Parents should not introduce a young child to any dog, regardless of breed, without strict and close supervision.

## Need help choosing a breed?

The Petcare Information and Advisory Service can assist members of the public to choose dog breeds most likely to suit their lifestyle. Potential dog owners can contact the service prior to purchasing a dog to help find a good match of dog and family. This can be done on: **W** [www.petnet.com.au](http://www.petnet.com.au) for free by clicking on Selectapet.

Your veterinarian or canine associations can also give you advice about choosing the right dog.

## Training

Training is essential for all dogs regardless of breed, size or age.

Training is just teaching the dog good manners. It is important to teach the dog how to behave appropriately whether it is around people they know, strangers, children or other pets. Dogs that leap on visitors are not only annoying, but can cause serious falls. Dogs that fail to respond to verbal and visual cues such as 'come' and 'stay' could be placing their own life and also a car driver's life at risk by running onto the road.

All dogs should be taught the basic verbal cues that will keep them and others safe. Cues such as 'come', 'stay', 'sit', 'settle', 'drop' and walking safely on a loose lead are the very least a dog should know. Some dogs can also be trained not to react when someone touches their food, although it is best never to interfere with dogs whilst they are eating.

For advice on training, contact the Victorian Canine Association, the Canine Association in your state, a qualified dog trainer found in an obedience club, Canine Good Citizen trainer or Delta Society Australia. There are also many excellent books on the subject. The focus of training should always be on using positive reward based methods rather than punishing unacceptable behaviours.

Dogs need clear and consistent messages. Once a dog is trained, older children will need to be taught by adult family members how to continue working with the dog using verbal and visual cues that are meaningful for the dog. With the assistance of an adult, older children can also reward the dog for behaving appropriately with praise and pats.

## Socialising the dog

When out, all dogs should be on a lead unless in a designated off leash area and under your control.

Socialising your dog throughout its life is very important. Socialising means that your dog learns to accept people, children and other animals as part of its life.

It helps when selecting a dog that will become a member of a family, to choose a pup that has been socialised with children and other animals. This means the puppy is used to having contact with children and other animals.

Dogs that are not members of a household with children need to be introduced to children regularly and safely. Please understand however that some dogs may never learn to accept children.

## The dog's environment

Dogs need to exercise their minds as well as their bodies if they are to be fit and healthy and live happily in a family.

Most dogs like the opportunity to get involved with their physical environment. Most dogs also like to socialise with both people and other dogs. This interactivity should result in a happier, more relaxed dog, which is less likely to be aggressive.

A well managed physical environment for your dog can eliminate many of the unwanted and destructive behaviours that are usually associated with lack of mental and physical stimulation.

A secure yard, which prevents the dog roaming, is required by law by most local councils. This also minimises the risk of injury to the dog and motorists in motor vehicle accidents.

Sometimes a fence that allows the dog to

see the outside world and passersby can help interest the dog and occupy time and make a dog less likely to react to dogs and people. However, other dogs can be more reactive if they see outside the fence so their line of sight may need to be blocked.

Clean, dry bedding should be raised from ground level.

Clean up any faeces the dog deposits both inside and outside of the yard. Not picking up dog faeces creates both an unhygienic and unpleasant environment.

Provide opportunities for the dog to exercise its mind and body during periods when the dog has to be left alone. Toys such as a Kong™ or raw bones are good starters. Remember to change your dog's toys daily to maintain interest and check them regularly for safety. Discard toys that are broken as they can damage the dog's mouth and teeth. Some dogs may become possessive with bones. Avoid them if this is the case with your dog.

Dogs need regular walks and training to provide interest, variety and exercise in their day. Areas outside of the property can be utilised for walks and training and off leash exercise in designated areas. Children should always be supervised when a dog is present.

## The law

All states have laws that outline the responsibilities that dog owners have for their dog's behaviour. Offences are punishable under law. These laws vary from state to state and council to council, but generally the following principles apply.

You are required by law to register your dog with the local council, usually prior to the dog reaching three months of age. Commonly registration needs to be renewed annually. Registration may be cheaper for dogs that have undergone specific obedience training, have a microchip inserted and are desexed. Some councils require the dog to be desexed unless exempt. Failure to register your dog can lead to a fine. Your dog also needs to be clearly identified. A collar and tag with a clearly marked name, phone number, address, local council identification and registration number is important. A microchip provides permanent identification and

is mandatory in some jurisdictions.

It is an offence if your dog:

- Strays onto another person's property
  - Roams at large
  - Rushes at, attacks, bites, chases or worries any animal or person
  - Creates a nuisance e.g. excessive barking.
- You can be held liable for any damage caused by your dog.

Dogs must be confined to their property. Some councils require dogs to be under 'effective control' while in public spaces, others require dogs to be leashed at all times except in specially designated areas where dogs can be exercised off the leash. Dog owners should contact their local council to find out which rules apply.

Most councils have limitations on the number of dogs which may be kept on a property. A permit may be needed if you keep more than the specified number of dogs.

Your council may have local laws requiring the dog owner to remove any faeces deposited by their dog. This is courteous practice even if not required by law.

## Hot weather

Children and dogs should never be left alone in a car.

In hot weather, the temperature inside the car can increase dramatically within a few minutes. Leaving the window down makes little difference to the temperature inside the vehicle. Children and dogs left in vehicles on warm days are at risk of rapid dehydration and even death. It is an offence to leave a child unattended in a vehicle.

## Holidays

Make sure that your dog enjoys holidays when you do and organise safe and appropriate accommodation. Prepare well in advance as boarding kennels become booked out especially in peak periods. The carer must be aware of his/her responsibilities of keeping your dog and to make sure all people and property your dog contacts are safe. Make sure the carer of your dog has instructions on how to care for your dog, what the local laws are and



emergency phone numbers for veterinary care, the local council and yourself. Many people take their dogs with them on holidays. Again, prepare well in advance so that you are certain your dog is allowed to be where you intend to travel. Contact the local council you are travelling to and find out the areas your dog is welcome or excluded, such as beaches and national parks.

## Health issues affecting dogs 'n' kids

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Socially responsible owners maintain their dog's health. A dog, that is unwell, may be irritable. Dogs, like people, are susceptible to a variety of diseases and conditions that are caused or exacerbated by poor hygiene. Some diseases found in dogs can be transferred to humans, so it is essential to insist on strict hygiene rules for the entire family.

It is important to discuss the following information with your veterinarian who can give you accurate and specific information on keeping your dog healthy.

### Infections

Young children may not fully understand the importance of personal hygiene. The new puppy that has not yet been toilet trained poses a health risk for children crawling around as they can put their hands in dog faeces, and pick up infections or worm eggs from the floor or ground. Young children are likely to have less resistance than adults and can pick up a mild or serious gastroenteritis or other disease from dog faeces. It is important to supervise their hand washing after contact with all animals. It is particularly important that all faeces are removed from the yard and outside the yard if on a dog walk. Your veterinarian, veterinary nurse, veterinary behaviourist or qualified dog trainer will give advice about how to toilet train a new puppy quickly and effectively. Use rewards and praise for correct behaviour. If your dog soils in the wrong place, do not rub your dog's nose in it as it may make them sick and lead to other behavioural problems.

## Canine vaccinations

All puppies require vaccinations for canine distemper, hepatitis and parvovirus. Vaccinations are also available for kennel cough. People cannot catch these diseases. A yearly trip to the veterinarian is necessary for a general health check and your veterinarian will discuss appropriate vaccinations, health maintenance and desexing.

## Worms

Dog worms such as roundworm, hookworm, whipworm, tapeworm and heartworm can easily be controlled at home. Puppies are most susceptible to intestinal worms and should be wormed at least every two to four weeks depending on their age and adult dogs every three months. Consult with your veterinarian to make an effective plan to worm your dog. Heartworm requires different medication. Discuss this with your veterinarian for further advice. It is essential that all pet medication including worm control medication be placed in a locked child resistant cupboard.

With the exception of tapeworm, adult dog worms cannot be transmitted to people, however the larva from worm eggs can migrate through the organs and skin of children and cause a rare and serious condition called visceral larval migrans. Dogs should be wormed regularly as advised by your veterinarian. Children can pick up worm eggs from sources such as dogs, the ground and the school ground. They can pick up worms which are infectious to humans from other children. Children should be taught how to wash their hands thoroughly.

## Fleas

Flea bites can cause nasty skin irritations for dogs and humans. Fleas may also carry tapeworm eggs. Children ingesting these fleas can become infected with tapeworms. Flea control medications are now available for dogs and are one step in the flea control cycle. All dog bedding should be kept clean. Thorough vacuuming of all carpets and regular flea control programs within the house are

recommended. Consult your veterinarian for further advice.

## Food and Water

Dogs need a complete and balanced diet that meets their physiological needs. Your veterinarian can assist you with this. They also need an ample supply of clean water at all times, especially in the warmer months. Larger dogs require a higher volume of water. If young children are likely to enter the property, they are at risk of drowning in large containers of water. Replace large drinking containers with a series of smaller bowls that are not likely to be a drowning hazard for children. The bowls should be spill proof.

## What can health professionals do to reduce the risk of dog bite injuries to children?

Health professionals play an active and important role in reducing the risk of dog bites to children by:

- Providing parents with the *dogs 'n' kids* brochure.
- Conducting an information session with parents.
- Inviting a veterinarian to speak to the group about socially responsible dog ownership.
- Inviting a local government representative to explain laws and dog owner responsibilities.

- Following up any reported dog bites with dog owners and the local council.
- Running a basic first aid course that demonstrates how to deal with animal bites and stings.
- Encouraging parents to have a first aid book as a quick and easy reference and a first aid kit in the event of a dog bite and to seek medical assistance.
- Inviting a veterinary behaviourist, veterinarian or representative of the dog obedience school to attend an information session with parents and assist with introductory classes for parents with dogs.

### For more information contact:

#### The Safety Centre

The Royal Children's Hospital  
Flemington Road, Parkville, 3052

**T** (03) 9345 5085

**F** (03) 9345 5086

**W** [www.rch.org.au/safetycentre](http://www.rch.org.au/safetycentre)

**E** [safetycentre@rch.org.au](mailto:safetycentre@rch.org.au)

#### The Petcare Information and Advisory Service

404/685 Burke Rd.

Camberwell, 3124

**T** (03) 9827 5344

**T** Toll free 1800 631 784

**F** (03) 9827 5090

**W** [petnet.com.au](http://petnet.com.au)

**E** [petcare@petnet.com.au](mailto:petcare@petnet.com.au)