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Parents and the Web: 'Complete dichotomy'

They see the value — and the danger

By Janet Kornblum
USA TODAY

Most parents love the Internet and want their children to use it. But a new survey finds that almost as many also fear the online world — especially social networking sites such as MySpace — and worry that their kids will get in trouble with people they meet.

"It's this complete dichotomy," says James Steyer, CEO of Common Sense Media, which releases results today from a survey commissioned about parental attitudes toward the Internet.

"They see this incredible potential, and they know their kids have to be there," Steyer says. But "it's also what they are scared of most."

The study, which was done online May 5-10 by Insight Research Group with a margin of error of +/- 4.4 percentage points, says 80% of parents are concerned about children meeting sexual predators online.

But another study, conducted April 25-May 1 by Greenberg, Quinlan, Rosner Research, shows that just 30% of 18- to 24-year-olds worry about getting harassed or stalked online.

That's because young people who have largely grown up with the Internet think of it as a social outlet, says Jennifer Berktold, a senior associate with the research group.

To young people, the benefits of giving out some personal information to reach out to friends outweigh the risks.

And, the study shows, they're so comfortable with the medium that 78% have a personal website or blog.

But findings suggest that parents and teens alike need more education about using online media, Steyer says.

Parents also recognize the importance of the Internet. The survey shows that 91% say the Internet helps their children explore their passions, and 77% say the Internet is one of the most valuable education tools teens have. But 88% say it's important to know what their children are doing online.

That's why Common Sense today also is launching an educational campaign that includes a website, fliers and a multimillion-dollar public service advertising campaign. A guide for parents and a tip sheet for teens and parents can be found at commonsensemedia.org.

In the next two weeks, the San Francisco-based non-profit will launch an initial $3 million public education ad campaign with several media partners to be named this month, Steyer says. The campaign will include public service ads in print, online, TV and radio.

Nancy Willard of Eugene, Ore., an Internet safety consultant to schools, applauds the idea of a media campaign, even though plenty of information already is available online.

"We tend to do a good job of reaching those parents who are paying attention," she says. "But we are also struggling in finding ways to get to those parents who are not paying attention."

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Discussion

- Why are many parents wary of social networking sites like MySpace?
- Why do young people feel comfortable with the Internet?
- What Internet security risks should teens be aware of?
- What postings have you placed online? Do you believe what you posted is "safe"? Do you think the benefits of posting personal data outweigh the risks?
- What can a teen do if she or he feels threatened by someone on the Internet?
- Do your parents monitor your Internet use? What should every parent of a teen know about social networking sites and the Internet? What is the best way to teach parents Internet safety and security tips?

Activity

When children are young, parents and teachers talk a lot about stranger safety. They warn, "Never get into a car with someone you don't know," and "Always stay with your mom or dad when you're out shopping." In other words, use common sense, pay attention to your instincts and be cautious when dealing with strangers. These same safety rules apply in the online world, as well. The only difference is that one is face-to-face contact, and the other, face-to-computer contact.

With a partner, identify three specific and potentially-dangerous situations that a young child might encounter in his or her community. (All of your examples should relate to dealing with strangers.) Briefly describe each situation in the space provided on the following page. Next, jot down similar scenarios that a teen might encounter online. Then, explain how the child and the teen should handle each situation. Which of the rules that you learned as a child still apply now? Why do some teens believe that common-sense safety guidelines don't apply on the Net? What three tips can you share with your parents that they might not already know? Are you using safe Internet practices? Explain.

National Cyber Security Alliance Social Networking Tips

Protect Privacy: Keep personal information personal. Never give out their social security number, address, phone number, or family financial information like bank and credit card account numbers. Sharing information about other people in the family or about their friends can harm them. Be cautious about sharing other information too, like the name of their school, sports teams, or hobbies, where you work or hang out, or any other information that can be used to identify you or locate you offline.

World's Largest Billboard: Post only information that is appropriate for the entire public. The Internet is the world's largest billboard—anyone can see individual web pages, including teachers, law enforcement officials, college or university admissions officers, or potential employers. What is posted on a website today may be harmful in the future.

Minimize Negative Publicity: Be aware that posting inappropriate photos can lead to damaged reputations and unwanted attention from others. It is important to consider the ramifications for posting visual content online by using Web cams, videos, and camera phones. Posting inappropriate visual content such as explicit photos can attract individuals who have bad intentions, and may put you at risk. In addition, it can lead to suspension or expulsion from school.

No 'Take Backs': Remember that once information is posted online and deleted or modified, the original will never be completely deleted. Even if information is deleted from a website, older versions exist on others' computers.

Don't Talk to Strangers: Be careful about adding strangers to IM Buddy or friend lists?people are not always who they say they are. A friend is someone you know well and can trust. The online world has blurred the meaning and definition of a friend. It is important to understand the difference—if individuals cannot provide solid information as to how they know a person, decide if the person should be included in their IM buddy or friend lists. If you do not approve, delete the user name and block that user.

Go with Your Gut: Teach 'trust your gut.' If you feel threatened or uncomfortable by someone or something online, you need to tell an educator or another trusted adult. If you know someone is in immediate danger call the police. Speaking up can prevent someone from becoming a victim.

Cyber Strangers vs. Physical Strangers: Online friends should not be met offline. Strangers in the online world pose a threat to you as much as strangers in the physical world. Tell a parent or teacher if you plan to physically meet up with virtual friends, an adult should chaperone the meeting. Never go alone—not even with a friend.

Don't Accept Unsolicited Mail or Unmarked Packages: Do not click on links or download attachments in emails from strangers or emails they are not expecting. Emails from unknown individuals may contain viruses or spyware that could damage computers and steal personal information—including money from bank accounts. Some viruses can "spoof" the name and email address of friends and fool individuals into thinking the message is from someone known.

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Community Safety

Online Community Safety

Situation 1:

Similar to:

Situation 1:

Action:

Similar to:

Action:

Situation 2:

Similar to:

Situation 2:

Action:

Similar to:

Action:

Situation 3:

Similar to:

Situation 3:

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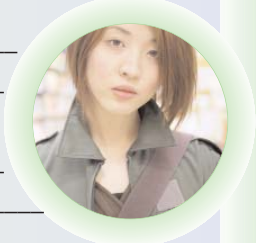

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