



A Survival Guide for Parents of Teenagers

Teens and the Internet

Colleen Gengler, Family Relations Specialist, University of Minnesota Extension Service

In a few short years, Internet and related technologies have mushroomed. Millions of web sites are available and e-mail use is commonplace. Census data from 2001 indicate that 51% of youth ages 10-13 and 61% of those ages 14- 17 have Internet access at home.

Adults view the Internet as a place to find information while teens see it primarily as a communication and socialization tool. And yet, the vast array of opportunities that would be otherwise inaccessible is a huge benefit to teens and adults alike.

There is a downside if the Internet and other communication technology isn't monitored and used with discretion. Typically teens stay online for longer periods than adults, are more likely to access the Internet from different locations, participate in a wider range of online activities and are more likely to adapt to new technology. Some of those characteristics contribute to potential problems.

Parents have a long way to go to catch up to their technologically savvy teen. Studies indicate a gap between how proficient adults consider themselves and how their children see the adult's abilities. Parents and teens can use communication and information technology as a point of discussion with the teen becoming the teacher and the parent as student. Parents can offer their experience in the real world as part of the discussion.

The Positives

Communication and information technology provides many opportunities to teens. From the teen's viewpoint, the Internet is a place to



“hang out.” They can be instantly in touch with friends through instant messaging. They can meet new people in chat rooms and perhaps find those with opinions and interests similar to their own. If there is a question to be answered or information to be found, the Internet is the first source. Accessibility to a huge variety of resources provides information for school projects as well as personal interests including sports, music, media and hobbies. The possibilities are endless.

The Perils

Parents are encouraged to monitor teens by knowing where they are going, whom they are with and what they are doing. Monitoring needs to occur when teens are on the Internet as well as when they go out with friends. Parents need to have knowledge of the kinds of activities their teen is pursuing on the Internet. Examples of the dangers the Internet poses:

- Victimization – teens are even more likely than children to get in trouble with child molesters or other exploiters through the Internet. A teen may not realize that the 15-year-old boy in the chat room is really a 45-year-old adult. Or, they may have given

out personal information that could lead to someone attempting to meet them in person.

- Pornography – the Kaiser Family Foundation found that among teens on-line, 70 percent have accidentally come across pornography. Natural curiosity might lead to searching for web sites with inappropriate and sexually explicit information. A Yankelovich Partners Study found that 62 percent of parents of teens were unaware that their children accessed objectionable web sites.
- Financial perils – giving out personal or parents' financial information could lead to financial risk. If an offer appears to be "too good to be true", then it probably is.
- Harassment and Bullying – information technology in a variety of forms can subject teens to harassment and bullying. Unmonitored chat rooms could be a forum for messages that are indecent, demeaning, violent or racist. Teens may receive objectionable and harassing kinds of e-mails.

What Parents Can Do

Parents can monitor their teen's use of the Internet and make Internet use safer by:

- Locating the computer in a common area in the home that is accessible to everyone. In cases where teens have gotten involved in dangerous or objectionable situations, the computer has often been in their room behind closed doors.
- Learning as much as possible about communication technology and becoming familiar with chat rooms, instant messaging, news groups, and other tools.
- Checking history of what Internet sites have been accessed on the computer. If that file has been emptied, it is probably for a reason. Teens should be told that the history will be checked periodically. Knowing they are being monitored helps teens monitor themselves.

- Paying attention to any changes in your teen that might be due to Internet use. Secretiveness, inappropriate sexual knowledge or sleeping problems could be among signs to watch for.
- Talking with teens about Internet use. The subject can be approached in a positive way with interest in what teens are doing and respect for their knowledge of the Internet as opposed to always "checking up" on them.
- Establishing basic rules about amount of use and what kinds of information should not be given out including: personal details; social security number; pictures that could lead to identification of self, family or friends; and financial information.
- Considering protective software for blocking, monitoring or filtering.

If a teen is accessing a website that is objectionable, it is important that parents not overreact. Some conversation about how the website was found and what kind of information was being sought may help to sort out the situation. For example, a teen may have accidentally found a porn site when legitimately seeking health information. Parents may be able to help their teen find credible, helpful websites.

Advice for Teens

In addition to establishing basic rules, parents can advise teens to:

- Never agree to meet someone in person they have met on-line. Suggest they talk with a parent or trusted adult first.
- Avoid chat rooms or discussion areas that look sketchy or provocative.
- Be leery of those who want too much information. There is no rule that says personal information must be given out.
- Log off if something online doesn't seem right or makes you uncomfortable.

Where you can go for more information:

Protecting Children in Cyberspace

www.protectkids.com/

Enough Is Enough

www.enough.org

Federal Trade Commission

www.ftc.gov/ftc/consumer.htm

National Institute on Media and the Family

www.mediafamily.org

Kaiser Family Foundation

www.kff.org

Safe Teens. Com

www.SAFETEENS.COM

Copyright © 2004, Regents of the University of Minnesota. All rights reserved.
The information given in this publication is for educational purposes only. Reference to commercial products or trade names is made with the understanding that no discrimination is intended and no endorsement by the University of Minnesota Extension Service is implied.
The University of Minnesota Extension Service is an equal opportunity educator and employer.

IN PARTNERSHIP...

