



## A Survival Guide for Parents of Teenagers

# Teens and the Internet

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Use of Internet and related technologies has mushroomed especially for teens. Millions of web sites are available and e-mail use is common place. In the 2005 Pew Internet and American Life Project report on teens and technology, it's estimated that 87% of teens aged 12 to 17 now use the Internet.

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.

It is important for parents to monitor their teen's Internet use. 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.

Some parents may 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 or through social networking websites such as MySpace.com. Or, they can meet new people in chat rooms and find those with similar opinions and interests.

If there is 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. Studies have shown that looking at large amounts of data via the Internet is helping to enhance teens' abilities to interpret and manipulate data.

### 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 online, 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 and social networking sites could be

a forum for messages that are indecent, demeaning, violence based or racist. Teens may receive objectionable and harassing 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 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, social networking sites 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. Signs to watch for could include secretiveness, inappropriate sexual knowledge or sleeping problems.
- 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 technology 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 (full name, address, phone number and information which would help someone find the teens physical location or determine their schedule) 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 an objectionable website, it is important that parents not overreact. A conversation about how the website was found and what kind of information was being sought will help sort out the situation. For example, a teen may have accidentally found a porn site when legitimately seeking health information. Parents can help teens 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 online. 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.
- Never give out passwords, even to friends.

### Where you can go for more information:

Federal Trade Commission  
[www.ftc.gov/ftc/consumer.htm](http://www.ftc.gov/ftc/consumer.htm)

Get Net Wise  
[www.getnetwise.org](http://www.getnetwise.org)

National Institute on Media and the Family  
[www.mediafamily.org](http://www.mediafamily.org)

Parenting Education Resources  
[www.parenting.umn.edu](http://www.parenting.umn.edu)

Protecting Children in Cyberspace  
[www.protectkids.com](http://www.protectkids.com)

Safe Teens. Com  
[www.SAFETEENS.COM](http://www.SAFETEENS.COM)

*Teens and Social Networking Websites – Teen Talk: A Survival Guide for Parents of Teenagers*  
<http://www.parenting.umn.edu/programs/familiesWithTeens/teenTalk/index.htm>

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