

Use of the Internet and communication technologies is a big part of teens' lives. According to a 2010 Pew Internet and American Life Project survey, 93 percent of teens age 12 to 17 use the Internet, compared with 79 percent of adults. Newer media, including social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, gaming sites, and instant messaging, now combine with 24/7 access through cell phones. That allows teens to extend the time they spend with people they already know and sometimes with those they don't.

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 try new technologies. Those characteristics contribute to both potential opportunities and problems so it is vital that parents monitor their teens' online activities.

Some parents may have challenges keeping up with their technologically savvy teen. There is a gap between how technologically capable adults consider themselves (more) and how children see adults' abilities (less). Teens can teach their parents a great deal about use of information technologies; this can be a good point of discussion. However, parents still need to provide guidance simply because they have more life experience than their children.

## The positives

The Internet and other communication technologies provide many opportunities to teens. From the teen's viewpoint, the Internet is a place to "hang out." According to the Pew survey, the top five teen Internet activities are: using SNS; accessing current event news and information; purchasing items; sharing artwork, photos, videos, and stories; and finding health, dieting, or physical fitness information.

If teens need to find information, they look to the Internet first. Access to a huge variety of resources helps them with school projects, as well as pursuing personal interests – such as pop culture, sports, and



music. Studies have shown that looking at large amounts of data via the Internet can enhance teens' abilities to interpret and manipulate information. Other benefits include developing thinking and writing skills as they post to blogs or other online forums, and connecting with others to discuss shared interests.

## The risks

Just as parents are encouraged to monitor teens by knowing where they are going, who they are with, and what they are doing, parents also need to be knowledgeable about teens' Internet activities. Examples of risks the Internet poses:

- **Bullying and harassment.** Unmonitored social networking could provide a forum for messages that are indecent, demeaning, violent or racist. Sometimes comments can be misinterpreted and the conversation can quickly turn into bullying or harassment.
- **Inappropriate relationships.** A teen may not realize that the 15-year-old boy asking to be an online "friend" is really a 45-year-old man. Teens may find themselves in online relationships for which they are unprepared.
- **Victimization.** Teens are even more likely than younger children to get in trouble with child molesters or other exploiters. An online relationship may move into the real world if teens are persuaded to give out personal information that allows predators to stalk or meet them in person.
- **Pornography.** The Kaiser Family Foundation found that 70 percent of 15-17 year olds have accidentally

come across pornography on the Internet. Natural curiosity might also lead to searching for websites with inappropriate or sexually explicit information.

- **Financial risk.** Giving out personal or parents' credit card, banking, or other financial information could lead to trouble. If an offer appears to be "too good to be true," then it probably is.

## What parents can do

Parents can monitor their teens' use of the Internet and make it safer by:

- Learning as much as possible about the Internet and communication technologies and becoming familiar with SNS, blogs, and other tools.
- Talking about Internet use no matter how it is accessed. Approach the topic in a positive way with interest in what teens are doing and respect for their knowledge of technology, as opposed to "checking up" on them.
- Establishing basic rules about amount of Internet use and what kinds of information should not be given out, including personal details (full name, address, phone number and information that would enable strangers to find a teen's physical location or determine their schedule); social security number; pictures that could lead to identification of self, family or friends; and financial information.
- Reminding teens to use secure settings. For younger teens' online activities, parents should keep their own list of passwords and remind teens they will be monitoring their activities occasionally.
- Not allowing teens to sleep with their cell phone nearby. When teens are always connected, their rest will be interrupted.
- Paying attention to any behavioral changes that might be related to Internet use. Signs to watch for include secretiveness, spending increasing amounts of time on the Internet, inappropriate sexual knowledge, or sleeping problems.
- Monitoring teens' online purchases, whether material or downloadable. Encourage teens to buy only from reputable companies.

For home computers, parents should consider:

- Locating the computer in a common area in the home accessible to everyone.
- Checking the history of what Internet sites have been accessed. Telling teens that you will monitor histories helps them monitor themselves.
- Installing protective software for blocking, monitoring or filtering websites.

If parents discover their teen has visited an unacceptable website, it is important not to 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 seeking health information. Parents can help teens find credible, helpful websites and teach them to be critical consumers of information.

## Parents can advise teens

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

- Never agree to meet someone in person they have met online. Teens need to talk with a parent or trusted adult first.
- Avoid chat rooms or discussion areas that look risky or provocative. Suggest teens trust their instincts.
- Be wary 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 causes uncomfortable feelings.
- Never give out passwords, even to friends.

## Where you can go for more information:

**Families with Teens – University of Minnesota Extension**  
[www.extension.umn.edu/familieswithteens/](http://www.extension.umn.edu/familieswithteens/)

**Teens and Social Networking Websites: Teen Talk Fact Sheet – University of Minnesota Extension**  
[www.extension.umn.edu/familieswithteens/fact-sheets/teen-talk-social-networking.pdf](http://www.extension.umn.edu/familieswithteens/fact-sheets/teen-talk-social-networking.pdf)

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

**Internet & American Life Project – Pew Research Center**  
[www.pewinternet.org](http://www.pewinternet.org)

**Parent Further: A Search Institute Resource for Families**  
[www.parentfurther.com](http://www.parentfurther.com)

**WiredSafety**  
[www.wiredsafety.com](http://www.wiredsafety.com)