



## A Survival Guide for Parents of Teenagers

# Teens and the Internet

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Use of Internet and related technologies is an integral part of teens' lives. In the 2007 Pew Internet and American Life Project – Teens and Social Media report, an estimated 93 percent of teens aged 12 to 17 use the Internet, up six percentage points from 2004.

Adults view the Internet as a place to find information while teens see it more as a communication and socialization tool. However, the vast array of opportunities provided through the Internet is a huge benefit to both adults and teens.

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 technologies. Those characteristics contribute to both potential opportunities and problems.

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

### The positives

Communication and information technologies provide many opportunities to teens. From the teen's viewpoint, the Internet is a place to "hang out" through social networking websites such as Facebook. Teens' Internet use continues to change. According to the 2007 Pew report, fewer teens are using instant messaging, going to chatrooms, and purchasing items online. More teens have their own webpage, blog, and upload content including pictures and videos.

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 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. Parents can help teens learn to be critical readers of information found on the Internet.

Teens can develop writing skills as they post information. Other benefits include using the Internet as a forum to discuss sensitive topics or to talk with someone they typically wouldn't. If discussion becomes uncomfortable, teens can simply log off.

### The risks

Parents are encouraged to monitor teens by knowing where they are going, whom they are with, and what they are doing. Monitoring also needs to occur when teens are on the Internet. Parents need to be knowledgeable about teens' Internet activities. Examples of dangers the Internet poses:

- Bullying and harassment – Information technology in a variety of forms can subject teens to bullying and harassment. Unmonitored social networking could provide a forum for messages that are indecent, demeaning, violence-based, or racist. Teens may receive objectionable and harassing e-mails.
- 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 who has asked to be an online "friend" is really a 45 year old adult. Teens may give out personal information that could lead to someone finding their physical location, stalking them, or offering to meet in person.

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- Pornography – The Kaiser Family Foundation found that among 15 – 17 year olds, 70 percent have accidentally come across pornography. Natural curiosity might also lead to searching for websites with inappropriate and sexually explicit information. A Yankelovich Partners Study found that 62 percent of parents of teens were unaware that their children accessed web sites the parents found objectionable.
- Financial risk – Giving out personal or parents’ financial information could lead to financial risk. If an offer appears to be “too good to be true,” it probably is.

## 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 were involved in unsafe situations, the computer has often been in their room behind closed doors.
- Learning as much as possible about communication technology and becoming familiar with social networking websites, blogs, and other tools.
- Checking the history of what Internet sites have been accessed on the computer. If the 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, spending increasing amounts of time on the Internet, 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 “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 accesses an unacceptable 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 and teach them to be critical consumers of information they discover.

## 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. 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 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 causes uncomfortable feelings.
- Never give out passwords, even to friends.

## Where you can go for more information:

### Federal Trade Commission

<http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/consumer.shtml>

### Get Net Wise

<http://www.getnetwise.org>

### National Institute on Media and the Family

<http://www.mediafamily.org>

### Parenting Education Resources

<http://www.parenting.umn.edu>

### Pew Internet and American Life Project – Teens and Social Media

[http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_Teens\\_Social\\_Media\\_Final.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Teens_Social_Media_Final.pdf)

### Protecting Children in Cyberspace

<http://www.protectkids.com>

### Safe Teens. Com

<http://www.SAFETEENS.COM>

### Teens and Social Networking Websites – Teen Talk: A Survival Guide for Parents of Teenagers

<http://www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/familydevelopment/00144.pdf>