

Adolescent Social Networking Activities: What Adults Don't Know

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Introduction

There has been significant research in the area of adolescent online behavior, as well as research in the area of parental involvement in their children's internet activities. However, there is a lack of literature on studies that explore the disconnect between what parents do and understand regarding their adolescent children's online activities and what their children report about their online activities. Other areas that require more examination include the degree to which communication about rules and online activities has been successful – for example, do parents and their children have the same understanding about the rules that govern the adolescents' internet activities, and do parents know what their children are doing in chatrooms and what is occurring on social networking websites? This study examines parent-child pairs and their communication regarding the adolescents' online social networking activities and the rules that govern those activities. Studies of this type are essential to gain a better understanding of the conditions surrounding adolescents' risky behavior.

The internet is rich with collaboration tools that allow users to engage in videoconferencing, chats, photo- and video-sharing, and discussions, among other activities. Using the Web to facilitate collaboration and social networking is on the increase, with a vast potential to link individuals at a distance. Social networking has become popular among today's Net Generation youths, the first to grow up surrounded by digital media (Tapscot, 2006). According to studies sponsored by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Lenhart, Madden, Rankin-Macgill, & Smith, 2007; Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005), 93 percent of American youths aged 12 to 17 now use the internet. Of these, more than half use it on a daily basis. One out of two teens has a broadband connection at home which is typically used for instant messaging, playing games, making purchases, doing homework, and getting news and health information. 84 percent of teens report owning at least a computer, cell phone, or PDA, with 44 percent owning two or more of these devices. Young people are not only consuming digital media, but are also creating it – more than half of all U.S. teens are creating content for the internet, such as blogs, personal webpages, and shared original and remixed artwork, photos, stories, and videos. A 2007 Pew Internet and American Life Project study reported that more than half (55 percent) of all online American youths ages 12-17 use online social networking sites (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). While adolescents are very adept at many social networking

activities such as blogging, instant messaging, chatting, and posting to websites, it does not necessarily follow that they are aware of responsible online behavior. Advocates of monitoring software maintain that without blocks on social networking sites and activities such as instant messaging and chatting, adolescents will put themselves at risk to online predators. Others maintain that parents and teachers can teach students responsible online behavior by having discussions and setting down rules. There is a lack of literature on studies that explore this disconnect between what parents understand about their adolescent's online activities and understanding of the rules, what their children report about their online activities and communication with parents, and the role teachers play in social networking.

Methodology

This research study has three questions:

1. To what extent are an adolescent's social networking activities different from his or her parent's perceptions of the child's activities?
2. What characterizes parent-child pairs who have the highest and lowest agreement on the responses regarding the child's social networking activities and communications on internet-usage rules?
3. Are schools playing any role in advocating responsible online behavior?

Data Collection

Two online surveys, one for parents and one for adolescents, were designed to gather information regarding social networking and supervision of online activities. Part I of both the adolescent and parent surveys collected general demographic information such as age, race, gender, and level of education. Part II presented adolescents with questions about location of computers in the home, whether monitoring software or a filter is installed, if teachers discuss social networking with them, and what rules if any their parents set down for them for online activities. The rest of the questions for Part II gathered information regarding the types of social networking activities, amount of information participants share on the internet, and where participants are doing their social networking (home, school, or a friend's house). Part II of the parent survey was aimed at determining what parents know about their children's online activity. As much as possible, the same or similar wording was used for both the parents' and adolescents' surveys. Similar forms allowed for comparative analysis between parent and child groups and more holistic analyses across groups. An identification number was used to identify parent-child pairs. Most of the 37 questions were quantitative, and there were a few open-ended questions.

The survey was disseminated in the winter of 2008 through two middle schools, one high school, and one pre-Kindergarten through 8th grade school in southern Connecticut. Of the 191 respondents, there were 52 parent-child pairs, whose

survey results were analyzed to determine agreement on survey items. In this study, the researchers manipulated no variables, and quantitative data were analyzed to observe relationships among variables. The open-ended questions on the survey were analyzed using constant comparison techniques. Most of the quantitative data were reported as descriptive statistics, with means and standard deviations for continuous variables and percentages for dichotomous variables to illustrate levels of participant agreement per item. 27 items from the parent and child responses were compared to determine if there was a high, medium, or low level of correlation among each pair's answers.

Results

The study results indicate that there are parents who are very aware of their children's online activities. When their children are not very active online, this becomes easier. As adolescents gain more internet access and become more active online, parents may become less aware of their child's activity. This study was able to examine a group of parents whose perceptions of what their children are doing online, with whom their children are chatting, and what personal information is being posted is different from what their own children report. When compared with parent-child pairs who had a high level of agreement in survey responses, the parent-child pairs in the low correlation group were characterized by the following:

- Adolescents had greater access to computers in a private location or had their own computer
- Adolescents used a friend's computer more often to do social networking
- Adolescents posted more personal information and photos online
- Adolescents were more likely to visit chatrooms and to chat with people unknown by their parents
- Adolescents are more likely to be involved in cyberbullying incidents, either as perpetrator or as victim
- Adolescents are less likely to report that they discuss their online activities with their parents, even though parents report that these discussions take place
- Adolescents are less likely to report that they feel comfortable coming to their parents if they were in trouble

This last item represents the most troubling statistic; overall 23.4% of adolescent survey respondents would not tell their parent if they were in trouble; this number jumps to 46.7% in the low-correlation pairs.

Filters do not appear to play a role in an adolescents' behavior or level of communication between parent and child, nor does checking the sites a child has visited on the computer. Rules, too, are not enough to keep adolescents safe; as this study indicates, adolescents are not following the rules as much as their parents think they are. Rather, it is the discussions with parents and the comfort the child

feels in coming to his or her parent when in trouble that may be most important in keeping adolescents from engaging in risky online behavior. Most parents seem to feel that these discussions have taken place whereas many adolescents perceive to not have had that conversation, indicating a noteworthy disconnect.

Schools can also be an important source of online safety instruction; 82.9% of adolescent respondents had discussions with teachers about social networking. Schools are beginning to actively educate and protect children from unwanted material on the internet.

Implications

While this study was small in size, it can however begin to give researchers who are studying adolescents' online behavior and safety issues a better picture of how the pieces of parent and child behavior fit together. Future research ought to include a greater sampling size with a more diverse population. Additionally, the profiles of high-correlation and low-correlation parent-child pairs can be more fully developed with the inclusion of more probing questions as to the nature and frequency of communications about online social networking activity.

Conclusion

Results of this study have begun to shed some light on the extent to which filters or monitoring software and discussions about online behavior with adults correlate with adolescents' decisions about social networking activities and disclosing personal information online. Both parents and teachers have a role in teaching adolescents about digital responsibility. Establishing rules of engagement on the internet is paramount, but the assumption that just because rules exist, adolescents will follow them is a dangerous presupposition. Beyond relying on rules, filtering and monitoring software, and checking up on children's Web browser history, parents and teachers ought to be having regular conversations with adolescents. Most importantly, children need to feel comfortable coming to their parents in the event that they run into trouble online, and parents need to develop an awareness of the adolescents' reticence to report incidents

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