



The Good, the Bad, *and the URL...*

Help children avoid the risks and reap the benefits of today's broadband world. *by Bobbie Eisenstock*

Is hanging out online a good thing or a bad thing for today's kids? Many parents and teachers think it's a time-waster and risky. But new research indicates that spending time online is actually a good thing. Children and teens who hang out online are developing the critical-thinking and technology skills required of digital citizens in the 21st century.

What about the potential dangers youth may encounter when they go online? There are certain online risks, but they're no greater than offline risks. In fact, online risks are similar to offline risks, but the online behaviors—and consequences—are more public. As with anything, in the new media world, you have to take the good with the bad.

What the Research Says

According to the most extensive study yet to explore how American youth use new media, digital communication is changing the way kids learn, play, socialize, and engage in civic life. The study, undertaken as part of the MacArthur Foundation Digital Media and Learning Initiative, documents how the emerging media ecology is defining a generational identity distinct from that of their parents' generation. The "digital generation" is coming of age in a world of user-driven communication technology—cell phones, laptops, iPods, and other mobile devices—with capabilities for text, Twitter, instant messaging (IM), e-mail, social networking, gaming, and sharing photos, music, and videos. These digital tools facilitate and direct young people's

everyday lives in the emerging participatory culture. *[For more on new media and participatory culture, see the Spring 2009 edition of Threshold, Cable in the Classroom's quarterly journal for school leaders.]*

News stories are filled with the bad things that can happen from cyber contact with bullies and predators, posting too much personal information, copy-and-paste plagiarism, exposure to porn, and access to risky behaviors and illegal activities: A middle schooler commits suicide after nonstop cyberbullying by classmates. A teen is molested by a predator she met in a chat room. Underage girls send boys nude photos of themselves taken with cell phones and are arrested for child porn. These are real stories about real kids with real life consequences. But this is not the whole story.

It is critical to be aware of harmful effects and to develop effective strategies to keep kids safe in cyberspace. At the same time, it is important to understand the beneficial ways digital kids are adopting new media on their own. In reality, more good than bad things are happening as youth innovatively integrate technology in their lives. Consider two important ways young people are opting in to new media that are shaping their social world and their future participation in the digital society: building communities of online peers and exploring personal interests.

Network of Friends

The majority of kids' and teens' digital media and online connections mirror their offline friendships. Text messages, IMs, e-mails, social-network sites, and other online spaces are where and how youth are hanging out 24/7 with their friends one-on-one or in groups, as described in the book *Hanging Out, Messing Around, Geeking Out: Living and Learning with New Media*, which is based on the Digital Youth Project study. They use new media not only to maintain existing friendships but also to make new friends within their extended peer network, turning an acquaintance into a friend or cultivating a friendship with a friend of a friend.

Their technology devices have become indispensable social tools to plan get-togethers, talk about homework, coordinate a club meeting or team practice, or simply share information about a new music group or video. What's more, digital communication has become a tactic for flirting and dating. Romantic relationships can escalate much more quickly by discovering what each other is like through Facebook or MySpace profiles and by sending carefully composed text messages and IMs rather than by merely talking on the telephone between dates.

Some young people's online connections are more interest-driven. They're extending their social world by pursuing specific interests that lead them to niche communities of peers who share similar interests. Still other kids are identity-driven. They go online searching for social support from like-minded peers they have not found at school or in their community. For these online kids, the Internet can serve as a virtual

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You've Got Friends

In the new media culture, "to friend" is now a verb and the practice of "friending" has been transformed into a ritual that is publicly articulated, displayed, and ranked. Instant messaging, buddy lists, and social-networking sites are all about who is friends with whom, and meeting in person is no longer a prerequisite for friendship. Kids like to keep connected by checking friends' status updates and posting what they're doing when they're away from their wired devices.

Most teens have a hundred or more friends and use different strategies to negotiate their friendships and manage the social implications. For the most part, the dynamics of making and maintaining online friendships mirror offline friendships. When teens are forced to create a "top friends" list that does not exist for them offline, the social drama gets complicated but they figure out a way to handle it—some reciprocate with friends who list them, others rotate best friends each month or list favorite bands or family members, and a few simply choose not to participate.

Who Do Kids Friend?

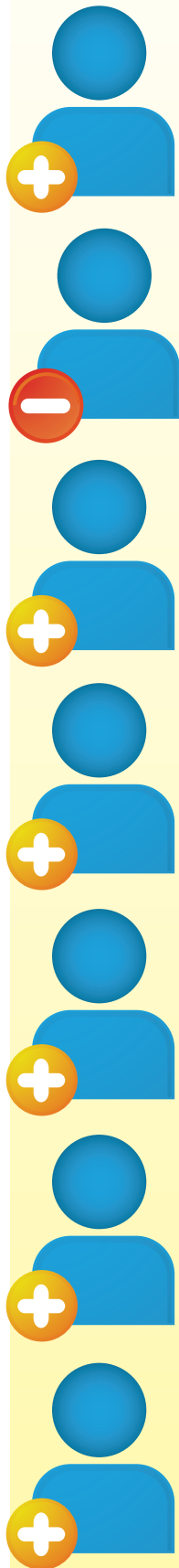
Most kids start with close friends and accept requests from everyone in their extended peer network—classmates, teammates, club members, summer campers, and co-workers. Some accept requests from peers they don't know that well to avoid offending them, while others exclude people they know well—such as parents and teachers—or use privacy features to limit their access to content. Still others amass thousands of friends to build communities based on cultural affiliations or specific interests. Typically, requests from strangers are denied unless they are members of a known group.

Where do parents, teachers, and other adults fit in? Kids have determined not only which genre is appropriate to communicate with one another but also who is welcome to participate. The unspoken rule is that adults are generally unwanted in friendship-driven networks, but they are welcome in interest-driven groups where interactions are based on knowledge and expertise and not authority. A parent or teacher accessing profile information on Facebook or MySpace is considered equal to them entering your room without knocking or reading your journal without permission.

Is Deleting a Friend OK?

Teens agree that deleting a friend you know personally is socially unacceptable and perceived as intentionally hurtful. Even accidentally removing a friend can hurt feelings until the action is explained and the friend is reinstated. However, it is acceptable and even encouraged to delete people you don't personally know when you change your profile from an open to a closed one. And, in most cases, anyone who bullies or harasses is immediately deleted and blocked.

The new media ecology provides the perfect stage for adolescents to act out the social dramas inherent in their search for identity. As they jockey for status and attention, there's plenty of opportunity for teen angst, yet many kids appear to be less interested in spreading rumors and gossip and more into negotiating new social norms that validate their friendships and drive an ethic of reciprocity in online peer networks. In whatever ways teens use new communication channels, the result is immediate and more public than ever before—all the world truly is their stage and, if they choose, all the digital people can be their friends.



Candid Cameras

Got a cell phone? Then you probably have a digital camera. Cell-phone cameras and videos are so pervasive today that teens don't think twice about capturing images of themselves to send to friends who may resend them to other friends or post them online. What happens when the photos are sexually explicit or the videos record a prank or illegal activity?

Kids have always taken dares or experimented with risky behaviors, but they didn't end up in cyberspace for the whole world to see. When that happens, there may be consequences: What started out as a joke cost teens their jobs when they videotaped themselves taking a bath in the sink of a fast-food restaurant and then posted it on MySpace. A teenage girl committed suicide after her ex-boyfriend shared nude photos of her with his friends and classmates, who relentlessly harassed her.

Sexting Risks

According to a fall 2008 survey by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and CosmoGirl.com, "sexting"—the term coined for sending nude or semi-nude photos or videos of yourself via cell phones or posting them online—is on the rise. One in five teens admits to sexting, and one in four teen girls and one-third of teen boys say they have received sexy photos of others. Even though three-fourths of

teens know that sexting can have serious negative consequences, they think it's not a big deal. But it is. Sending sexual images to minors is against the law. Teens who exchange nude photos of themselves via cell phone are being charged with child porn and even branded as sex offenders in some states. Law enforcement, schools, and parents are grappling with what to do, given the enormous legal consequences of what is most often a typically normal, albeit thoughtless, adolescent action.

Educating youth about the risks of sexting is only part of the solution. Kids need to understand the difference between what is private and what is public. Growing up in a hyper-sexualized culture that has normalized self-objectification and rewards self-exposure may have blurred the line for them. The bottom line is teens need to think twice about the potential consequences before they hit "Send." They need to understand—and accept responsibility for the fact that—anything can be copied, posted publicly, and live in cyberspace forever.



peer support group, where they can express feelings and share information about socially sensitive topics. To facilitate this, a number of kids maintain multiple online profiles to connect with different groups of friends they know from different activities.

What You Need to Know: While young people's online friendships usually reflect their offline social world, their extended peer networks are likely to include people they have not met in person. Kids can be very trusting and need help determining how to draw cyber boundaries in online relationships and deciding whom to accept or reject as friends in social networks.

Despite headlines that make it seem like every other teen is likely to chat with a predator, the majority deny requests from strangers. They are more likely to confront a cyberbully than a sexual predator when they're online, and they are just as likely to encounter either one offline as online.

For the most part, youth who are at-risk online are also the ones who are at-risk offline—a teen who does drugs, self-injures, or has an eating disorder may go online to connect with others involved in the same risk-taking behaviors.

What You Can Do: Monitor where kids go and who they know online and make sure they have skills to protect their privacy and respond to potential cyber harm. Remember that kids may be tech-savvy but not safety savvy and need help to minimize the risks.

Learning with Peers

Young people have tapped into a new kind of learning environment that defies traditional boundaries of teaching and learning. Unencumbered by classroom walls and teacher-driven practices, kids and teens have found a place where they can "mess around" and "geek out." Here is what's

known from the Digital Youth Project study and the book *Hanging Out, Messing Around, Geeking Out*.

Messing around involves exploring and experimenting with the digital culture—searching for information, playing with technology, even creating digital-media productions. It is driven by personal motivation and trial-and-error learning that can build self-confidence and open up new possibilities for self-expression.

Geeking out takes youth media use to a new level of involvement and expertise. It requires a time commitment, unlimited access to digital media, specialized knowledge about a particular

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interest, and passion for pursuing it.

Kids and teens geek out by delving into a subject area beyond a casual interest or typical class assignment. They may get involved in online communities of peers of all ages, anywhere in the world, who drive the learning by sharing expertise and exchanging feedback about their common interest—such as gaming, music, writing, science, social causes, or other specialties. Some are motivated to showcase their talent to a wider audience in order to gain visibility and enhance their reputation among expert peers.

Geeking out online is cool; in fact, these kids often are early adopters who may have honed their technical skills by messing around and are driven by a special talent or interest.

What You Need to Know: In peer-based learning environments, youth become learners and leaders alongside adults who become their peers and potential collaborators. Unlike the formal teacher-student relationship, adults are not automatically the experts or authority figures for young people. Instead, authority depends not on age but on whose knowledge is valued. However, given their experience, adults often are

mentors who play a major role in setting community learning goals and defining standards for expertise and literacy.

Despite the vast digital diversity of resources available to youth, the majority of young people do not take advantage of online learning opportunities. They are more likely to go online to socialize with friends than to experiment with technology or exchange ideas and information in peer-driven communities.

Unless kids geek out on their own, they may not benefit from this type of social exploration and experimentation because it is not generally available at school. One reason is that their school may ban, block, or simply not have access to social-networking sites and blogging tools. Another reason is that the lack of standardized benchmarks to measure how and what kids learn from new media prevents teachers from integrating new media literacies into the curriculum.

What You Can Do: Encourage kids to explore and engage in peer-driven collaborative-learning online environments in which they can develop critical-thinking skills while enhancing their leadership abilities. Remember that kids who spend time online networking, negotiating, and appropriating content in meaningful ways are better prepared to participate in today's global society.

The Big Picture

Whether hanging out, messing around, or geeking out, young people are negotiating new social norms to manage their digital identities across an elaborate network of friends and acquaintances. But they are not always thinking about the unintended consequences of their actions. They are the say-anything, post-everything generation who have yet to fully understand that there are no take-backs in the virtual world. But what they send, share, and post is public and permanent, can affect their reputation in the real world, and may come back to haunt them when applying to college or for a job.

While most teens say they don't share sensitive or identifying information, what they say does not support what they actually do online. Among the countless examples, one in particular stands

out because so many kids do it: The majority of youth do not post their cell phone numbers in their contact information on their online profile, but when a friend posts a request on her Facebook page to retrieve classmates' lost numbers, teens will write their number on that friend's public "wall" for anyone who has access to it—friend or stranger. Even the more media-literate, tech-savvy kids may lack the critical thinking and maturity to protect their cyber privacy and security at all times.

As we begin to understand more about how young people are using new social media to their advantage, we need to help them master critical-thinking and technology skills to avoid the pitfalls. They need guidance for networking with friends, searching for information, evaluating digital documents, problem-solving with experts, judging the reliability of sources, and creating content to share online. This is not an easy task, because it requires new ways of thinking about raising and educating children to thrive in the digital world. Because kids' new media habits are evolving faster than their cyber literacy skills, then the challenge for teachers and parents is to raise and educate children to thrive in a digital, participatory world. Whether kids use digital media at home or at school, they need the guidance to use digital tools effectively and ethically and connect what they're learning in the digital culture to what they're learning in the classroom.

Young people are showing us the possibilities for learning and living in the wired world. Now we need to empower them to find the good and steer clear of the bad to safely and responsibly navigate the digital society. ■■

Bobbie Eisenstock, Ph.D., is an educator and consultant specializing in the role new interactive media play in the lives of children, teens and families. She facilitates media-literacy workshops for students, parents, teachers, and health practitioners. Dr. Eisenstock serves on the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences Fred Rogers' Blue Ribbon Panel. She can be reached through her website at www.bobbieeisenstock.com.

The majority of kids' digital media and online connections mirror their offline friendships.

TIPS ON TALKING TO KIDS ABOUT RESPONSIBLE ONLINE BEHAVIOR

Cable in the Classroom: Media Smart
www.ciconline.org/media-smart

Common Sense Media
www.common Sense Media.org

iKeepSafe.org
www.ikeepsafe.org

PointSmart.ClickSafe.
www.pointsmartclicksafe.org

TIPS ON TALKING TO KIDS ABOUT SEXTING

Common Sense Media: Talking About "Sexting"
www.common Sense Media.org/talking-about-sexting

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy: Sex and Tech: What's Really Going On
www.thenationalcampaign.org/sextech

RELATED RESOURCES

Building the Field of Digital Media and Learning
digitallearning.macfound.org

Digital Youth Research: Kids' Informal Learning with Digital Media
digitalyouth.ischool.berkeley.edu

Hanging Out, Messing Around, Geeking Out: Learning and Living with New Media
Mizuko Ito et al. (MIT Press, forthcoming)
digitalyouth.ischool.berkeley.edu/report

Project New Media Literacies
newmedialiteracies.org

Threshold: Learning in a Participatory Culture. Spring 2009
www.ciconline.org/threshold-spring09