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# The Online Generation Gap

Contrasting attitudes and behaviors  
of parents and teens

## Executive Summary





# The Online Generation Gap:

Contrasting attitudes and behaviors  
of parents and teens

**Submitted to: The Family Online Safety Institute**  
**By Hart Research Associates**  
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## Executive Summary

- In October 2012, Hart Research Associates undertook a quantitative research project to explore parents' and teens' online behaviors and views of teens' online safety on behalf of the Family Online Safety Institute. The research consisted of two nationwide online surveys: one among 511 13- to 17-year-olds who use the Internet at least occasionally, and another among 500 parents of 13- to 17-year-olds who access the Internet. To simplify administration of the parent survey, respondents were asked to think about their child who had the most recent birthday in answering the survey's questions. The objective of the research is to better understand behaviors and attitudes toward online safety, parents' perceptions of and teens' self-reported use of various online/mobile platforms, and the types of tools used and actions teens and their parents take to keep themselves and their children safe online. Interviewing was conducted from October 2 to 10, 2012. This report details the key findings identified through the research.

## KEY FINDINGS

### 1. When it comes to monitoring teens' online activity, a substantial gap exists between how many teens say their parents monitor their online activities and their parents' reported oversight.

- When it comes to parents' monitoring of their teens online or mobile activity, 39% of teens say their parents monitor their activities very (11%) or somewhat closely (28%). On the other hand, more than four in five (84%) parents report that they monitor their teens' usage very (31%) or fairly (53%) closely—a 45-percentage-point gap in perceptions.

### 2. Similar to reports of online monitoring, parents also claim to be more informed about their teens' online activities than teens believe them to be.

- More than nine in 10 (91%) parents say they are well informed about what their teens do online and on their cell phone, including more than one-third (37%) who say they are very well informed. By a difference of 29 percentage points, teens are less likely to say their parents are informed about their online activities. Three in five say their parents are very (21%) or somewhat (41%) well informed about their online behavior.

84%

of parents report that they monitor their teens' usage very or fairly closely.

### 3. Social networking and media sharing Web sites expose the greatest gaps between teens' online activities and parents' knowledge of these activities.

- Differences in parents' degree of knowledge about their teens' activities and teens' perceptions of their parents' awareness are greatest when it comes to social networking platforms such as Twitter, Facebook or Google Plus, and media sharing Web sites like Tumblr and Pinterest. The largest gap exists around teens' use of Twitter, in which 38% of parents say they are well informed about their teen's use of the site, while just 14% of teen Twitter users say the same of their parents—a difference of 24 percentage points.
- There also are notable gaps between parents who say they are very well informed and teens who say the same of their parents when it comes to specific social networking services, such as Facebook (18-point gap), Pinterest (14-point gap), and Tumblr (15-point gap).
- For other online platforms asked about in the survey, parents' self-reported level of awareness is more in line with teens' ideas about how well informed their parents are. Gaps in perceptions are absent or smaller for online gaming (no gap), texting (3-point gap), instant messaging (7-point gap), and teens' use of YouTube (10-point gap).

### 4. Both teens and parents feel that teens generally are safe online.

- A large proportion of teens report feeling safe online. Fully 95% of teens say they feel very (37%) or somewhat (58%) safe online. Similarly, 94% of parents say they feel their teen is very (36%) or somewhat (58%) safe online. Just 5% of teens and 6% of parents say they feel unsafe.
- When teens were asked in an open-ended question what it means to feel "safe" online, the largest proportion (25%) of responses mention privacy and ensuring no one has access to personal or identifying information. Another 17% of teens say safety means preventing harm or harassment.
- For parents, avoiding "stranger danger" scenarios (29%) is top among their definition of a "safe" online experience, as is ensuring teens' privacy and the protection of their personal information (26%).



# 95%

of teens say they feel very or somewhat safe online.

**5. When it comes to specific concerns about teens' online activity, parents and teens largely are on the same page, but attitudes differ on the hazards posed by strangers and inappropriate content.**

- Parents and teens indicate similar levels of concern for a number of negative potential outcomes of teens' online behaviors and activities. Concerns about teens' postings "haunting" them or creating future problems with getting a job, applying to colleges, or with teachers at school are roughly the same for each audience.
- The biggest gaps in concern exist regarding teens being exposed to harmful or inappropriate content (79% of parents are concerned; 53% of teens) and a stranger learning something about a teen from online posts (78% of parents; 59% of teens), with parents reporting greater levels of concern for both.
- Smaller gaps in concern are reported for the following:
  - Identity theft from online posts is teens' greatest concern (64%) and likewise top among parents (78%).
  - Parents (57%) are slightly more likely than teens (43%) to show concern about teens being bullied for something they posted online, and for teens' being teased by friends about something they posted online (50% of parents say they are concerned; 41% of teens are concerned). The proportion of parents (61% versus 56% among teens) who are very concerned about a company

tracking teens' online behavior also is slightly above that of teens.

- Teens are only slightly more likely to worry about someone posting unflattering pictures of them (54%) than are parents (49%).

**6. Teens are taking many steps to protect their privacy and information online, particularly when it comes to the use of social networking sites.**

- Teens who use various social networks report taking proactive steps to ensure their online safety. Large proportions of teens say they have set privacy settings on their social networking account (81%), placed limits on who they share their posts with (65%), removed a tagged photo (54%), blocked someone from seeing posts (52%), unfriended someone due to an offensive post (50%), or marked a comment as "private" (49%). Twitter and Instagram users are active in setting privacy settings on their account (48% for Twitter, 44% for Instagram), but less likely to limit those who can follow their posts (26% on Twitter, 33% on Instagram).

**7. Parents also say they are doing several things to protect their child's safety, including many actions of which teens are unaware.**

- Significant gaps exist between what parents say they do to protect their children online and what teens say parents are doing in this arena, particularly when it

# 81%

of social networking teens have set privacy settings on their account.



comes to reviewing teens' browsing history, logging on to teens' Facebook accounts, and reviewing teens' text messages.

- Other measures to keep teens' safe that involve conversations with teens also demonstrate a disconnect between teens and parents. Significant gaps in awareness exist when it comes to:
  - Parents discussing rules or expectations with teens regarding time spent online or on a mobile device. Fully 93% of parents say they have done this, while 61% of teens report having a conversation with their parents.
- Setting limits or rules about the use of online or mobile platforms. Parents' reports exceed that of teens' when it comes to setting rules or limits for time spent online or on a cell phone, teens' online search capabilities, and the number of text messages teens can send.

**8. Despite actions taken by parents and teens to protect teens online, notable proportions of teens say they have done things online that would enable a stranger to learn personal information about them.**

- Teens were asked whether they have done a number of things online with someone they do NOT know personally, ranging from the innocuous (commenting on blogs, sharing recommendations for TV shows), to the risky (mentioning the town they lived in, sharing their first or last name), to the truly dangerous (sharing their address or password, making a plan to meet someone).
- When it comes to their online interactions with someone they do NOT know personally, the less risky actions (i.e. friending a stranger on Facebook or sharing TV recommendations) are most common.
- When it comes to riskier behaviors tested, more than half (51%) of teens report to have done at least one of the following: mentioned the city or town where

# 43%

**of teens say they have posted something online that they later regretted.**

they live; shared their first or last name; mentioned the school they go to; or shared their phone number. Few teens say they have done the most dangerous of behaviors tested.

**9. While teens report steps they are taking to remain safe and vigilant while online, two in five admit to posting something online that they later regretted.**

- More than two in five (43%) teens say they have posted something online, either on a social networking site, Instagram, Twitter, or elsewhere that they later regretted; 57% of teens have never regretted a post.
- The most common reasons teens give for regretting a post are because they were mean to someone else, or they shared more information than they should have.
- Among those who admit to having regretted an online post in the past, fully 83% later deleted it.

To view the full report, visit:  
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