Do You Know Who Your Child is Talking To?

Internet Generation Gap:
An Analysis of Student Assessments and Parent Surveys from an Active Learning Internet Safety Environment

Focus: Recent survey statistics, which expose discrepancies between youth and parent responses to questions about Internet behavior, have documented the existence of an Internet generation gap. Previously there have been no data to evaluate baseline Internet behaviors of youth, parent perceptions of their children's Internet usage, and the impact of Internet safety education on behavioral change.

What is the Gap?

Analyses of i-SAFE assessments and surveys indicate a noteworthy difference between parent and student perceptions about general safety on the Internet, and reported student Internet usage and conceptions about the consequences of that usage.

PARENT'S INTERNET ASSUMPTIONS:*

88% of parents feel they know "some" or "a lot about where there children go or what their children do on the Internet.

92% stated they have established rules for their child's Internet activity.

*YOUTH PERCEPTIONS / BEHAVIORS REGARDING THE INTERNET**:*

33% do not share what they do or where they go on the Internet with their parents.

40% do not discuss Internet safety with their parents.

23% stated their parents complain about the amount of time they spend on the Internet.

14% stated their parents have **no idea** how much time they spend on the Internet.

34% said their parents had not established any rules for their Internet activity.

*1050 parents responded to our Parent survey.
**Approximately 7000 students (grades 5-12) from 30 states.

Why is this Identified Gap Important?

Today's youth have grown up with the Internet as an integral part of society, and many are much more Internet savvy than their parents. A 2003-04 i-SAFE America study indicates that 30.1% of students surveyed felt that their parents' Internet skills were either *weak or very weak.*[1] Likewise, 53.9% of parents felt that their children were *proficient or experts* in computer use.[2]

Results of these recent studies document notable disparities between parents and young people in their computer knowledge and proficiency. This difference is further heightened when noting that young

children and teens are online constantly. According to a National Telecommunications & Information Administration report, 90% of American youth ages 5-17, or 48 million kids and teens, use the Internet.[3] Of nearly 4400 students surveyed in a 2002-2003 study, four out of five (81.1%) spent at least one hour a week on the Internet[4], and parental estimates showed that three in ten children (29.8%) spent more than six hours a week on the Internet[5].

Unfortunately this proliferation of Internet use among kids and teens, constituting a large and highly influential segment of the American population, has exposed a very dark side of the World Wide Web. The anonymity of the Internet and ease in creating different identities has opened up an entire new avenue for online predators, identify thieves, hackers, and other devious individuals. Since kids and teens are typically unaware of the tricks and techniques that these predators use to deceive their victims, and since most use the Internet as an everyday part of their lives, young people are at risk to a higher degree than other Internet users.

The Evolution of Predators

Today, the Internet has created a whole new playground in which predators lurk and lure children. Internet chat rooms and Instant Messaging (IM) applications are widely popular among young American online population. The cloak of secrecy and anonymity that these forums provide creates an ideal situation for online predators to meet and interact with their potential victims. These predators are essentially invited into their victims' houses or bedrooms, and often the victims do not realize they are in danger until it is too late.

An FBI report says
> "By using chat rooms, children can chat for hours with unknown individuals, often without the knowledge or approval of their parents. Investigation reveal(s) that computer sex offenders (have) used chat rooms to contact children. Chat rooms offer the advantage of immediate communication around the world and provide the pedophile with an anonymous means of identifying and recruiting children into sexually illicit relationships.[6]

Forty percent of children surveyed report, "if their parents knew with whom they chatted, they would have concerns." Dissecting these figures further, almost ten percent of students indicated their parents would restrict Internet use and eight percent would actually take the computers away[7] if their parents knew with whom they were chatting.

Chat Room Usage Among American Students (Grades 3-12)
   (i-SAFE America Pre-Assessment Surveys, 2002-04)

GRADE	% OF STUDENTS USING CHAT ROOMS	% CHANGE (from grade 3)	POPULATION (users/total number of responses)
3	16%	N/A	346/2184
4	18%	2%	679/3032
5	22%	6%	239/1093
6	31%	15%	698/2254
7	40%	24%	1016/2508
8	41%	25%	546/1330
9	38%	22%	254/665
10	37.7%	22%	75/199
11	26.8%	11%	33/123
12	14.9%	-1%	13/87

The number of students that communicate in a chat room steadily increases from grades three to eight – where the percentage peaks. As a student enters the high school years, the need to communicate online decreases and is replaced by more social activities in the real world such as dating, sports, and other extra-curricular activities. Students become much more mobile (for example, they obtain their drives license) and would rather hang out with friends than chat on the Internet.

Note: The i-SAFE results show that chat room participants decrease in higher grades. However, students who continue to actively participate in chat rooms may be habitual chatters whose social interactions with peers are minimal. Therefore, those students remain receptive to online relationships and communications.

Predators can log on to a teen chat room and meet a child or teenager, while pretending to be someone who is the same age and interested in the same music, movies, or sports. The predators then establish a sense of trust with the victim. The communication moves from the chat room to IM, then to e-mail and eventually the telephone. While the child believes a new friend has been made, the predator's ultimate goal is to set up a face-to-face meeting with the soon-to-be victim. This process, the one by which online predators generally operate, is known as *grooming*.[8]

Danger Kids and Teens Face While Online

Kids and teens face a variety of potential dangers while online. These dangers include, but are not limited to:

> *Victimization* by predators as a result of online communications – chat rooms, message boards, and Instant Messaging. As used here, *victimization* is the exploitation of young people via Internet-related communications, abduction, molestation, rape, and/or murder.

> *Exposure to inappropriate material* on line. Inappropriate material as defined here is adult or child pornographic images, online alcohol and cigarette sales, online hate sites, or other material deemed to be unfit for viewing by young people. In this case, exposure to this type of material by kids and teens is inadvertent or deliberate.

> *Identify theft* is one of America's fastest-growing financial crimes. Victims have their credit rating destroyed, amass unknown debts, or have criminal records created by identity thieves. An awareness of the information that identity thieves use, along with the methods they use to obtain that information, are i-SAFE keys to preventing identify theft. In their normal online communications, kids and teens may not realize they are providing identity thieves with the personal information they need.

> *Cyber-bullying* is a rapidly growing phenomenon. Kids and teens are using chat rooms, message boards, blogs (personal online journals) and other forms of online communication to create and spread rumors or hurtful information about their peers.

> *Intellectual property* violations, e.g., free downloading, copying, and distribution of music, movies and other types of media, while very popular, are nonetheless illegal. Students and their parents have been hit with lawsuits and fines for this relatively easy and immensely popular form of intellectual property theft.

> *Plagiarism*, or someone using someone else's work as his or her own, is not a new phenomenon. However, the wealth of information available on the World Wide Web, along with the *copy and paste* ease of use that the Internet affords, has taken plagiarism to an entirely new level in the information era.

Endnotes

[1] (i-SAFE America Assessment Surveys, 2002-04, grades 5-12)

[2] (i-SAFE America Parent Survey, 2003-04)

[3] (NTIA, A NATION ONLINE: How Americans Are Expanding Their Use of the Internet
   Washington, D.C. February 2002)

[4] (i-SAFE America Assessment Surveys, 2002-04)

[5.] (i-SAFE America Parent Survey, 2003-04)

[6] (The FBI's Innocent Images National Initiative – Operation Handyman Investigation, Marsh 2002
   http://www.fbi.gov/hq/cid/cac/innocent.htm

[7] (i-SAFE America Assessment Surveys, 2002-04, grades 5-12)

[8] (i-SAFE America Parent Presentation: Grooming Techniques – 2004)