Survey: Major disconnect between teens, parents on online risks, rules

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BY LOIS M. COLLINS

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Parents and teens seem to live on different planets when it comes to who's doing what online.

A new survey finds lots of teens have online accounts their parents don't know about; parents think they've clearly stated rules teens say don't exist, and children and teens who encounter problems online, such as cyberbullying, will probably seek help from someone other than parents.

The survey was a collaboration by Microsoft and the National Cyber Security Alliance, a public-private nonprofit group focused on cybersecurity and privacy education and research. It included surveys of 800 teens between the ages of 13 and 17 and 800 parents who have teenagers in that age group. Just 9 percent of the parents said they have

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no rules governing use of internet-connected devices, while 28 percent of the teens reported there are no household rules. "What's problematic is there seems to be tremendous difference of opinion about whether rules actually exist or not within families," said Michael Kaiser, executive director of the alliance. He called for parents to take a different approach, since existing efforts "clearly aren't working."

Kaiser said young people have "fairly straightforward concerns" about being online. They worry whether someone can access their accounts without authorization. And they worry about photos and private information being shared without permission. Both generations agree about the importance of protecting privacy and preventing identity theft.

Those concerns open a door for families to revamp both communication and rules. "I think this provides real opportunity for discussions: 'A lot of young people worry about someone getting into their accounts. Are you concerned about that? Let's talk about how we can make that more secure,'" Kaiser said.

Most parents and teens said household rules are sometimes hard to follow and hard to enforce.

Big differences

In the survey, 67 percent of parents said their children are "required to report to them any online incidents that make them feel scared or uncomfortable," but just 32 percent of the teens say they know of such a rule.

The report noted "a disconnect between the kind of rules parents are reporting and those that teens believe they are expected to follow. It is also possible that some parents are reporting rules that may apply to other, younger children in their households."

Among other findings:

• Sixty percent of teens said they use social media accounts or apps their parents don't know about; only 13 percent of teens said their parents are "completely aware" of their online activity.

Kaiser said the idea that parents must know everything a child does online should change. It's almost impossible keeping up with a changing array of apps. Instead, "strengthen your kids' ability to move through this world. Make a small number of rules that are enforceable and that apply to the whole family, such as asking permission to share pictures of the kids on social media."

• Nearly 40 percent of teens reported someone was mean to them online in the past year — usually about something the teen said or did (52 percent) or their appearance (45 percent). Teens were targeted for sexual orientation (27 percent), gender (25 percent) or race and ethnicity (24 percent).

When a teen encounters serious problems online, 4 in 10 said they would seek help from friends, compared with 33 percent who said they'd ask their parents. Forty-three percent said a friend asked for help with an online problem.

Parents who recognize teens form a strong support network have an opportunity to strategize with their kids, Kaiser said: "Do you know on the sites you're using how to block someone or report abuse?" "What would you do if Jer came to you for help?"

He said these conversations are an opening to set rules about what kids can do online.

Millennial parenting

How old parents are impacts how they see the internet, said Chris Rothey, executive chairman of Content Watch, which makes NetNanny, a monitoring software service parents can use to filter content they find objectionable. Parents 30 and older say they don't want to spy on their kids' online lives — even parents who routinely check where their kids go at night and with whom.

"They seem to think the digital world is not real life," said Rothey, who added millennial parents "have a different attitude. They don't see a difference between the physical world and online, so they are more willing to put rules in place and enforce them. Part of being a parent now is being aware of and helping a child develop good technology skills."

Cellphones changed how the average family tackled security, he said. A family used to put the computer in a common room so everyone could see what everyone else was doing online. Now, devices go everywhere with kids. Rothey tells parents to have onlinerelated conversations more often. He recommends looking for tools to help enforce rules. And he said parents should set a good example.

Rothey has four children, 6 to 16, so it's not just a question he ponders for work. "I found that the earlier we introduce boundaries at home, the better off the children are going to be, because by age 3, they are navigating tablets, figuring out how to bring up Disney videos and other things. When you start early, they don't question that this is how we do it."

His family takes a day off every week from technology and screens. Phones are charged in the parents' room at night, so they don't keep the kids awake. When his oldest son complained that "it's not normal; my friends don't do this," Rothey responded, "I don't know what's normal. I do know this: You need eight to 10 hours sleep at a minimum and if you have that phone in your room at night, you will not get it. Your grades and your sports will suffer and you will be grumpy."

It made sense, so it's not a battleground, Rothey said.

EMAIL: lois@deseretnews.com **TWITTER:** Loisco