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# Internet Safety Gone Wild?

## Sacrificing the Educational and Psychosocial Benefits of Online Social Environments

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Many Internet safety and parenting experts suggest that parents prohibit their teens from social networking sites and other online spaces where predators may lurk. But we may do adolescents a disservice when we curtail their participation in these spaces, because the educational and psychosocial benefits of this type of communication can far outweigh the potential dangers. These benefits include developing cognitive skills that are consistent with those required in educational settings and perspective-taking skills that are necessary for citizenship in an increasingly multiracial society. Alternative strategies for keeping adolescents safe online should build on the increasing technological awareness and sophistication of teens themselves.

**Keywords:** *Internet safety; adolescent development; identity; education; social networking; computers*

Many a parent's blood ran cold at the recent news that a Michigan teen, Katherine Lester, had slipped out of the country to join a would-be husband she had met through the online networking site MySpace. As teens flock to MySpace, Facebook, and other online social sites, a flurry of media reports warns of the "digital dangers" that they purportedly face. Experts, too, urge parents to keep their children away from chat rooms and networking sites where Internet predators may lurk. For example, internationally recognized Internet expert Donna Rice Hughes, who recently launched the National Internet Safety Awareness and Parental Empowerment Program with the U.S. Department of Justice, argues that parents should disallow chat rooms, limit instant messaging to those people who are approved by parents or guardians, and closely monitor teen online behavior. These warnings and Internet safety tips are often heeded by parents, and some may go so far as to ensure that their children avoid cyberspace altogether. But is this the response that we as developmental psychologists and educators should strive for?

A current article by Northwestern University researchers Justine Cassell and Meg Cramer (in press) suggests that the media have distorted or ignored the statistics on Internet safety. Using data from the Youth Internet Safety Surveys (1 and 2, 1999-2000 and 2005), they argue that although media attention to the issue is growing, there has actually been a decrease in sexual solicitations of youths over the past few years. This study of two nationally representative samples of 1,500 adolescents ages 10 to 17 shows that adolescent exposure to unwanted sexual solicitation was 1 in 5 (19%) in 1999-2000 and 1 in 7 (13%) in 2005. Aggressive solicitations, those in which perpetrators attempt to make contact in face-to-face settings, were relatively stable over this period, with 3% in 1999 and 4% in 2005. Throughout this period, most of the online sexual solicitations that youths received came not from strangers but from family members, family friends, and peers. The media alarm, according to the authors, reflects a "moral panic" that in turn results from adults' fears that adolescents, particularly girls, with access to communication technology will no longer be under their control.

Whatever the reasons for parental concern, I argue that banning adolescents from social networking sites—if this were even feasible—as well as monitoring too closely might close off avenues for beneficial cognitive and psychosocial development that are available to young people in the online social world. This view is informed by my research on teenagers' use of the Internet and by other recent research on discussion forums, chat rooms, and social networking spaces. These studies suggest that there may be such a thing as being too safe. If we completely bar youths from the many opportunities for social interaction online—with strangers as well as with people they know from face-to-face settings—we do not protect our children so much as deny them the myriad educational, psychosocial, and emotional benefits the Internet has to offer. I contend that the potential benefits of online social networking far outweigh the negative aspects and that alternative strategies are available for keeping young people safe online.

## Educational Benefits

Adolescent participation in social online environments (defined for the purposes of this essay as social networking spaces, chat rooms, and discussion boards) can foster learning that reinforces and complements what is taught in traditional classrooms. Many spaces offer training in how to develop critical thinking and argumentation skills. Although this training is usually informal, delivered through peer interaction, it can be effective.

When writing in discussion forums, for example, a participant must take time to reflect on the sequence of entries and responses in order to carefully construct his or her own posting for others to read. If a position is not well argued, the participant may be called out for faulty reasoning, as in this exchange from a popular teen discussion forum in 2003:

GravelBiker088: black people always cause mischief and steal, they are very rotten how they have their stupid accents i mean come on man "axe" its ask. however i admit there is one black boy in my school and he is ok

Stonevixen2424: Ok, I understand if you feel that way, but white people do the same things too. And you even said there was one black kid who was ok. So think about that.:)

Verysexy21: I am black and I have never stolen or caused mischief (not like a crime or anything) but that's stupid how you say we have our accents b/c I bet u have a country accent. I dont say "axe" unless I'm talking about that thing you cut trees down with. Just because we wear different clothes or listen to different music doesn't mean we are worse than you. If you hate black people then you should throw away your refrigerator and next time you drive you shouldn't pay attention to the traffic lights. Because black people invented them. Think about that.

In this thread, Stonevixen argues against the statement that Blacks engage in antisocial behavior by saying that White people do as well. She highlights the flaw in GravelBiker's reasoning by reminding him that he knows a person who counters his stereotype of Blacks. In the final entry, Verysexy draws on the contributions that Blacks have made to argue against GravelBiker's argument, bringing in historical fact to make her point (Verysexy is probably referring to African American inventors Garrett Morgan, who patented an early type of traffic signal, and Thomas Elkins, who patented an improved refrigerator design). Kuhn (1991) describes this practice as providing genuine evidence, the type usually demanded in formal educational settings.

Teens often ask their online friends for help with homework and advice on courses they should take. For example, Facebook users can form discussion groups around a particular academic subject or course. This may be particularly important for teens who do not have older siblings or parents who can help them with their schoolwork. Although parents may prefer that their teens talk online only to people they already know, a student's peer group may not be able to answer all of the questions the student needs to ask. In this case, an extended online peer group can be valuable.

Research also suggests that video games (and by extension, online games) may help adolescents develop cognitive skills such as spatial visualization, analog representation—the ability to read images—and divided visual attention, that is, being able to manage multiple components in a visual field at once (for a review, see Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, Kraut, & Gross, 2001). These skills are important for success in school subjects such as science, mathematics, language arts, and music. Although no direct link has been found between online games and academic performance, the skills developed in online gaming are the same skills that are measured in non-verbal IQ tests such as the Stanford-Binet (Subrahmanyam et al., 2001).

Another type of informal learning comes through cross-cultural and interracial interaction. Many adolescents in America still live in segregated areas, and their principal exposure to people of color is on television, where stereotypes and caricatures of minority groups abound. Schools in many communities are becoming more segregated, and some school districts are even suing for permission to deintegrate. And in many classrooms, the curriculum exposes children to people of color only on special occasions such as Black History Month (Bolgatz, 2005; Pollock, 2004). Not so on the Internet. In chat rooms, for example, adolescents build online acquaintances with people from across the United States and around the world. Peer teaching and learning takes place across racial and ethnic boundaries as young people talk to one another about their different cultural backgrounds. Teens may discuss the ways in which particular groups are discriminated against, different family practices, different perspectives on U.S. history, how to speak languages other than English, and much more. It is an education that in some cases may be more effective than education from textbooks because adolescents construct learning for themselves. They also develop relationships with their peer “teachers” that make learning more meaningful.

Chat rooms appear to be less popular today than a few years ago. A newer social networking tool that has attracted many teens is digital video, in particular YouTube, a large user-generated database of video and dialogue. Sonja Baumer (2006) of the University of California at San Diego, working with the Digital Youth Research project, argues that YouTube is a “multi-voiced and multifarious tool for informal learning.” She is investigating how adolescents learn political information about topics such as the war in Iraq from YouTube and how they learn to engage in public political discourses in this space. She suggests that adolescents’ access to alternative media and the political opinions of youth around the world can engender new notions of civil society.

## Psychosocial Benefits

Online social networking can facilitate identity exploration, provide social cognitive skills such as perspective taking, and fulfill the need for social support, intimacy, and autonomy. Whether constructing their profiles in MySpace, creating a video and posting it on YouTube, or talking in chat rooms, teens are constantly creating, recreating, and honing their identities—a primary goal of adolescent development (Greenfield, Gross, Subrahmanyam, Suzuki, & Tynes, 2006). This requires constant reflection on who they are, on who they want to become, and on their values, strengths, and weaknesses. Identities also evolve, in part, out of the evaluation and comparison of oneself and others. More opportunities for reflection may lead to a more developed and positive self-structure, which in turn may better prepare adolescents to act and get along in the world.

In addition to nurturing their own identity online, teens may become more sensitive to others. My research into how adolescents learn about race and ethnicity in online settings (Tynes, 2006) suggests that perspective-taking skills can improve as a result of computer-mediated interaction with people from different backgrounds. When asked what they learned from interacting online with people from backgrounds other than their own, adolescents commented that they became able to see things from another person's point of view. These perspective-taking skills may have implications for the future of race relations in the United States if online interaction is indeed engendering empathy for the "other" in ways that other types of interaction often do not.

My research also suggests that teens spontaneously engage in what I call *racialized role taking*—the adoption and enactment of race-related identities. I found six roles: witness, advocate, sympathizer, friend, target, and discussant. Whereas face-to-face settings also offer opportunities to engage in role-playing around racial issues, barriers to offline interracial discussion abound—geographic distance, physical separation, institutional impediments, and shyness or fear among them. The Internet makes physical separation irrelevant and alleviates many of the social and emotional concerns attached to talking with someone of a different race.

Social support is another important benefit of interacting in social environments online. Participants can enter chat rooms or go on discussion boards for just about any interest or problem they may experience and find others who share their concern. For some teens struggling with personal problems, online spaces may serve as their principal or only source of social support. In my research on ethnic identity and online interaction among youths, I collected data from teens via instant messaging (IM).

Teens participating in the study would continually contact me and my research assistant via IM to ask questions that ranged from the mundane to the serious. In one instance, a participant contacted my research assistant and told her that she had been cutting herself and that she was going to do it again. My research assistant got in touch with me and I began to talk to the teen, still through IM. We talked for more than an hour about her problems in school, her feelings of social isolation, and the teasing she endured because she was a cutter. We began on a very grim note, but over the course of the conversation, there was a dramatic shift in her mood. By the end, she was in good spirits and agreed to talk to her family about the cutting. Several days later, she messaged me again and said that she had seen a therapist and was feeling better. It's not clear that my research assistant and I were her only form of social support—we were just two of a number of online friends on her buddy list that she could have contacted. But contacting someone outside of her family and peers at school was crucial, and the online setting provided that opportunity.

Recent research has shown that the brain's frontal lobe, which allows a person to prioritize thoughts, think in the abstract, anticipate consequences, plan, and control impulses, is not fully developed in teens (Ortiz, 2003). This part of the brain undergoes the most maturation during adolescence and is the last part to develop completely (Sowell, Thompson, Tessner, & Toga, 2001). The Internet provides a space for teens to try out ideas and enhance their decision-making ability. Many will still act impulsively and make poor decisions, but many can and do seek advice online before taking big steps.

For example, one European American participant mentioned in a discussion forum on racism that she wanted to disobey her parents and date an African American boy. She said that her parents had different, more closed views on interracial dating and had forbidden her to date Black people. She told the group that she felt this was wrong and that she wanted to disregard her parents' orders and date the boy anyway. Others in the discussion validated her feelings with statements like, "I know how you feel," and "Our parents' generation is backward but we should be different." Yet, these peers also carefully reviewed with the girl various scenarios of the negative consequences that could result from disobeying her parents. Again, the Internet provided a safe space for this teen to discuss a very personal issue with a group of friendly listeners who understood exactly what she was going through.

Peer advice and support may be particularly important in helping teens navigate romantic relationships and sexual health issues, topics of great importance to most adolescents. By age 15, researchers have found, some teens interact more with romantic partners than with their friends, siblings,

and parents and spend 5 to 8 hours per week thinking about them. A recent study by Suzuki and Calzo (2004) found that romantic relationships were the most frequently discussed topic on a teen discussion board, and sexual health the most commonly discussed topic on a sexuality discussion board. The authors note that these discussion forums provided critical information, suggestions, and emotional support to adolescents who visited them. They learned about how to use condoms, what to expect during a Pap smear, and how to avoid sexually transmitted infections—all from their peers. One participant in the study explained, “The whole Pap smear consists of them putting a speculum in your vagina to dilate it, so they can see your cervix. It doesn’t hurt, it might be a little uncomfortable, like mild cramps.” Another participant exclaimed, “I have a hooked penis, do you know how to fix this?!?!?! PLEASE HELP ME!!!” Thus, adolescents sought and received much-needed information about their developing bodies and their sexuality. Questions that were often too personal to ask a peer face-to-face could be asked in the online forum.

### **Promoting Online Safety: Alternatives to Banning Social Online Environments**

In an effort to protect their children, some parents have used filtering software such as CyberPatrol, NetNanny, and IPrism to monitor interaction and block “dangerous” sites. Parents may ask their teens to agree not to visit social networking sites or to use the Internet strictly for school-related purposes. Some parents also insist that the computer be located in a central space in the home so that they can physically monitor as much as possible their teens’ online behavior. But these methods are not foolproof. Filters do not always block access to risky sites, and they frequently block sites that are harmless. Even if parents succeed in denying access to a particular site on the home computer, adolescents may find alternative ways to participate in this aspect of peer culture, such as by using the computer at a friend’s house or by shifting to a newer, more popular networking site. Pulling the plug on computer use or banning access to particular sites deemed dangerous is simply not feasible in most situations.

So, what can parents and educators do? The first line of defense should be teens themselves. Increasingly, tech-savvy adolescents are aware of the risks in online socializing and are developing their own strategies for staying safe in cyberspace. These strategies may involve use of the privacy settings that most online social sites offer or simply adjusting one’s online

behavior to minimize the risks. One teen I interviewed informally for this article mentioned that he shuns interaction from people he does not know in online spaces. He makes sure that requests to exchange IMs come from screen names that he recognizes. If someone with whom he does not want to talk were to “stalk” him—contact him repeatedly—he would change his screen or user name. None of these strategies was suggested by his parents, who, according to the youth, know very little about computers.

To encourage safe Internet behavior, adults can take advantage of and build on the increasing awareness and technological sophistication of youths who go online. The following are three key strategies:

1. *Maintain open and honest dialogue.* Parents and teachers should engage teens in frank discussion of the risks associated with the Internet as well as of its potential benefits. Research has shown that girls who have discussed Internet safety with a teacher are less likely to agree to meet in person with a stranger encountered online (Berson, Berson, & Ferron, 2002). Equally important is adult-teen dialogue about adolescent developmental concerns. Youths whose personal problems are not being addressed at home or at school are more vulnerable to overtures from seemingly solicitous strangers, both online and off.
2. *Help youths protect their privacy online.* Partly as a result of negative publicity about MySpace, many social networking spaces have recently improved their user options for privacy controls. Adults should encourage youths to learn about and take advantage of these options if they are not already doing so. Privacy settings can typically be used to limit contact to a list of designated persons, to block certain persons from initiating contact, or to cut off further contact with a person who has become a problem. Facebook, for example, allows the user to ensure that his or her profile can be viewed only by “friends” that the user designates. In MySpace, users can delete names from their “friends list” to avoid further contacts by offending individuals. Teens who want to meet new people online should know what kind of information is safe to give out and what is not. They should never reveal their real names, addresses, telephone numbers, school names, or passwords. They should also be careful not to give out their friends’ personal information.
3. *Develop an exit strategy.* Rather than requiring adolescents to avoid certain Internet spaces, adults can help them learn to recognize the telltale behavior of predators who may frequent such sites. Teens should know how to warn or block persons who make them feel threatened and how to extract themselves from uncomfortable situations. If the threatening behavior persists, they should report it to authorities on the site as well as to trusted adults in their lives. A teen who is sexually solicited by an adult online should immediately report the perpetrator’s user name to the “cybertipline” of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children ([www.cybertipline.com](http://www.cybertipline.com)), which monitors Internet crimes. Other activities that can be reported

to the cybertripline include possession, manufacture, and distribution of child pornography, sending unsolicited obscene material to a minor, and use of misleading domain names.

As teens prepare to enter the adult social world, online social environments provide training wheels, allowing young people to practice interaction with others in the safety of their homes. Educators should try to provide a balanced view of this process. Rather than sensationalizing the dangers, we need to educate parents about the positive aspects of the Internet as well as about necessary precautions that they and their adolescents can take. Banning social networking sites is unnecessary and would close off adolescents' access to an important space in which to meet their developmental and educational needs.

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