

Mind the (online) gap

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Instant messaging, blogs, Facebook, MySpace — there are limitless ways your child communicates online with the offline world. And the risks and opportunities are only increasing.

A new Tel Aviv University research study has found that, despite what parents might believe, there is an enormous gap between what they think their children are doing online and what is really happening.

In her study, Prof. Dafna Lemish from the Department of Communication at Tel Aviv University surveyed parents and their children about the children's activities on the Internet. "The data tell us that parents don't know what their kids are doing," says Prof. Lemish.

Her study was unique in that parents and children from the same family were surveyed.

In one part of the study, Prof. Lemish surveyed over 500 Jewish and Arab children from a variety of ages and socio-economic backgrounds, asking them if they gave out personal information online. Seventy-three percent said that they do. The parents of the same children believed that only 4 percent of their children did so.

The same children were also asked if they had been exposed to pornography while surfing, or if they had made face-to-face contact with strangers that they had met online. Thirty-six percent from the high school group admitted to meeting with a stranger they had met online. Nearly 40% of these children admitted to speaking with strangers

regularly (within the past week).

Fewer than 9 percent of the parents knew that their children had been meeting with strangers, engaging in what could be viewed as very risky behavior. Prof. Lemish suspects that this gap is wider in the U.S., where children from middle-class backgrounds have more opportunity to surf online privately.

In another part of the study, Prof. Lemish found that 30 percent of children between the ages of 9 and 18 delete the search history from their browsers in an attempt to protect their privacy from their parents. She suggests that common filtering software may not be effective, since children will access what they are looking for elsewhere — at a friend’s house, an Internet café, or school. And if the child accesses dangerous material outside of the home, they will be unprepared and uninformed when it happens, she says.

Prof. Lemish believes that one problem is that parents are not as media-literate as they could be. They don’t have a handle on using popular online software and chat programs, and tend to have no clue about what is really happening online.

But she cautions, “This lack of knowledge on the parents’ part may be no different than the situation before the advent of the Web. Parents don't know what their children are doing on the Net, in the same manner that they don't know what goes on at class, parties, or clubs.”

Prof. Lemish advises that parents should give their children the tools to be literate Internet users, and to navigate around any potential dangers. Most importantly, parents need to talk to their children. “The child needs similar tools that teach them to be weary of dangers in the park, the mall or wherever. The same rules in the real world apply online as well.

“For example, under no circumstances, should a child ever give strangers their private information over the Internet, or meet unsupervised with strangers. Children should be encouraged to tell their parents about Internet encounters that make them uncomfortable. It’s just common sense and parents need to teach them that. Talking with your children regularly is important.”

At the same time, she stresses, parents should not disregard the advantages of the Internet: “We tend to forget that it offers our children a source of independence, a way to explore the world, and helps them meet friends whom they could not meet in their real world. As parents, we need to help them explore the positive opportunities the Internet offers them, and to reduce the risks.”

Source: American Friends of Tel Aviv University

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