

# Survey indicates parents unaware of how their teens use social media

August 14 2009, By Linda Shrieves

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Parents, do you know what your teen is texting? Got any clue what's on her Facebook page? Chances are you don't.

You think they're checking Facebook once a day. The reality? Many are checking it 10 or more times a day.

You think they'd never hack into someone else's online accounts. But a quarter of them have.

You think they'd never pretend to be an adult and talk to strangers online. Nearly one in five has.

Those are the results of a national survey by Common Sense Media, a nonprofit parents organization. James Steyer, the chief executive officer of the organization, says there's a "huge disconnect between parents and [kids](#)," and he argues that parents who are unaware of their kids' habits online are letting them loose in an environment that poses many potential threats.

"Kids and teens today live in a 24-7 digital media environment and it is having a huge impact on their lives," Steyer said. "It affects everything -- from the way they communicate to the way they socialize and to how they learn and behave in school."

Want proof? In June, his organization found that one-third of teenagers admitting to using their cell phones to cheat during school. Yet parents

appeared clueless. Only 3 percent believed their own teen had ever used a [cell phone](#) to cheat.

At Tracy Squadrito's house in Oviedo, Fla., the rules about [social networking](#) are clear: When her son, Hayden, opened a MySpace account several years ago, his parents had to know his password -- and they regularly checked out his site. When he switched and set up a Facebook account, they followed him. Now 16, Hayden accepts his parents' oversight -- even when his mom called out some of his friends for sending inappropriate messages online.

"He thinks it's dorky, but we started that from the beginning and it has always worked," Tracy Squadrito said.

Families like the Squadritos are on the right track, experts say. But other parents need to wake up. At a time when preteens and teens need guidance on appropriate behavior, Steyer said, their parents aren't even sure what the kids are up to \_ especially online.

"The implications for kids and families are simply extraordinary and, as a society, we ignore them at our peril," Steyer said.

While many parents assume the greatest threat comes from sexual predators who are trolling the Internet to meet teens, Steyer says their fears are misplaced.

On the positive side, social networking sites are a relatively safe space for kids to express themselves and communicate with others. It's when teens communicate anonymously or under disguised identities that the risk arises, according to the report. And there are many types of risks online beyond the most obvious bogeymen.

"There's been a real focus on kids meeting a predator online," he said.

"That's a small percentage. Much bigger are the kids who are cyber-bullied or the kids who post semi-nude pictures and later go apply for a job and that picture comes back to haunt them."

Already some kids have felt that sting. In the survey, 39 percent of the teens and preteens surveyed said they'd posted something online that they regretted later.

What's worse, teens often don't seem to realize that what they're typing or posting is out there for everyone to see.

"Conversations that were intended for just a friend or two might spiral out of control and scale to the entire school or, if it is especially embarrassing, the whole world," said Danah Boyd, a social media researcher and fellow at Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet and Society.

While Boyd doesn't see any reason for parents to panic over teens' use of social media, she said that it's easy to copy and paste a conversation from one social medium to another -- which is great for sharing information, but is also at the crux of rumor-spreading.

In the survey, 28 percent of [teens](#) said they had shared personal information about themselves that they would not normally share in public. And 13 percent said they had sent or posted naked or semi-naked photos or videos of themselves or others.

"These are like digital tattoos," Steyer said. "You post a picture of yourself semi-naked and it's there forever. You can't get rid of it."

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## TIPS FOR PARENTS

Parents are the first line of defense when it comes to protecting kids online.

Become more computer and Internet savvy.

Get yourself an account so you can be familiar with the networking sites.

Establish an atmosphere of trust by talking openly about the online risks to their safety .

Watch for changes in your child's behavior (mention of adults you don't know, secretiveness, inappropriate sexual knowledge, sleeping problems, etc.).

Place your computer in an area of your home where you can easily monitor your child's Internet activity.

For more tips: [www.protectkids.com/kidsonline](http://www.protectkids.com/kidsonline)

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