

## Study: Teen bloggers show little risky behavior online

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An Ohio State University study of 100 teen bloggers from around the United States found that the vast majority use blogs to nurture relationships with their peers and build a sense of community -- rather than to admit misbehavior.

This preliminary study suggests that blogging could be used therapeutically to help troubled teens express themselves in positive ways, said Dawn Anderson-Butcher, associate professor of social work at Ohio State.

She and her students examined blog posts from the public Web site Xanga [pronounced "Zanga"; xanga.com] for an entire month, to find out whether teens blogged about risky behaviors, such as skipping school, doing drugs, or having sex.

In the current issue of the *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, they report the contrary: most teens in the study blogged about positive behaviors, such as studying, participating in school activities, spending time with family, and going to church.

"We looked at every quote, and the kids wrote about very few [problem behaviors](#)," Anderson-Butcher said. "They showed a lot of creative expression through poetry, lyrics and song. It was very exciting -- and for me, positive -- to see the typical developmental activities that they were writing about in their blogs."

The blog data in this study came from 2007. Xanga is less popular with teens now, as the majority are "micro-blogging" their activities on [Facebook](#).

Anderson-Butcher said she can't replicate this study on Facebook, however, because unlike Xanga, it offers safety measures to keep strangers from reading kids' profiles. "That's a good thing in relation to privacy," she said. "It just means we aren't able to access the data as freely."

While the researchers couldn't know whether parents were supervising the Xanga blogs used in this study, the teens were clearly writing blog entries as messages to their peers.

Quotes from typical blog postings:

"OK! Now my 4th quarter is startin' and I am sooo scared b/c I didn't start it off very well in honors Geometry and Biology and I'm scared that I'm not gonna get a good grade (A) by end of the year. Plus finals so I'm soooo dead. Pray 4 me guyz!"

"I'm getting my wisdom teeth out Friday, wanna come over and be my nurse? We can play monopoly and listen to music. It'll be great!!"

"Wuts up every1? Just got back from church. Yeah it was oh so exciting. I have to go to church at 5 instead of 7 every Wednesday since I play keyboard in the band."

"Hey, hey, I'm grounded so I'm not gonna be able to post for about a month. Sorry!!!! I'll explain later."

Most of the postings were simply conversations with friends, the researchers found.

"They use blogging the same way my generation used the telephone when we were kids. They're just talking, only now they can talk to each other any time, anywhere," Anderson-Butcher said.

Researchers went through the blog postings and counted how many times the teens mentioned any good or bad behaviors.

Among the most common positive activities the teens described were playing video games (65 percent); watching television (45 percent); doing homework (40 percent); going to lessons, such as music, dance, or martial arts (38 percent); browsing the Internet (29 percent); and participating in faith-based activities (22 percent).

These are traditional youth development activities kids engage in during their out-of-school time, Anderson-Butcher said.

Even the teens' most common complaint -- boredom (65 percent) -- isn't such a bad thing if they are blogging about it instead of engaging in [risky behaviors](#), she added.

"Think about the other things they could be doing. We know that when kids are bored, mostly between the hours of 3:00-6:00 p.m., that's when they're most at risk for using alcohol or having sex, for example. It's the time when their parents are working and they are often unsupervised. But instead these youth sought out social expression via Xanga," she said.

"So that's definitely a positive. They're filling their time with this social networking."

Some teens posted to Xanga every day, while others only posted once or twice during the month used in the study.

Teens did describe some negative feelings, such as feeling blue (30

percent); feeling angry (28 percent); and feeling like they don't fit in (22 percent). They complained that they didn't want to do their homework (16 percent), and worried about getting bad grades (11 percent).

Very few mentioned cutting class (8 percent); using drugs, alcohol, or cigarettes (6 percent); or having sex (1 percent).

Anderson-Butcher stressed that parents should supervise their kids' blogs, perhaps by making such supervision a condition of blogging. That way, parents can notice problems when they come up in the blog.

Her advice: parents can keep an eye on kids' Facebook micro-blogs by being part of their circle of Facebook "friends," or by enlisting the help of another trusted adult who is "friends" with them.

She also sees a potential for social workers to suggest blogging as a tool to support further relationship-building with teens on their caseloads, and maybe even texting as a way for [teens](#) to stay in touch with mentors, coaches, youth workers and therapists.

"I wonder if we have an opportunity for mentoring via the Internet in general. With appropriate boundaries, an adult could text message a kid to offer support between in-person appointments."

Ohio State doctoral student Annahita Ball co-authored the study, along with former students Amber Lasseigne, now a project development specialist with the Fort Worth Independent School District in Texas; Michelle Brzozowski, now outreach director at the North Coast Health Ministry in Cleveland; Megan Lehnert, now a social worker at Maysville Local School District; and Brandy L. McCormick, who is now pursuing a doctoral degree in psychology at the University of Indianapolis.

Provided by The Ohio State University

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