Generation gaps in attitudes towards social networking,cyber safety revealed in study

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A new report on young people's use of social networking and cyber safety reveals that young people may be more aware and better able to manage online risks than their parents commonly think.

The report, released by researchers from the University of Western Sydney, Murdoch University and the Inspire Foundation, is based on the results of a 'Living Lab' experiment involving a group of young people and adults.

As part of the 'Living Lab', young people designed and delivered 3 hour workshops on social networking and cyber safety to adult participants - thereby reversing the traditional roles by positioning the young people as the experts and the adults as the learners.

UWS researchers observed the workshops, finding there was a clear divide between the young people's and adult's perceptions of the value of using social networking services (SNS) and the risks involved with spending time online.

Dr. Amanda Third from the UWS Center for Cultural Research says there are distinct intergenerational attitudes towards young people's use of SNS.

"Prior to the Living Lab, the young people perceived adults as being largely opposed to SNS and oblivious to the positive impacts for young people of creating and maintaining online networks," says Dr. Third.

"They felt their parents saw the internet as a dangerous place and believed they were ill-prepared to recognise and respond to potential risks."

For the adults, Dr. Third says the key concerns were regarding privacy settings, how much personal information young people were putting online, and whether their online social interactions were cheapening their friendships or limiting opportunities to socialise face-to-face.

"However, following the workshops, the young people recognised the value of sharing their knowledge of SNS with adults and the adults felt reassured that the young people were equipped better than anticipated to deal with the risks they face in their online lives," she says.

"In particular, adults realised that the same values shape young people's behaviour online as well as offline."

Dr. Phillipa Collin from the UWS Center for Citizenship and Public Policy says mobile phones, the internet and social networking are deeply embedded in young people's everyday lives.

"Young people don't experience a division between the online and offline," says Dr. Collin.

"So it is absolutely critical that parents, schools and governments invest in strategies that ensure young people have great media literacy - and what this research shows is that, particularly in the context of the internet, parents need this too."

Rather than policing what their children are doing online, Dr. Collin said parents would benefit from having conversations with their children and developing an understanding about the ways they negotiate their online lives.

"Our research shows that young people are a critical resource to parents and the community in understanding how to address online risks and promote [cyber safety](#). It shows that some young people have a very high awareness of the risks and how to deal with them effectively. We need to make sure that all members of the community develop this level of awareness and skill."

More information: The complete report, 'Intergenerational attitudes towards social networking and cyber safety', is available for download from 5 April 2011 at: www.interactivemediarelease.com/ogilvy/yawcrc

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