

# Parents should try to find middle ground to keep teens safe online

March 20 2014, by Matt Swayne

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(Medical Xpress)—Parents might take a lesson from Goldilocks and find a balanced approach to guide their teens in making moral, safe online decisions, according to Penn State researchers.

In a study on parenting strategies and online adolescent safety, the researchers found evidence that suggests that [parents](#) should try to establish a middle ground between keeping their teens completely away from the internet not monitoring their online activities at all.

"It's a Goldilocks problem," said Pamela Wisniewski, a postdoctoral scholar in information sciences and technology. "Overly restrictive parents limit the positive online experiences a teen can have, but overly permissive parents aren't putting the right types of demands on their children to make good choices."

Active mediation and monitoring online behavior, not blanket rules, may be a better strategy.

"Parents should have some level of monitoring their teens online usage, but not necessarily in a covert way because that may create trust problems," said Wisniewski, who works with Mary Beth Rosson, professor; John M. Carroll, Distinguished Professor and Heng Xu, associate professor, all of [information sciences](#) and technology.

Ideally, parents would start to work with their teens to guide their [moral development](#) in making decisions about online behavior when their

children are young. The earlier the better, according to Wisniewski.

"By the time they are age 16 or 17, it's probably too late to jump in and start to intervene," said Wisniewski.

Parents who learn more about technology can better guide their children, according to the researchers, who presented their findings at the recent Computer Supported Cooperative Work conference in Baltimore.

"Our analysis also suggests that parents' level of digital literacy moderates their mediation strategies," the researchers noted. "Parents who knew more about [technology](#) tended to be more actively engaged in their teens' online behaviors while parents who were less technically inclined tended to be more in favor of restricting how their teens engaged with others online."

The researchers studied the parenting styles and mediation strategies of 12 pairs of parents and their teen children, who ranged in age from 13 to 17. They interviewed the children and parents separately about online activities such as illegal downloading, cyber bullying and identity theft.

The researchers assessed responses to 270 statements on moral behavior based on a common six-staged chart of moral development used by psychologists. They also analyzed 555 parental statements that indicated their parenting and mediation styles, from authoritarian with active mediation to indulgent with little mediation.

Most of the younger teens were more compliant to parents—considered stage one of the moral development scale—while older teens tended to make moral decisions by weighing personal rewards and punishment—a second stage strategy on the scale.

The researchers are currently conducting a study with a larger group of

parents and teens. Eventually, these studies could help software designers create online monitoring software that helps parents actively engage with their teens in developing moral guidelines for online behavior, as opposed to just imposing restrictions on [teens](#)' online activities.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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