

Abstinence may not be the best policy for avoiding online risk

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The online world is full of risky situations for teens, but allowing them to gradually build their own coping strategies may be a better parental strategy than forbidding internet use, according to a team of researchers.

The researchers, who monitored web-based diaries of a group of 68 teen internet users during the two-month study, said the [teens](#) reported they encountered 207 risky events, including [sexual solicitations](#) and online harassment, said Pamela Wisniewski, formerly a post-doctoral scholar in information sciences and technology, Penn State, and currently an assistant professor in computer science at the University of Central Florida. However, in many cases, teens were able to resolve the issues on their own.

While the media may continue to focus on cases of online risk that had tragic consequences, the diary entries showed that many teens routinely handle some risky situations on their own.

"Focusing on the more positive interactions dealing with online risk flips this debate on its head and turns the conversation from one of parents trying to keep their teens safe to maybe there's more we can do to teach teens how to keep themselves safe," said Wisniewski.

Teens, in fact, did not see much of a difference between online risks and the risks they encounter in real-life social settings, she added.

"As adults we see these online situations as problems, as negative risk

experiences, but teens see them as par-for-the-course experiences," said Wisniewski.

The researchers suggest that teens may be better off gradually acclimating to online risk and building resilience by overcoming lower risk situations, rather than avoiding exposure to risks, which is a more commonly recommended tactic today. Parents and caretakers can act as guides in the process.

"In the past, we tended to focus on the higher risk events, not the medium risk events, but I think there's a missed opportunity for learning some of the coping strategies that teens use in lower risk situations," said Wisniewski. "So, if they are exposed to a higher risk event, they may be able to exercise some of the skills they already learned."

She added that avoiding the internet is not a realistic option for most teens. According to a 2015 Pew Research Center survey, 92 percent of teens have access to the internet daily and 89 percent have at least one active social media account.

The researchers, who present their findings at the ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems today (May 11), recruited 68 teens, ages 13- to 17-years old, to enter first-hand accounts of their online experiences in a web-based diary. The experiences were divided into four risk categories: information breaches, online harassment, sexual solicitations and exposure to explicit content.

Of the 207 events the teens entered into their diaries as risky encounters, there were 119 reports of exposure to explicit content, 31 information breaches, 29 sexual solicitations and 28 incidents of online harassment.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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