

# Kids want parental help with online risk, but fear parental freak outs

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Although it may come as no surprise to the Fresh Prince, kids think that

parents just don't understand what it is like to be a teen in an internet-connected world and this lack of understanding may hinder the development of skills necessary to safely navigate online, according to a team of researchers.

In a study, [teens](#) rarely talked to their parents about potentially risky [online](#) experiences, according to 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. She added that parents and children often have much different perceptions of and reactions to the same online situations. Some of these situations may include cyberbullying, sexual exchanges and viewing inappropriate content online.

"There seems to be a disconnect between what types of situations teens experience every day and what types of experiences parents have online," said Wisniewski. "Teens tended to be more nonchalant and say that the incident made them embarrassed, while parents, even though they were reporting more low-risk events, emoted much stronger feelings, becoming angry and scared. For teens, some felt these types of experiences were just par for the course."

The researchers suggest that this disconnect may lead teens to refrain from talking about situations that may upset their parents.

"When you asked why teens didn't talk to their parents, a lot of times they mention risky situations, which they didn't think were a big deal, but they add that if they told their parents, they would just freak out and make things worse," Wisniewski said.

She added that while overreacting may curb communication, parents should avoid acting dismissive when a teen does come to them with an issue.

"When teens actually talked to their parents about what had happened, they often wanted help understanding or navigating the situation, but parents tended to misinterpret their intent, not realizing that their teens were trying to open lines of communication," said Wisniewski. "It seemed like a missed opportunity. One of the takeaways for parents, then, is that if their teen goes to them with something that they are experiencing online, parents might realize that there are likely other events that their teen doesn't come to them about. If it's important enough for the teen to bring up to the parent, it may be important enough to use as a teachable, yet nonjudgmental, moment."

The researchers, who present their findings at the ACM Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing today (Feb. 27), suggest that parental reactions—both over reactions or under reactions—may not just thwart teens from seeking their parents' help with a current problem, but also diminish the teens' ability to successfully navigate future online encounters that may be even more risky.

"Parental engagement can serve as teachable moments and increase the teens' resilience in safely interacting online and in social media," Wisniewski added.

A total of 136 participants—68 parents and their teens—completed diaries about their online experiences during the study. The participants filled out a pre-survey, post-survey and eight weekly diary entries. Each week, [parents](#) and teens were expected to report on four potential types of online risks—information breaches, online harassment and bullying, sexual solicitations and exposure to explicit content—that they may have encountered during the week.

"The important point here is that the parent and the teen could both report on the same event, the teen could report on an event that the

parent didn't report on and the parent could report on an event that the teen didn't report on," said Wisniewski.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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