

Online security apps focus on parental control, not teen self-regulation

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Mobile apps designed to keep teens safe online are overwhelmingly focused on parental control, which may be only a short-term solution that hinders a teen's ability to learn coping strategies in the long run,

according to a team of researchers.

In a study of 74 Android mobile apps designed to promote adolescent [online](#) safety, the researchers said that 89 percent of security features on the apps are focused on [parental control](#), while about 11 percent supported teen self-regulation.

"The apps are focused on what the phone is capable of doing and how parents can restrict and monitor those capabilities," 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. "I equate this to a governor on a vehicle that will only let you drive at a certain speed limit. In a way, the app's just trying to monitor or restrict—or act like a governor on—what the mobile phone is designed to do."

The security features aim at online activities that teens are most likely to engage in, for example, using a browser or app, texting, or accessing social media.

While these features may initially help curb unwanted activity they do not improve communication between parents and their children, or help teens develop the necessary skills to navigate the online world in the long run, according to the researchers, who present their findings at findings at the ACM Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing today (Feb. 27).

"These features weren't helping parents actually mediate what their teens are doing online," said Wisniewski. "They weren't enhancing communication, or helping a teen become more self-aware of his or her behavior."

Without this type of instruction, teens may find it difficult to develop

strategies to cope with future online encounters, she added.

The researchers suggest that app designers incorporate features that balance both parental control with teen self-regulation.

"These parental control features may not even be congruent with most parenting styles," said Wisniewski. "Parents probably don't feel comfortable policing every text message their teen sends, or want to set tight restrictions on what their teen can or cannot do on the phone. I believe that parents want ways to be engaged in what their teen is doing and give them the autonomy to learn from what they're doing."

The researchers conducted online searches of Android apps on the Google Play app store. They used keyword terms such as, "teen safety," "online safety," "cyberbullying" and "sexting." They then examined apps that were found in the "similar apps" section. They continued this process until no new relevant apps were identified.

Over half—59 percent—were free for download, 24 percent had a limited free trial period and 16 percent had both a free and paid version.

The researchers said they expect similar results from Apple iOS products. Wisniewski found similar parental control-dominated apps during an initial review of Apple products.

Wisniewski worked with Arup Kumar Ghosh, doctoral student in computer science, University of Central Florida; Heng Xu, associate professor of information sciences and technology; Mary Beth Rosson, professor of information science and technology and interim Dean of the College of Information Sciences and Technology and John M. Carroll, distinguished professor of [information sciences](#) and technology, all of Penn State.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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