# the net EFFECT

## Girls and New Media

Executive Summary

**Girl Scouts**

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**Girl Scouts.**
Where Girls Grow Strong.

# contents

# introduction

## Research Background and Objectives

The girls who participated in this study belong to the "Cyber Generation," a label that ties them to the ongoing technological revolution that exploded in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Unlike some of their older brothers and sisters, the teens of the Cyber Generation began using computers in elementary school or even earlier; thus, computer technology is an integral part of their social and academic lives.

As a result of this early immersion in computer technology, teenagers today embrace many different forms of online communication. Unlike adults, who mainly rely on e-mail, teenagers are quick to adopt new forms of online communication, such as instant messaging (IM) and MP3 technology to download music (Lenhart, et al., 2001). Teenagers today often possess more computer skills than their parents, and this disparity causes many parents to worry about what their children do online (Guernsey, 2001). At the same time, this information gap between the generations prevents parents from being able to offer their teenage children the instruction they need about the Internet.

Although much research is available about how many teenage girls are online and what sites they frequent, scant attention has been paid to how the Internet and the large amount of time girls spend online affect their social and emotional lives. Most recently, the Pew Internet & American Life Project released a study (Lenhart, et al., 2001) on teenage life online, specifically reporting on the Internet's impact on the friendships and family relationships of teenage girls and boys. The research in this study provides a more focused look at the Internet lives of teenage girls and a more in-depth portrayal of the Internet's effect on girls' social and emotional lives.

**The objectives of *The Net Effect: Girls and New Media* are to:**

❥ **Identify how the Internet has been integrated into the emotional lives and communication patterns of girls ages 13-18.**

❥ **Provide an overview of areas of concern girls are experiencing from being online as well as the positive effects of their online behavior.**

❥ **Suggest ways in which adults who live and work with girls can aid girls in making their time online a more positive, safe, and rewarding experience.**

This research explores a full range of issues and concerns that girls face in their online lives. The topics examined in the overall study include:

❥ How girls are using the Internet as a communication tool.

❥ The Internet and girls' academic lives.

❥ The advice girls receive about the Internet from adults in their lives.

❥ Sexual harassment and online sexual content.

❥ The prevalence of online romances and relationships.

❥ Using the Internet for emotional communication.

❥ Negotiating right and wrong on the Internet.

❥ Internet safety and online privacy.

Additionally, this research focuses on the discrepancies between girls who have frequent online access and those who have limited access. Girls were encouraged to reflect on:

❥ Whether the Internet has a different effect on the social lives of girls with limited online access than on the social lives of girls who spend a great deal of time online.

❥ Whether Internet proficiency has an effect on their current lives as well as their futures.

# Methodology

The overall study contains data collected from 1,246 teenage girls ages 13–18 over a three-month period (May – July) in 2001. Several methodologies were used in order to achieve the research objectives of this study. Research consisted of:

❥ Small *focus group interviews* that were conducted in four target cities representing the Northeast, the Midwest, the South, and the Southwest. Seventy-one girls participated in the focus group sessions.

❥ *Journal research*, which consisted of personalized journals that were mailed out to girls across the country. These journals contained individual activities and questions about Internet patterns, usage, and behavior. The journal research expanded on salient topics from the focus groups, such as online dating and parental rules. Eighty-eight girls participated in the journal research.

❥ A 27-question *written survey*, which was taken by a total of 153 focus group and journal participants.

❥ A 30-question *online survey*, which was posted on www.planetgirl.com and www.girlscouts.org. This survey was completed by 1,087 girls.

# Sample

Research participants were separated into three different categories based on three levels of Internet usage: frequent, moderate, and infrequent. Frequent users (67 percent) were defined as girls who were online seven days a week, usually two or three times a day, using home Internet connections. Moderate users (32 percent) were defined as girls who went online approximately every few days, and who spent between 15 minutes to an hour online in a typical log-on session. While the majority of moderate users had home access, they used the computer far less than frequent users. Infrequent users (1 percent) were defined as girls with very little access to or experience with computers and the Internet. They were unlikely to have home computers and only went online at school. Infrequent users made up the smallest part of this research, as the project focused predominantly on how the Internet has affected the social and emotional lives of girls who have home online access.

The overall racial and ethnic breakdown of the research participants is as follows: White/Caucasian (60 percent), African American (16 percent), Hispanic/Latina (10 percent), Asian American/Pacific Islander (8 percent), Native American (4 percent), Other (1 percent), Undetermined (1 percent).

# summary
## OF FINDINGS

# The Internet Is a Powerful Tool in Girls' Daily Lives, but Girls Are "Driving Without a License."

Internet communication technology is a pervasive part of girls' lives. On average, girls report going online two to three times a week, with dedicated users going online several times a day. **Although it has not replaced the telephone or face-to-face communication, the Internet, with its e-mail and Instant Messenger (IM) features, is a powerful socializing and communication tool, and is an integral part of girls' online experience.** Girls appear to spend the majority of their time online socializing. Personal research, including searching for song lyrics and school research, are other uses they find for the Internet. Many girls also report using the Internet when they are "bored."

Research has also shown that girls discuss similar topics online and off-line: boys and romance, school discussions, and social plans. Additionally, they talk about personal problems, such as family fights or depression, and socially relevant topics, such as drugs or current events.

**The majority of girls in this study describe girls who are computer-savvy in a positive light, using terms such as "smart," "fun," and "social."** When assessing how computer-savvy girls view other girls who lack their computer skills, however, there is an interesting distinction. While moderate users choose very negative words, such as "clueless," "boring," and "left out," most frequent users list words such as "smart," "busy," and "interesting," implying that girls who do not use the computer to socialize are probably healthier, spend more time outdoors, and have a better social life than girls who are online all the time. These responses suggest

that frequent users worry more than moderate users about the negative effects of spending too much time online. However, the majority of girls agree that girls who do not spend much time on the computer risk being regarded as unqualified for good jobs in the future because of this lack of experience.

Because girls overall do use the Internet often, they tend to see themselves as the most computer-savvy members of their households.

### Who Is the Savviest Computer User in Your Household?[1]

| | |
|---|---|
| You | 58% |
| Your Mother | 14% |
| Your Brother | 12% |
| Your Father | 11% |
| Your Sister | 5% |
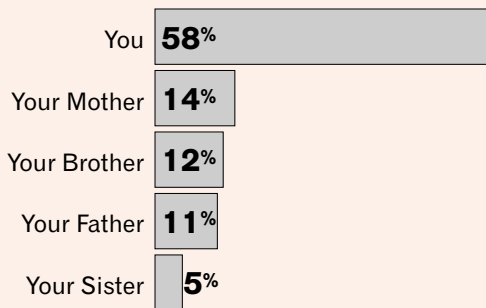
**Most girls in the overall study report that they receive very little pertinent and valuable Internet advice from the adults in their lives.** In fact, only 50 percent of girls in the written survey report receiving Internet advice from their parents. Girls feel that their parents (and their teachers as well) often know far less than teenage girls in general about computer technology and so cannot understand what they do online. **When parental advice is given, it is usually about online safety, and it is often limited to the following four directives:**

- ❣ **Don't give out personal information.**
- ❣ **Don't go to certain Web sites.**
- ❣ **Only respond to e-mail addresses you recognize.**
- ❣ **Don't talk to strangers.**

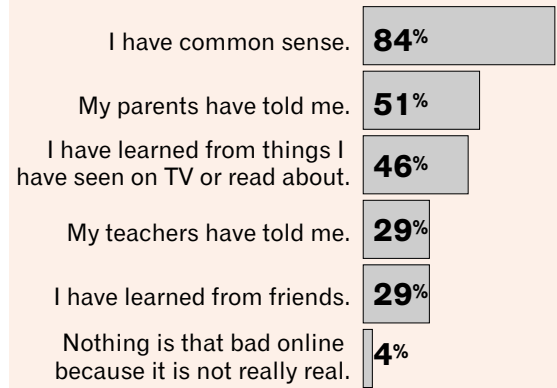Girls seldom receive more specific guidance from adults in their lives about what is safe or unsafe behavior online. In the online survey, 84 percent of girls report that they make their own decisions about online safety based on "common sense." Similarly, girls in the focus

groups and the journal research group responded almost unanimously that they know right from wrong online because they have "common sense."

### How Do You Know What Is Safe and Unsafe Behavior on the Internet? (Choose All That Apply.)[2]

| | |
|---|---|
| I have common sense. | 84% |
| My parents have told me. | 51% |
| I have learned from things I have seen on TV or read about. | 46% |
| My teachers have told me. | 29% |
| I have learned from friends. | 29% |
| Nothing is that bad online because it is not really real. | 4% |

Girls do often have a fair amount of common sense when it comes to what is right and wrong on the Internet. However, common sense cannot cover every situation. **For example, girls often fail to see online crime as serious because it is in the realm of cyberspace. Girls also have difficulty assessing the legal penalties for those who commit online crime.**

In addition to being somewhat naïve, teenage girls are also still emotionally vulnerable. They report grappling with issues such as whether or not to enter into "cyber romances" and how to react to online sexual harassment. Additionally, girls are bombarded with online porn that they frequently describe as "sickening," "morally wrong," and "not my thing." They receive "spam" e-mails with porn links and often accidentally go to porn sites when looking for "legitimate" teen sites. When asked how they felt when they accidentally brought up porn sites, girls responded:

*"It was like a car crash. You want to look away but can't." (Age 14)*

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1 This question came from the written survey, with 148 girls responding.
2 This question came from the online survey, with 1,087 girls responding.

*"I think these sites were put on the Web to corrupt society." (Age 13)*

*"It was kind of disturbing, but I realized it was just a color picture of the human anatomy." (Age 13)*

**These comments from girls reveal that while they are not seeking out online porn, which they find disturbing, they are still frequently exposed to it.** Although girls in general are technologically savvy, they are often too emotionally immature to be able to process the information they receive online, especially when it is about topics such as sex and drugs.
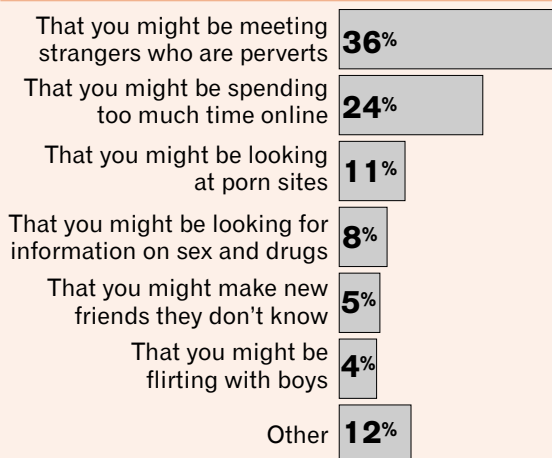
**An examination of girls' responses makes clear that most advice and rules girls receive about the Internet are in the form of prohibitive statements, rather than proactive advice about real-life situations that occur for them online.** Additionally, the majority of advice from parents comes in preparation for receiving a home Internet connection. Once girls receive a home connection, the amount of parental advice they receive drops. **Because girls are forced to navigate potentially difficult or emotional situations online with little pertinent and useful advice, they are in effect driving the information highway without a license.**

# Girls Want Adults to Fully Understand Their Online Lives

The computer knowledge differential between girls and their parents creates situations in which parents worry about being unable to understand girls' online lives. While parents do not give girls much in-depth Internet advice, they are concerned that their daughters will get into dangerous situations online. Girls sense this parental fear; 45 percent of girls in the online survey report that parents worry about the same issues as they do. What exactly are parents worrying about, however?

While girls understand why their parents worry, they want some recognition from their parents of their computer knowledge and common sense. **For example, although girls report being able to do many things online without parental knowledge, the majority feel they are "too smart" to do bad things and feel that they deserve more respect and trust from their parents.**

### What Worries Your Parents Most About What You Do Online?[3]

| | |
|---|---|
| That you might be meeting strangers who are perverts | **36**% |
| That you might be spending too much time online | **24**% |
| That you might be looking at porn sites | **11**% |
| That you might be looking for information on sex and drugs | **8**% |
| That you might make new friends they don't know | **5**% |
| That you might be flirting with boys | **4**% |
| Other | **12**% |

### What Could You Do Online Without Your Parents' Knowledge? (Choose All That Apply.)[4]

| | |
|---|---|
| Chat in a chat room | **86**% |
| Read your parents' e-mail | **57**% |
| Carry on a cyber love | **54**% |
| Set up a meeting with someone you met online | **46**% |
| Get into a porn site | **42**% |
| Buy something online | **38**% |
| Copy software | **26**% |
| Hack into your school's computer | **18**% |
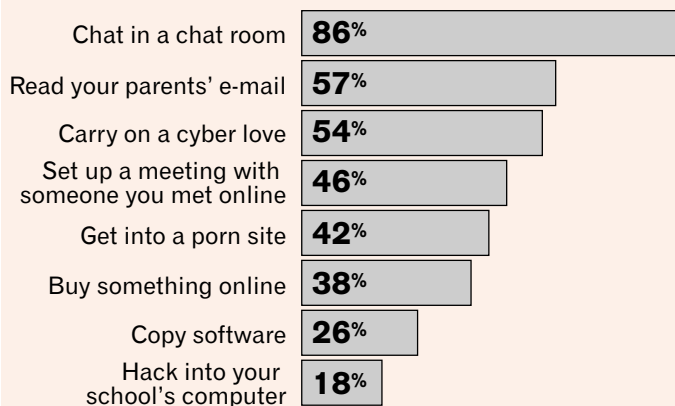
3 This question came from the online survey, with 569 girls responding.
4 This question came from both the written and online surveys, with 1,235 girls responding.

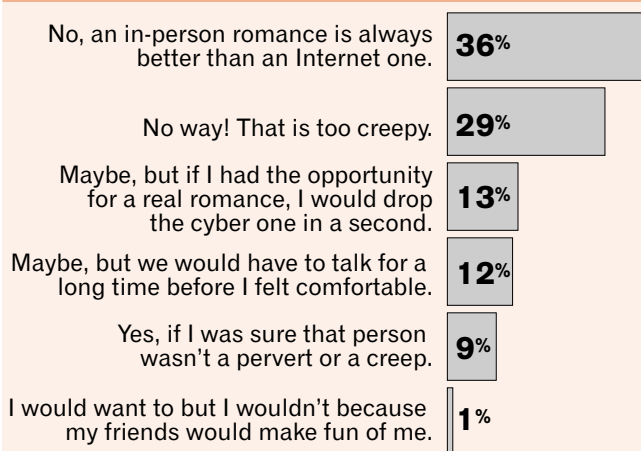While girls *could* do these things online behind their parents' backs, the majority feel that they are aware of how potentially dangerous these behaviors could also be. For example, 71 percent of girls in the online survey state that it is wrong to meet people off-line they have initially met through online communications. Out of 75 participants in the focus groups, only two girls report meeting a stranger in person they had initially met online. Citing another example, while 61 percent of girls in the online survey and 49 percent of girls in the written survey report being able to start a cyber romance if they wanted to, the majority of girls avoid these relationships, which they generally view negatively.

### If You Met Someone You Really Liked in a Chat Room, Would You Ever Consider That Person for a Cyber Romance?[5]

| | |
|---|---|
| No, an in-person romance is always better than an Internet one. | **36**% |
| No way! That is too creepy. | **29**% |
| Maybe, but if I had the opportunity for a real romance, I would drop the cyber one in a second. | **13**% |
| Maybe, but we would have to talk for a long time before I felt comfortable. | **12**% |
| Yes, if I was sure that person wasn't a pervert or a creep. | **9**% |
| I would want to but I wouldn't because my friends would make fun of me. | **1**% |

Girls in their journals were asked to provide advice to other teenage girls about online romances. The most frequent tips included:

▼ **Be careful!** Girls urge other girls to be safe online by not giving out personal information such as an address, phone number, city of residence, or last name that could lead someone to identify them.

▼ **Don't meet strangers!** Most girls acknowledge that face-to-face meetings are potentially dangerous.

▼ **Don't get too carried away!** Girls encourage other girls to be sensible about online relationships, that is, to realize that the persons they are communicating with might be misrepresenting themselves. Girls add a general warning — don't do anything in an online relationship that will make you uncomfortable.

▼ **Know who you are talking to!** They encourage other girls to "get to know the real him" by asking lots of personal questions about past relationships and life history.

**Despite the rare occurrence of cyber romances, girls do think about cyber relationships a great deal. Many report making good friends online and feeling frustrated about being unable to tell their parents, who, girls think, "won't understand."** As one girl argued, *"Not everyone online is a crazy!"*

Girls are also offended at the idea that their parents think they are seeking out porn. One 15-year-old girl in the focus group recounts confronting her mother's suspicion that she was looking at porn online with male friends: *"I told her that thinking I would go to those sites was degrading to me."* Another 13-year-old said parents did not need to worry about girls going to porn sites because *"anyone in their right mind wouldn't go to those sick places."* **Girls feel that their parents' worry about "bad" sites reflects their lack of experience with computers. If their parents were more computer-savvy, they would understand how easily porn comes up without girls seeking it out, girls believe.**

As previously stated, girls are remarkably computer-savvy and often do exhibit common sense. However, they are still teenagers and lack the emotional development necessary to navigate some difficult and powerful situations that may arise online. For example, while 42 percent of girls in the online survey

5 This question came from the online survey, with 1,078 girls responding.

expect people they meet in chat rooms to lie, they appear to have difficulty accepting that someone they bond with emotionally could be lying to them. **Although many teenage girls act way beyond their years, most are still naïve and vulnerable, and they appear to be especially swayed by online friends who express caring and emotional sentiments toward them.** Additionally, while cyber romances are rare, sometimes face-to-face interactions do occur, which reveals that girls' common sense does not always prevail in complex situations.

# Girls Are Aware of Internet Dangers, but Will Benefit from Proactive Rather than Reactive Advice from Adults

Girls often have Internet rules set down by the adults in their lives with which they must comply.

### Do Your Parents Have Rules About the Internet for You?[6]

Yes **75%**

No **25%**

Some parents give specific rules, such as:

♥ Time limits.
♥ No online chatting.
♥ No shopping online.
♥ No cyber romances or face-to-face meetings.

However, girls are often able to get around parental rules due to their overwhelming computer skills as well as their parents' lack of Internet knowledge. For example, **while 75 percent of girls in the online survey report being given Internet rules by their parents, 43 percent also report breaking those rules at least once.**

### Have You Ever Broken Any of Those Rules?[7]

No **57%**

Yes **43%**
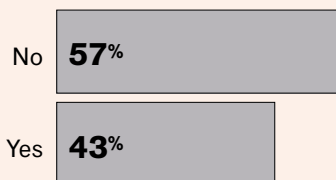
While girls in the focus groups report rarely being caught for rule violations, not all girls escape punishment. Girls who have been grounded from the Internet appear to get punished mainly for breaking computer rules, such as staying online too long and running up large phone bills. As these are valid computer-related offenses, girls in the focus groups generally see being grounded from the Internet as a fair punishment that "fits the crime:"

*"Being grounded from IM was the worst!" (Age 14)*

*"I behaved well after [being grounded] because I need [the Internet]." (Age 14)*

6 This question came from the online survey, with 1,086 girls responding.
7 This question came from the online survey, with 1,018 girls responding.

The same punishment is seen as unfair (or ineffective), however, when it is not for a valid computer-related offense. **Often girls report being punished for computer rule violations that they do not see as their fault, such as accidentally bringing up porn sites.** Several girls wrote about embarrassing situations such as these:

*"The most embarrassing story that I have experienced on the Internet is when I had to do a project on a president on www.whitehouse.gov and instead I went to a porn site and my mom was right there."*
*(Age 13)*

*"One time I was looking for a teen magazine site and I looked under teen.com and it was porn. My parents saw and I was absolutely mortified."*
*(Age 14)*

**It is important to note that while girls want their parents to be more realistic about the Internet, they do not advocate less parental advice. Rather, they are concerned that their parents worry too much about the wrong things. Girls were asked to list things they think parents don't worry about enough in regard to girls and the Internet. The most common responses were:**

- ❥ **What information girls could access online if they wanted to.**
- ❥ **What kind of people girls could come into contact with online.**
- ❥ **Girls' behavior online, especially lying and cursing.**
- ❥ **Practical worries, such as hackers and viruses.**

In general, girls feel that parents are too worried about IM, chat rooms, and girls giving out too much personal information online. One girl writes that parents keep teenage daughters "on lockdown." Another girl writes

that parents should relax because *"we just use it for socializing."* This comment reflects the fact that girls mainly use the Internet to talk to existing school friends, not to seek out older men online. Girls also feel that they are savvy enough not to give out too much information, such as addresses, phone numbers, or last names. Though girls acknowledge that lying is wrong, they add that most of their lies center on their attempts to keep themselves safe online:

*"I think parents are too worried. They think we know nothing about the dangers and we really know more than they do." (Age 15)*

*"I would tell parents not to worry so much. Most of us just want to go on and chat with our friends. The parents who are worried about porn and sex and violent sites should also not worry because most of us don't care for that stuff." (Age 15)*

**Girls are extremely aware of Internet dangers. At the same time, girls feel that parents underestimate their level of awareness about online risks.** When girls were asked to assess what possible dangers existed from chatting with strangers, they were quick to recount horror stories they had heard in the media about teenage girls who were kidnapped or sexually abused by strangers they had met online:

*"You could be talking to a rapist and they could come to your house and rape you." (Age 15)*

Additionally, girls are aware of the possibility of accidentally talking to sexually perverted older men who pass themselves off as teenagers online:

*"I've heard horror stories about 40-year-old men who pretend they are 15."* (Age 15)

*"You could be talking to some perverted 50-year-old man sitting around in his boxers."* (Age 18)

All of the girls in the study were asked what they did to remain safe online. The majority report withholding any information that is "too personal." Girls would be willing to give out their first name, their age, and the state in which they live but not their last name, city, or phone number. Girls also feel relatively comfortable giving out e-mail addresses to boys they meet online but not cell phone or house phone numbers. The majority of girls also see mailing pictures to strangers as unsafe. Additionally, many have learned to use blocking software as protection from anyone who harasses them online. Other girls remain safe online by not talking to strangers at all and by avoiding chat rooms.

Just over 80 percent of journal participants report that they do feel safe online. In general, however, girls do not deny the fact that real problems do occur for girls on the Internet. Girls were asked if they themselves have ever been sexually harassed online:

Have You Ever Been Sexually Harassed in a Chat Room?[8]

| | |
|---|---|
| No | **70%** |
| Yes | **30%** |

Harassment comes in many different forms, ranging from being asked for bra sizes to being sent unwanted naked pictures of men. Additionally, girls frequently report being asked to "cyber," which is slang for having cyber sex.

*"I hate that. Guys'll ask your bra size and stuff like that and it is stupid."* (Age 15)

*"I just hate all the chat room guys who ask you what you are wearing and if you want to cyber. It is so stupid!"* (Age 16)

*"I was in a chat and this guy IM'd me. He told me all this stuff about himself but then he started saying really perverted stuff."* (Age 13)

**These comments reveal that girls are annoyed by both the unwanted sexual attention they receive in chat rooms and the frequency with which "perverted" comments are made to them online.**

Those who have been harassed shared the following stories:

*"Some guy kept asking me if we could have cyber sex and I kept saying no but he kept asking. I got really scared and blocked him. He was so persistent and scary that he wouldn't go away. If it wasn't for the blocking feature, I probably wouldn't feel that safe."* (Age 15)

*"A guy threatened to come to my town if I didn't have cyber sex with him."* (Age 13)

8 This question came from the online survey, with 1,079 girls responding.

*"There was one guy who kept telling me I was beautiful, sexy, and hot, and that he wanted to meet me. Even though I kept saying no, he kept giving me his pager number and telling me to call him." (Age 14)*

*"I was chatting with two people who were friends [with each other] and after talking to them for like an hour, one of the guys (I didn't know them) told me that his friend had hacked into my computer and knew where I lived, and he told me that he was incredibly horny and was going to come find me." (Age 16)*

**Despite the frightening or threatening nature of this harassment, most girls who have experienced harassment express a reluctance to tell their parents.**

### If You Have Been Sexually Harassed, What Did You Do?[9]

| | |
|---|---|
| Just got out of the [chat] room. I didn't tell anyone. | **30%** |
| Got mad at the harasser and wrote a nasty note back. | **28%** |
| Nothing. This happens all the time and is no big deal. | **21%** |
| I told my friends. | **14%** |
| I told my mom or dad immediately. | **7%** |

**Only 7 percent of girls in the online survey and two girls out of the 71 in the focus groups report telling their mothers or fathers about the harassment.**

*"[I met] a guy online and gave him my number so he called me and said that if I hung up before he was ready, he'd begin to stalk me, in person. But I didn't want to tell my parents so I didn't." (Age 16)*
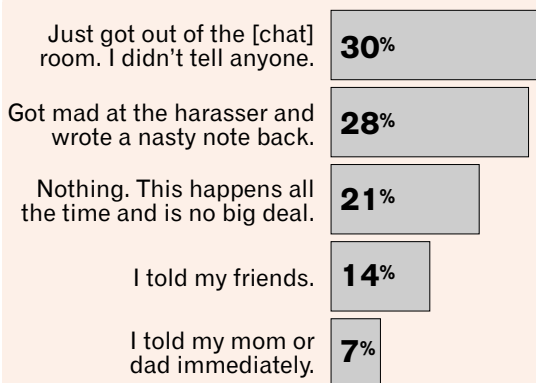
This hesitancy to tell parents about harassment appears to stem from a fear that parents will overreact and ban girls from socializing online. For this reason, most girls keep quiet about online harassment, unless it is extremely scary. **Thus, if adults want girls to come to them when they have frightening online experiences, they need to create an environment in which girls do not feel that they will be blamed or punished for sexual harassment that is not their fault.** Girls advise parents to be realistic and address actual problems their daughters are experiencing, even if it is scary to them. For example, one girl writes, *"Talk to kids about online romance because it will eventually happen."*

Overall, with respect to online activity, girls report that they want parents to:

❥ Teach them to have responsibility.
❥ Educate them about possible dangers.
❥ Be cautious but not too cautious.
❥ Trust them.

**Girls often feel "freaked out" by the information they can access online, such as information about sex and drugs. They also often do not know what to do when they are sexually harassed in chat rooms or asked on a "cyber date."** While teenage girls today are cognitively able to understand much of the information they read online, as the GSUSA report on preteen girls titled *Teens Before Their Time* (Roban, 2000) reveals, girls often do not have the emotional development to process all the information they come across. Specifically, girls' lack of emotional maturity can lead to the desire to trust online strangers who

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9 This question came from the online survey, with 611 girls responding.

express similar interests, problems, or concerns. **With little adult advice that is relevant to their online lives, girls are often put in emotionally complex situations with limited guidance.**

Although it does appear that parents are aware of Internet dangers and do offer their daughters some cautionary advice, this advice is generally reactive rather than proactive. Girls need help processing emotionally complex situations that unavoidably arise online rather than receiving blame or punishment for these situations.

**Because many girls inevitably come across emotionally charged situations such as sexual harassment and online porn, they are seeking ways to avoid these incidents or process them when they do arise. Such information from adults is more valuable to them than prohibitive comments and punishment. Thus, girls need less "don't do it" and more "let's work through this" from parents. The result will be an environment in which girls do not have to keep secrets but instead can feel safe confiding in their parents about negative situations they encounter online.**

# Empowered with Knowledge and Pertinent Advice, Girls Will Successfully Navigate Both Positive and Negative Experiences Online

Despite Internet dangers such as stalkers and sexual harassment, girls report having mainly positive experiences online and tend to feel empowered and very safe on the Internet. Some comments girls made about the Internet include:

*"It is an excellent way to become closer to people, talk to people who are far away, talk to people you are scared of talking to in person, and ask questions you need to ask but can't in person or on the phone." (Age 13)*

*"I think the Internet is like another world. You can get on it and never get off. You can be a whole new person. The only thing I don't agree with is the extreme dependence that people have on the Internet. They can't live without it. It's their lives. I once heard that technology made the world a harder place to live in. But all in all, the Internet has opened the window for people to do things that would have been harder to do without it." (Age 14)*

*"The Internet is a wonderful thing. You can keep in touch with friends, meet new people, exchange information, and have great fun! Connecting to the world is great but since you are connected with the world and its information, the world is also able to obtain your information, so be safe!!"*
*(Age 15)*

In addition to communicating with friends and doing school and personal research, girls are also able to use the Internet to get more information about topics they know little or nothing about. For example, one girl researched eating disorders when she thought a friend was anorexic. **In general, girls see the Internet as a way to get information that they might be embarrassed to ask about in person.**

Because girls can communicate emotions online that they find difficult to express in face-to-face conversations, **using the Internet to fight with friends or discuss potentially emotional subjects is extremely common among girls in the overall study.** Fifty-four percent of frequent users and 38 percent of moderate users prefer using e-mail for emotional confrontations with friends, and 52 percent of frequent users say they feel more comfortable expressing their emotions online than in person or through other means of communication. These findings correspond with other research that has been done that indicates girls have a reluctance to express anger in face-to-face situations (Brown, 1998):

*"You're not scared to say something because you are not face-to-face." (Age 15)*

The Internet is beneficial to girls who often have no outlet for angry emotions because, as Mary Pipher (1994) has argued, having no outlet for anger often leads girls to internalize

negative feelings. In some cases these unexpressed feelings have the potential to resurface in the form of eating disorders, self-mutilation, or depression.

Girls, however, view online gossip or mean comments as "less real" than negative face-to-face comments. For example, 83 percent of girls in the online survey report that exposure to gossip about them at school is much worse than gossip written about them online. Girls in the focus groups agree, arguing that online comments are less believable and reach fewer people because not everyone is online. Girls also appear to prefer getting mean comments online because they are able to react to them in private and think about their responses, rather than having to make a quick comeback or show that they are hurt.

Focus group participants, however, report a downside to the ease with which intense emotions can be expresssed online. **Girls report that they spend too much time thinking about how they act online and worry that the Internet may lead them to become inept at off-line communication.** They also worry that the Internet allows them to be "too mean" and use more profanity. Several girls report that they have sent "evil e-mails" to friends when they were angry and being much meaner than they ever would be in person. These comments offer supporting evidence that the privacy of the Internet allows girls to act differently online.

A positive aspect of being able to act differently on the Internet is that girls find it much easier to talk to boys online. **Girls report more self-confidence when interacting with boys online than in face-to-face communications.** In the journals, girls write that it is easier to talk to boys because there is less focus on girls' appearance. Additionally, girls who feel uncomfortable with their appearance can lie about what they look like online, which makes them feel more at ease when talking to boys:

*"I can lie about my appearance online and when I talk to guys in public, I usually shy away from them." (Age 14)*

*"People will talk to me for who I am and respect my views on things. They can't take a look at me and then find a prettier person to talk to. They accept me for who I am and that is a great feeling to have. I don't think I would ever have known that feeling if it weren't for the Net." (Age 15)*

Another girl writes that without the Internet, she would *"never have a boyfriend"* because she feels that she is too ugly. While these are three extreme examples of girls who feel uncomfortable with themselves, other girls do suggest that not having to see boys when they are talking online makes them feel more relaxed:

*"I feel I can talk to them about anything I want and it is not the same in person." (Age 15)*

*"You can be so much more like yourself and if you say something stupid, you can say that you meant it in a different way." (Age 15)*

Online communication offers a feeling of safety for girls because they can plan what they want to say in advance and they can deny the "meaning" of an online comment if it does not go over well. Having this freedom makes girls feel more confident and less shy when talking to boys, especially if they are interested romantically in the boys.

Girls do worry, however, about boys adopting different online personalities as well. In the focus groups, **girls report that their male friends are more open online and express themselves in "sweet" ways that they do not off-line.** Since both girls' and boys' online personalities usually do not hold up the next day in school, girls report that the difference creates problems for both parties:

*"[While online] I told this guy at my school that I liked him and he was cool about it but it was weird for me [when we saw each other at school] and nothing really happened and we are still friends and stuff." (Age 15)*

**19**

# conclusions
## AND IMPLICATIONS

This study reveals that girls know a great deal about computers and navigating the Internet. Girls are aware of the dangers that lurk online and do exhibit common sense when utilizing chat rooms and IM. However, even though teenage girls today appear to be knowledgeable and mature beyond their years, they are often still naïve and vulnerable when encountering emotionally charged online situations: for example, accidental and frequent exposure to online porn, which they find disturbing, or sexual harassment in chat room conversations.

Girls report that the adults in their lives mostly offer prohibitive advice, rather than dealing with the true situations at hand. Therefore, with little pertinent advice from parents and teachers, girls are often put in a situation of "driving without a license" in terms of using the Internet.

Girls can benefit from more adult guidance and instruction that goes beyond "don't do it." They actually do approve of their parents' concerns and feel that certain punishments for valid computer-related offenses are appropriate. Girls, however, report that they desire more acknowledgment from their parents regarding their computer skills, less blame for computer offenses that are not their fault, and more trust in their online behavior. Girls feel that parental education regarding their online lives would foster more open and trusting relationships between parents and daughters.

The Internet does provide many positive experiences for girls, such as offering an outlet to express intense emotions and building social self-confidence. Girls who are computer-savvy are often described by their peers in a positive light. Unfortunately, girls will also have negative experiences in their online lives. However, armed with knowledge, trust, and support from the adults in their lives, teenage girls will be able to enjoy all of the benefits of the Internet while being empowered to navigate through their online lives in an intelligent, safe, and productive manner.

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