

# teens and the internet: how concerned should you be?

First, the good news. The internet is an effective and helpful tool for practical applications such as research, work and social communication, academics, shopping, commerce, and networking. In most work and academic settings, the effective and appropriate use of the internet is a critical skill. Mastery of internet applications can have positive results for young people not only academically, but socially as well. Teens can build a supportive social community online and remain in contact with friends.

With up to 84% of all US teens using the internet to communicate, it's the social applications of the internet that youth tend to access the most and that represent both the greatest opportunities for good and for harm. Since teens are the largest users of the internet, it's easy for parents and educators to feel a few steps behind as we attempt to manage the internet hazards for the young people in our care. Following are a few of the hazards the internet poses along with some tips to help adults guide young people toward positive internet use.

## INTERNET HAZARDS

### Internet Use and Loneliness

Ironically, adolescents whose use the internet to seek primary support during times of difficulty tend to experience more loneliness than other teens in crisis. Adolescents who spend a large amount of time maintaining relationships online are also more likely to have unrealistic perceptions about those relationships, which can lead to disillusionment, misunderstanding, and misperceptions about relationships in general. As a result, research is finding that adolescents who rely primarily on the internet to build and maintain relationships experience a decrease in overall psychological well-being. Adolescents who feel lonely and attempt to seek support online may exacerbate their loneliness.

Teens who access the Internet primarily for information, however, have less of a tendency to experience the negative drawbacks of the Internet. So the specific applications that teens utilize have a significant bearing on whether the internet is a positive or negative resource.

### Predators

It is terrifying to think of your teen giving free access to your home to anyone who wants it. Unfortunately, this is exactly what many young people do every day by not filtering their online contacts and by providing personal information online. Lonely young people who do not tightly manage their social networks (e.g. Facebook account) can end up victims of cyber predators who use the internet to extract personal or family information, or to lure young people into dangerous face to face meetings.

## Drugs/Alcohol and Internet Use

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It doesn't take much surfing to realize that no topic and no type of information is off limits online. Adolescents are increasingly using the internet to exchange information regarding drugs and alcohol. It has been reported that 10% of all exchanges between adolescents involves advice on how to take illicit drugs without getting caught. In addition, there are websites, blogs, and social networking pages dedicated to promoting teen use of illegal substances.

## Future Opportunities

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What happens in Vegas may stay in Vegas, but what happens online can haunt a young person for years. In recent years, students have had their college acceptances retracted and jobs denied as a result of online postings that may have been from months or years prior. Young people have also been expelled from school and subjected to legal or criminal investigations due to what they considered casual or flippant communications online. The internet is a public place, so adolescents must be coached to publish information responsibly. Once comments, photos and information are online they can be impossible to retract.

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