

In

the fast-moving era of the Internet, school leaders and parents increasingly face a dilemma: Is it possible to protect children from inappropriate content on the Internet without denying them access to engaging and valuable educational content? Can adults set guidelines that strike a balance between safe and smart Internet usage by children?

To help parents and school leaders make better decisions, the National School Boards Foundation worked with Grunwald Associates, a leading market research firm specializing in technology, to develop an unprecedented national survey of parents and children. The Dieringer Research Group conducted the survey and tabulated the data for Grunwald Associates. With generous support from the Children's Television Workshop and Microsoft Corporation, we asked parents of children aged two to 17 a number of questions about the role the Internet plays in their children's lives. We also asked 601 nine- to 17-year-old children themselves, from the same random sample of 1,735 households, for a reality check on the role of the Internet in their own lives.

The bottom line: *Parents and children alike view the Internet as a positive new force in children's lives.* Despite recent negative headlines about online violence, pornography, predators and commercialism, parents and children generally are upbeat and favorable about their own Internet experiences. Parents, in fact, are even more positive than children — they believe the Internet is a powerful tool for learning and communicating within families, and they *want* their children to be on the Internet. And, as parent responses suggest, the Internet can be an equally powerful tool for schools that want to increase family involvement. The data also suggest that schools have an opportunity to help bridge the digital divide between those who have computers and Internet access and those who don't.

By the time they are teenagers, nearly three out of four children are online. *Moreover, children who use the Internet are more likely to log on at home than at school.* In light of the survey findings, school leaders must consider the major roles that parents, families and even peers play in children's use of the Internet. To be most effective, policies and practices should be developed in collaboration with parents.



Schools Can Help Bridge the Digital Divide

The Internet gives schools the opportunity to help narrow the gap between the haves and have-nots. Overall, 70 percent of parents with incomes of \$75,000 or more report that one or more of their children use the Internet, compared to 35 percent of parents with incomes less than \$40,000. Fifty-seven percent of white parents report that their children use the Internet, compared to 23 percent of African-American parents.

Already, schools are providing significant Internet access for students who otherwise would have none. In families with incomes under \$40,000, 76 percent of nine- to 17-year-old children who use the Internet say they log on at school, compared to 68 percent of children from wealthy families and 54 percent of children from middle-income families.

In African-American families, 80 percent of nine- to 17-year-old children who use the Internet say they access it from school, compared to 16 percent who say they access it from home.

In addition, low-income families appear to have a

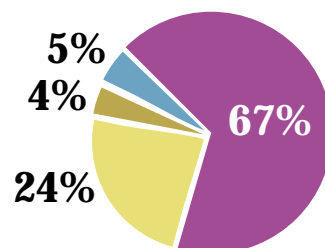
strong belief in the Internet as a vehicle for their children's advancement. Internet use has a pronounced effect on the school attitudes of low-income children and children in single-parent households.

Parents Want to Serve as Guides to Good Content

Parents trust their children's use of the Internet; however, they do have some concerns. Their top three concerns are the possibilities that their children will encounter pornography (46 percent), undesirable adults (29 percent) and violent or hate content (20 percent) online.

Despite these concerns, parents generally believe that the Internet is a safe place for their children. Sixty-seven percent of all parents believe that their main role in their children's use of the Internet is as a guide to good content rather than as a watchdog (24 percent). Overall, though, parents generally are satisfied with the content available for their children on the Internet —

At Home, Parents Serve as Guides, Not Watchdogs



What parents say their main role is in their children's use of the Internet

- Guide to good content 67%
- Watchdog 24%
- Neither 4%
- Don't know/didn't answer 5%

Source: Grunwald Associates

TO LEARN MORE

For the full **Safe & Smart** report, including more data, implications and resources for school leaders, visit the National School Boards Foundation Web site at www.nsbf.org.



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Safe & Smart

Research and Guidelines for Children's Use of the Internet



Microsoft

With generous support from Children's Television Workshop and Microsoft Corporation

Families Use Computers, Internet for Children's Learning

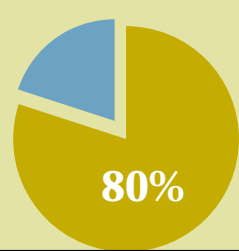
The most common reasons parents cite for buying home computers are children's education (36 percent) and business use (27 percent). Likewise, parents cite education (45 percent) as the most common motivation for their children to use the Internet from home.

Education continues to be the single-most common "main use" for the home computer, parents report. *In fact, families are using their computers for education even more than they thought they would.* While 36 percent bought household computers for their children's edu-

cation, 45 percent actually are using it for that purpose now. Internet use has become the second-most common main use of the home computer, cited by 33 percent of parents.

Children ages nine to 17 themselves confirm that education is the single-most

Internet Spurs Learning Activities



■ Percentage of nine- to 17-year-old children with home Internet access who use the Internet once a month or more for schoolwork

Source: Grunwald Associates

common main use of the Internet at home; 48 percent cite this as the main use, followed by e-mail (32 percent). Education also figured prominently in reasons for children's *increased* Internet use.

Forty-three percent of nine- to 17-year-olds who use the Internet in their schools believe the Internet has improved their attitude toward school, including 17 percent who say it has improved their attitude *a lot*. The Internet has had a strong positive effect on school attitudes among a broad range of children, including low-income nine- to 17-year-olds, children in large families and children in single-parent households. In addition, there are no differences among children of various ethnic groups.

Internet Generation Still Engaged in Everyday Life

Internet use does not disrupt children's everyday habits and typical, healthy activities. In fact, the findings present a picture of American children whose involvement in a variety of activities, including reading, playing outdoors, and doing arts and crafts, continues and even increases — *even as their Internet usage is rising*.

Thirty percent of all parents whose children use the Internet report that their children spend more time reading books since they began using the Internet, compared to 14 percent who say their children spend less time reading.

Eighty-five percent say their children's book reading time has increased or stayed the same.

Eighty-seven percent of all parents whose four- to 17-year-old children use the Internet report that they spend the same amount of or more time reading newspapers and/or magazines since they began using the Internet, compared to 10 percent who say they spend less time.

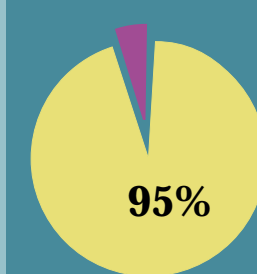
While reading time has increased or stayed the same, television viewing has not: 37 percent of all parents whose children use the Internet report that their children's television watching has *decreased* since they began using the Internet at home, compared to 5 percent who say it has increased.

Internet Doesn't Isolate Children, It Connects Them

Contrary to conventional wisdom, parents and children report that the Internet does *not* isolate children from their families, peers or communities. Instead, the Internet is a powerful communication tool that connects children (and parents) to others — and could bolster the home-school connection.

Ninety-four percent of all parents whose children use the Internet report that their children spend the same amount of or more time with family and friends since they started using the Internet. Sixteen percent say their children spend more

As Much Time — or More — for Staying in Touch



■ Percentage of children ages 13 to 17 who say their time with friends and family has gone up or stayed the same since they started using the Internet

Source: Grunwald Associates

time, and only 6 percent say they spend less time.

Parents would like to use the Internet to communicate with their children's teachers and schools. That would create a powerful opportunity for schools to increase parental involvement. Sixty-four percent of all parents are interested in using the Internet to communicate with their children's teachers. Fifty-six percent of parents would like to be able to view their children's schoolwork online; 55 percent are interested in using the Internet to communicate with the local school board. These findings are even more striking among African-American, low-income, nonprofessional, noncollege graduates and younger parents.

Girls, Boys Equally Attracted to the Internet

Overall, 48 percent of nine- to 12-year-old boys and girls are online, while 71 percent of 13- to 17-year-old boys and girls are online. Girls are just as likely to use the Internet as their male counterparts; 50 percent of nine- to 12-year-old girls use the same amount of or more time with family and friends since they started using the Internet, compared to 46 percent of boys in this age group. In the 13- to 17-year-old age bracket, 73 percent of girls use the Internet, compared to 70 percent of boys. Overall, there is no statistical difference between the proportion of girls and boys who are online. *Clearly, this encouraging news debunks any remaining stereotypes about technology-phobic girls when it comes to the Internet.*

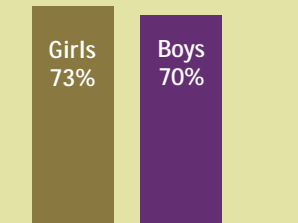
Girls and boys find different ways to use the Internet, however. Girls aged nine to 17 report using the Internet more for education than boys in the same age range (57 percent vs. 39 percent). Girls in this age group also report using the Internet for schoolwork more often than boys do: 88 percent of girls (compared to 71 percent of boys) report using it at least once a month for schoolwork.

Girls are more likely to use e-mail than boys, according to their parents. Sixty-eight percent of girls use e-mail at least once a week, compared to only 50 percent of boys. Thirty percent of boys *never* use

e-mail. Girls aged two to 12 are more than twice as likely as boys (23 percent compared to 10 percent) to use the Internet to e-mail friends and relatives, according to their parents. Girls also appear more likely than boys to use chat rooms on the Internet: 36 percent of girls and 27 percent of boys use chat rooms at least once a week, according to their parents.

Boys, on the other hand, report using the Internet more often for entertainment than do girls. Sixty-one percent of boys and 45 percent of girls aged nine to 17 report using the Internet for entertainment at least once a week. In the same age group, 54 percent of boys and 26 percent of girls report using the Internet for games at least once a week.

Girls Use the Internet as Much as Boys



Percentages of 13- to 17-year-olds who are online

Source: Grunwald Associates

GUIDELINES for School Leaders and Parents

Do's & Don'ts

■ **Take a balanced approach to policies and practices for children's use of the Internet.** Initiate conversations with teachers, administrators and parents, rather than setting and implementing rules that may be perceived as too rigid. Make sure all stakeholders have a chance to contribute to the decisionmaking process.

■ **Pay as much attention to highlighting good content as to restricting bad content.** Remember that overzealous watchdog policies may inhibit Internet opportunities for students whose only access to the Internet is through school. Follow the example of the many

parents who take a balanced approach to the Internet. Both at home and at school, set rules and limits on Internet use, but also guide children to good content. Avoid gender stereotypes, especially since girls and boys are making equal use of the Internet.

■ **Develop a plan to help schools, teachers and parents educate children about safe, responsible uses of the Internet.** For example, encourage schools and families to place computers in rooms that are shared (such as family rooms, dining rooms, offices or libraries), where children can use the Internet with others around them. And

teach children never to share personal information (name, address, telephone or credit card number) online.

■ **Foster appropriate use of the Internet among preschoolers and other young children.** Exposure to the Internet can help preschoolers and children in the early elementary grades master literacy and other cognitive skills and also can spur integration of these skills early in their development. Parents and school leaders who look for online opportunities for younger children can be guides to engaging, age-appropriate content. The Internet can reinforce everyday learning opportunities and be

a powerful tool for fostering interaction among adults and young children.

■ **Help teachers, parents and children use the Internet more effectively for learning.** For example, suggest education-related Web sites for parents and children to visit together — and give them learning activities to do once they get there. Offer education-related help for students online, like after-school tutoring. Provide teachers with professional development opportunities to help them model effective use of the Internet as a tool for students' learning, including integrating Internet learning with regular classroom learning. If teacher training

takes place outside of regular school hours, offer teachers incentives to participate when possible. If teacher training pulls teachers out of classrooms, let parents know why it is important to support this professional development.

■ **Use the Internet to communicate more effectively with parents and students.** For example, launch school district or school Web sites, or publicize existing Web sites in newsletters and places where parents are likely to be. Update Web sites frequently with relevant, timely information. Post exemplary student work online, with teacher commentary explaining why this work meets academic

standards. Make Web sites interactive by soliciting comments or holding public forums about education issues online. Encourage teachers, parents and students to communicate with e-mail.

■ **Engage the community.** Consider holding computer and Internet training classes for parents or hosting convenient opportunities for parents, community leaders, librarians, teachers and others to talk together about children's use of the Internet. Schools may want to collaborate with libraries, community computing centers, local colleges and universities, and other places that offer alternative access to computers.

