

# Kids and teens on the Net

by Warren Clark

The Internet is changing the way we communicate, receive news and information, acquire new skills, work and do business. It is also transforming the world of education and learning as people of all ages can now communicate and work with others from all over the world. In addition, the Net provides opportunities to bring an abundance of images and information into homes and classrooms.

More and more households are connected to the Internet. This might be because parents believe their children need Internet access at home to keep up with their peers; in fact, 55% of parents with home computers said they had bought them specifically for their children.<sup>1</sup> Some teachers now give homework assignments that require finding information on the Internet and students without home access may have to queue up to connect in the classroom, school library or a friend's home. But even having the Net at home may be problematic, especially if there are several children competing for time. Because over 75%

1. 66% of parents reported educational advantages as the greatest benefit of their children's use of the Internet. Media Awareness Network and Environments Research Group. *Canada's Children in a Wired World: The Parents' View — Final Report*. 2000. p.14. <http://strategis.ic.gc.ca/SS1/sf/finalreporteng.pdf>.

## CST What you should know about this study

The 2000 General Social Survey (GSS) interviewed about 25,000 adults aged 15 and over living in private households in the 10 provinces. It researched access to and use of information communications technology, primarily the Internet. This article focusses on the Internet use of children and teens aged 5 to 18 living with their parents. Parents were asked if and where their children used the Internet, how their children's Internet use is monitored and whether they encourage the use of the Internet for schoolwork or entertainment.

Counts of children using the Internet are not available from this survey because parents were asked general questions about the Net use of all their children and not that of each particular child. Thus, parents are identified as having a child using the Internet if at least one of their children does so. The results are often presented as a percentage of parents with children aged 5 to 18; this represents about 6.0 million parents. In some cases parents may not know if their children use the Internet at school, at a friend's house or at the library, meaning that Internet usage by children may be underestimated. The survey asked if children used the Internet at several locations, but did not inquire about how much time they spent connected to the Net.

Parental computer skills were self-assessed and rated relative to people the same age. About 23% of parents rated their computer skills as very good or excellent, 24% as good, 21% as fair, 14% as poor and 17% had never used a computer.

**Important: Strictly speaking, parents are responding to questions about the Internet activities of their school-aged children, therefore the figures quoted reflect the knowledge of the parents. For brevity, the text may refer to the percentage of school-age children or the percentage of children.**

of children who use the Net at home access it through a telephone line, “surfing” competes with family telephone use, unless another line or a more expensive high-speed service is available.

This article examines the extent to which children between the ages of 5 and 18 have access to the Internet at home. It focusses on parents’ knowledge of their children’s use of the Net, the factors that contribute to or limit access, parental concerns about privacy, and the limitations parents place on using the Internet.

### Nearly half of children used the Internet at home

In 2000, 82% of parents reported that their school-age children used the Internet. School was the most common point of access (71%), while 45% accessed it at home.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, a considerably smaller proportion of parents (59%) than children used the Internet themselves. Nonetheless, over one in three parents helped their children with the Internet.

Boys and girls had nearly equal Internet access rates at home,<sup>3</sup> although girls may visit different sites than boys.<sup>4,5</sup> Young children between the ages of 5 and 9 were only about one-third as likely to use the Internet from home (21%) as teens aged 15 to 18 (58%).<sup>6</sup> The rate of school use and access at other locations also increased with the age of children.

### Children of educated and high-income parents more likely to use the Internet at home

In 1999, Canada completed connecting all interested public schools and public libraries to the Information Highway. Consequently, about 9 out of every 10 students attended elementary, intermediate or secondary schools that had access to the Internet for educational purposes.<sup>7</sup> With nearly every school having connections, children’s Internet access at school shows

## CST Internet use is highest among older teens...

Parents with children aged	Location of children’s access to the Internet			
	All locations	Home	School	Other
	% of parents whose children use the Internet			
5-18	82	45	71	37
5-9	48	21	32	13
10-14	93	50	84	43
15-18	96	58	85	55

## ... and in homes with high socio-economic status

	Location of children’s access to the Internet			
	All locations	Home	School	Other
	% of parents whose children use the Internet			
All children	82	45	71	37
<b>Education of parent</b>				
High school diploma or less	79	34	69	34
College, trade/vocational diploma or some postsecondary	82	45	73	40
University degree	86	66	73	38
<b>Household income</b>				
Less than \$30,000	78	26	69	35
\$30,000-\$49,999	77	33	67	35
\$50,000-\$79,999	83	48	73	40
\$80,000 and over	86	65	74	37

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2000.

little variation regardless of the socio-economic status of the household.

In contrast, children from households with higher income and education levels were more likely to

have home access. About two-thirds of parents with a university degree had children who used the Internet from home compared with one-third of parents with a high school diploma

- Parents were less likely to know about their children’s Internet access at school or at other locations than at home. About 14% of parents did not know about Internet access at school, 10% at other locations and 3% at home. The percentages reported here are of parents who know about their children’s Internet use.
- Comparison of the access rates for families who had only boys with those who had only girls.
- YTV Kid & Tween Report 2000 Wave 6*. October 25, 2000. <http://www.newswire.ca/releases/October2000/25/c6279.html>.
- Environics Research Group. 2000. *Young Canadians in a Wired World — Parents and Youth Focus Groups in Toronto and Montreal*. p.5, <http://strategis.ic.gc.ca/SSI/sf/05380report.pdf>.
- Among parents of 5- to 18-year-olds, one million reported that none of their children used the Internet. Nearly 85% of parents whose children did not use the Internet had young children aged 5 to 9.
- Statistics Canada. October 12, 1999. “Computer technology in schools.” *The Daily*. <http://www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/991012/d991012a.htm>.

Parental education	Parental computer skills (self-assessed)						Never used a computer
	Total	Excellent	Very good	Good	Fair	Poor	
<b>All parents</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>16</b>
High school diploma or less	34	63	51	50	41	30	17
College, trade/vocational diploma or some postsecondary	45	65	57	51	43	35	16
University degree	66	79	73	64	63	44	--

-- Sample size too small to produce reliable estimate.  
 Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2000.

or less. Similarly, about 65% of parents with household income over \$80,000 reported that their children used the Internet at home, compared with 26% of parents in households with an income under \$30,000.

Lone-parent families are more likely to have lower income than two-parent families and this affects the home Internet access of their children. In 2000, 32% of lone parents said their children used the Internet from home compared with 47% of two-parent families. In addition, lone parents were less likely to help their children with the Internet and tended to have fewer computer skills to provide help.

**Parent’s computer savvy helps kids connect**

Children used the Internet at home much more frequently if their parents had strong computer skills.<sup>8</sup> About 71% of parents who considered their computer skills excellent reported that their kids used the Internet at home compared with 16% of parents who never used a computer. Parents with more computer savvy were more likely to have the equipment necessary for their children to connect to the Internet, to help their children use the Internet and to be less concerned about security and privacy

issues. All in all, they viewed the Internet more positively than parents with less computer savvy.

**About half of parents worry about privacy**

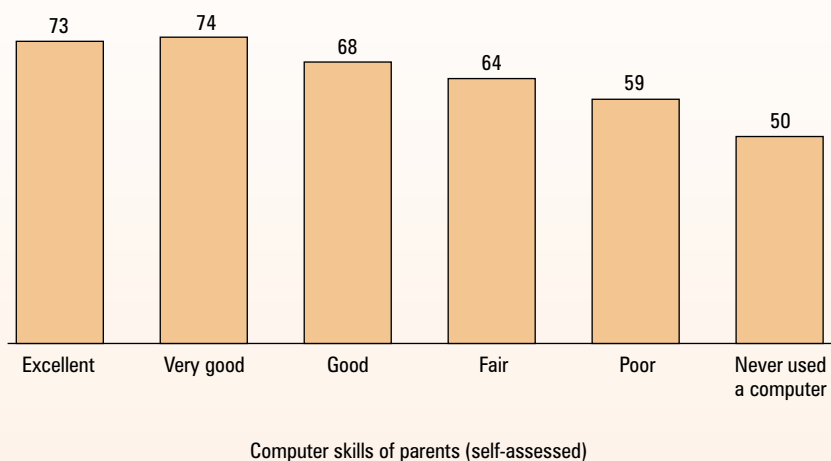
It is easy for children to become skilled navigators of the Net, and advertisers and marketers are increasingly using this medium to target children and gather information for marketing purposes. Such information can be obtained by asking children to register in order to play games, visit their favourite cartoon site or enter a contest. As users move from Web page to Web page, “cookies” (electronic files) may be placed on the computer’s hard drive to record

what was done at a Web site and possibly track where they go on the Web.<sup>9</sup> When you enter information on a Web site or any other place on the Internet, you potentially give up a bit of your privacy. Recently enacted federal legislation limits the uses of personal information for some enterprises.<sup>10,11</sup>

Parents worry about online privacy. In 2000, 46% of parents expressed great concern over this issue. This worry had an impact on their children’s access to the Internet at home. Those parents who were most concerned about privacy were less likely (44%) to allow their children to use the Internet at home than those who were not (52%). About 470,000

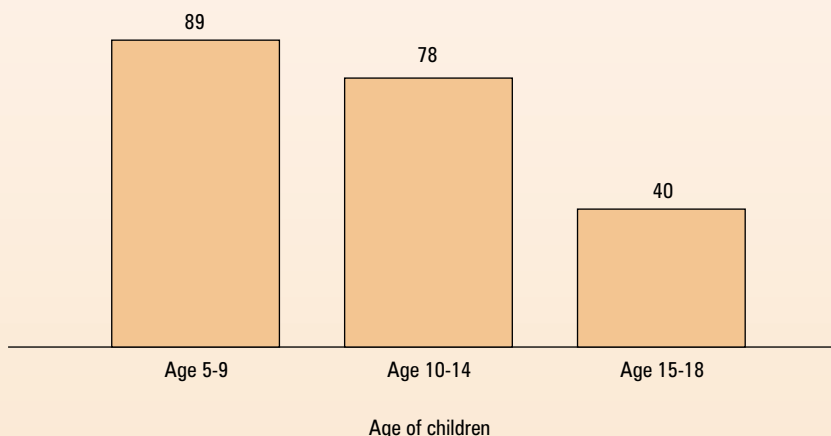
8. Strong parental computer skills are linked to higher levels of education and household income. After accounting for these factors, however, children’s use of the Internet at home is still positively influenced by the parent’s computer skills.
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10. *The Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act* (Bill C-6) came into effect on January 1, 2001. It protects the personal information of individuals in the course of commercial activities. The Act gives people control over their own personal information by requiring organizations to obtain consent to collect, use or disclose information about them. As of January 1, 2001 the Act encompasses federal works, undertakings and businesses including banks, telephone companies, cable television and broadcasting companies, firms engaged in interprovincial transportation and air carriers. By January 2004 the Act will also cover provincially regulated enterprises such as retail stores. [http://www.privcom.gc.ca/information/02\\_05\\_d\\_08\\_e.asp](http://www.privcom.gc.ca/information/02_05_d_08_e.asp).
11. The Statistics Canada Web site, <http://www.statcan.ca>, does not use cookies.

% of parents who monitor their children's Internet use at home



## ... or if they have younger children

% of parents who monitor their children's Internet use at home



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2000.

parents (8% of all parents) expressed no opinion about Internet privacy. This group of parents reported the lowest level of home Internet use among their children, at 23%.<sup>12</sup>

### Protecting children

Many parents are concerned that the content their children may be viewing includes sexually explicit material or sites that promote hate, drug use, fraud or computer hacking.<sup>13</sup> While

79% of parents encourage their children to use the Net for school work and 45% for entertainment, the accessibility of unsuitable information continues to generate debate and concern. An innocent keyword typed into a search engine or the misspelling of a Web site's name can lead to sites that may contain objectionable content. Unsolicited e-mail messages sent to thousands of people at a time encouraging them to buy something,

do something or visit a Web site, can entice children to visit sites that are inappropriate for them. About 6% of parents whose children use the Net reported that their children had come across content that promoted hate or violence while another 12% simply did not know if their children had seen such material.

Internet chat rooms, where children can communicate with each other in real time, are enormously popular, but are not without risk. Children may encounter profanity, inquiries about personal information, inappropriate advances, or adults masquerading as children.<sup>14</sup> Cyberstalking is a threat to many users of online chat rooms, including children. Teenagers are particularly at risk because their Net use is more often unsupervised than younger children's.<sup>15</sup>

Although few parents thought their children had seen content promoting hate or violence, most parents recognized the need to monitor their children's use of the Net. Nearly two out of three (63%) stated that it was very important to monitor their children's Internet use, one in five (20%) thought it was somewhat important and only one in seven (14%) felt it

12. Of the 470,000 parents who had no opinion on Internet privacy, 60% had never used a computer (compared with 17% of all parents of school-age children), 78% had never used the Internet and 59% did not report their level of household income.

13. "Digital chaperones for kids." *Consumer Reports Online*. March 2001. <http://www.consumerreports.org/Special/ConsumerInterest/Reports/0203fil0.html>.

14. Ipsos-Reid. November 14, 2000. *Uncomfortable Liaisons*. [http://www.ipsos-reid.com/media/content/displaypr.cfm?id\\_to\\_view=1113&refer=main](http://www.ipsos-reid.com/media/content/displaypr.cfm?id_to_view=1113&refer=main).

15. American Bar Association. August 2000. *Facts about Privacy and Cyberspace* (page 5 of 6). <http://gigalaw.com/articles/aba-2000-08-p5.html>.

was not at all important. Many of the parents in this last group had older teenagers and perhaps felt that they were mature enough to manage their own Internet use. Nevertheless, 67% of parents employed some means to monitor their children's use of the Internet at home, most often supervising their time on the Net. Only 8% of parents locked or disabled the home computer to control access, and 8% used software to monitor their use or filter offensive sites.

Parents make efforts to regulate the use of the Internet while at home, but elsewhere, control is more limited. About 53% of parents reported that their children's Internet access at school was monitored compared with 38% at other locations. However, 30% of parents didn't know whether or not monitoring took place at school or at other locations.

The parents who did not monitor their children's use of the Internet at home were more likely to have older teenagers (49%), or were not computer savvy themselves and therefore may not recognize the risk of exposure. Half of parents who had never used a computer monitored their kids' use of the Internet at home, compared with 73% of those who rated their computer skills as excellent.

### Summary

Children are frequently more comfortable, knowledgeable, and literate than their parents about computers and the Internet. Today, kids are learning, playing, communicating, working and creating communities in very different ways than their parents. Internet access at school is a great equalizer as it shows little variation by social status. Perhaps because of this, children are more likely to be Internet users than their parents.

Many parents are concerned about their children's use of the Internet. Despite their anxieties, Internet users engage in a wide range of activities that require them to trust in each other and the organizations that run Web sites. Parents can support their children by teaching them to validate and authenticate information, to identify offensive material, to protect their privacy, and to manage their time online.



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