



# **SAFETY** *in online relationships*

**A Kids Help Phone Online Survey**



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Based on the following data:

- Kids Help Phone/Jeunesse, J'écoute online survey conducted in February 2008.

Survey responses and messages posted to Kids Help Phone's website (posts) which are quoted in the body of the report have been edited for grammar and spelling. Some posts included in the French report have been translated from English.

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# Introduction

Today's young people have grown up using technology for communication, information and entertainment. The Internet has truly become a community for young people, and this community comes with its own unique set of rules, behaviours and potential risks.

Since 1989, Kids Help Phone's professional counsellors have connected with kids, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, about issues ranging from dating and family problems to abuse and violence. In 2002 we launched our online counselling service, "Ask a Counsellor". We are now helping kids with any problem, by phone or online.

As society embraces new and evolving technologies, Kids Help Phone must continue to grow and change to meet the needs of young people who will be seeking help through these ever-changing media. As we have made the move to online services, our counsellors have received more and more contacts about online behaviours – whether because they posted personal or private information, or because they are the victims of online bullying or harassment.

Kids are exposed to so much online, and much of it provides them with a different and exciting opportunity to learn about themselves and the greater world in which they live. But while online activities provide young people the opportunity to interact with people and information from around the globe, the distance and anonymity that they are provided through this medium has created a false sense of security for many. This in turn leads to many young people making choices that they would not make in face-to-face relationships.

Part of growing up is making mistakes and learning from those experiences – this is just as true of mistakes made online. At Kids Help Phone, our professional counsellors work with callers and online users to help them apply the critical thinking skills they use in offline situations to their online interactions and to

help them develop the skills they need to safely interact online. And most importantly, we help them deal with the outcomes of their choices.

As young people continue to turn online for social interaction, it is important that we as adults work together with technology providers, educators, social service providers and our children to ensure that young people are staying safe online.

This report is an analysis of responses to an online survey posted to [kidshelpphone.ca](http://kidshelpphone.ca) and [jeunessejecoute.ca](http://jeunessejecoute.ca) over a two week period and incorporates significant research done by leading experts in the study of online behaviours. It tells a compelling story about the ways our young people are interacting online and provides a snapshot of the ways children and youth in Canada are building relationships and socializing through this ever-evolving medium. The report's main goal is to highlight the gaps between what kids know about online safety and their online practices. It is our hope that this report will help inform emerging policies, education and technology.

Donna Hansplant  
Vice President, Counselling Services  
Kids Help Phone

**The Internet has truly become a community for young people, and this community comes with its own unique set of rules, behaviours and potential risks.**

Donna Hansplant



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## Background

For almost two decades, Kids Help Phone has been providing free counselling, information and referrals to kids in Canada, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Staffed by professional counsellors, Kids Help Phone offers telephone and web-based counselling and support in French and English to young people from ages five to twenty. All contacts with Kids Help Phone are anonymous and confidential.

Since 1989, Kids Help Phone has been a front-runner in understanding the issues that are important to young people. Through helping young people more than two million times annually, our counsellors hear first-hand what's on the minds of kids in Canada.

We have always been committed to addressing the issues that are most relevant to the kids that use our service. Because we know that the Internet is an integral part of young people's lives, our current report looks at reducing the risks associated with online relationships. We want to better understand what kinds of risks young people are taking on the Internet and how we can best help them, and the adults who support them, minimize that risk and cope with the problems they encounter online.

While the Internet offers many benefits for kids, it also poses a variety of dangers. Among the most common are:

- exposure to online violence or pornography;
- the potential for cyber-bullying;
- the risk of teens meeting strangers online and then later face-to-face;
- the potential for unwanted sexual solicitation;
- the misuse of webcams for sending sexual images;
- and the opportunities for exposure to websites that support damaging behaviours such as self-harm and eating disorders.

Many Internet safety guidelines outline strategies that youth can follow to avoid getting into trouble on the Internet. But what happens when a young person has already done something dangerous online? What if they have given out identifying information in a chat room, sent sexual images on a webcam, or planned to meet an online stranger in person? Young people need guidance on how to use the Internet safely. They also need help developing practical solutions about what to do if they have already gotten into trouble online.

Kids Help Phone takes a unique perspective. We know that some kids will make mistakes online – we hear from them every day. We want to prevent problems from happening online, but we also want to offer practical solutions to young people who have already made some errors, to help them safely navigate their online relationships.

In order to find out exactly what kinds of risks the kids are taking in their online relationships, we posted a survey on our website, [kidshelpphone.ca](http://kidshelpphone.ca) ([jeunessejecoute.ca](http://jeunessejecoute.ca)), for two weeks in February 2008. The anonymous survey asked 20 questions (17 multiple-choice and 3 open-ended questions), about safety in online relationships. The results of the survey, web posts that discuss cyber-safety from Kids Help Phone's online "Ask a Counsellor" service, and recent research on adolescents and the Internet inform this report.





## The Internet and Teens

The majority of young people in Canada have access to the Internet at home and at school: since 1999, 99% of Canadian public schools have had Internet access, and by 2005, 94% of Canadian youth had home Internet access (Steeves, 2005). Additionally, a growing number of young people are connecting to the Internet via cellular phones. In 2005, 45% of Canadian children had access to a family cell phone and 23% had their own cell phones; 44% of youth with access to cell phones were accessing the Internet this way (Steeves, 2005). Finally, in 2005 22% of young Canadians had their own web cameras and 17% had their own cell phone cameras (Steeves, 2005). One can assume that these numbers are even higher today.



The Internet has taken on enormous importance for young people. Teens go online in greater numbers than adults and they use more online communication tools such as email and instant messaging (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005, as cited in Valkenburg and Peter, 2007). As technology is evolving, the way young people use the Internet is also changing. In 1999 young people used the Internet primarily to find information and entertainment; today they overwhelmingly use it for interpersonal connections (Valkenburg and Peter, 2007). These communications typically occur via email, instant messaging, chat rooms, online discussion forums, social networking sites, blogs, and digital video channels such as YouTube.

While some youth use the Internet to try to build new relationships (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2003, as cited in Valkenburg & Peter, 2007), most use it to communicate with people they already know (Gross, 2004). They typically use the Internet to nurture relationships that they already have from school and other face-to-face communities; in fact, 84% of adolescents' instant messaging contacts were with friends from school (Gross, 2004).

This propensity to communicate with people they already know was reflected in a number of comments on our online survey:

*I only talk to my face-to-face friends on MSN Messenger and I don't go into chat rooms.*

*I usually don't create friendships with a stranger. All the people I know on MSN and Facebook are people I know/have known in my past...that I have contact with face-to-face.*

While the popularity of chat rooms seems to be decreasing amongst youth, social networking is one online communication tool that is growing in popularity. Websites such as Friendster, Xanga, Facebook and MySpace allow users to create a personal profile where they can post photos, add music or video, and connect to others with similar interests. Lenhardt and Madden's 2007 report, "Social Networking Websites and Teens: An Overview," found that 55% of American youth ages 12 to 17 use these sites. Social networking sites seem to be more popular among older teens, especially girls, who often use the sites to nurture their current friendships with "offline" friends. Boys, on the other hand, are more likely to use these sites for flirting and finding new friendships (Lenhardt & Madden, 2007).



The most common risks associated with using social networking sites include potential exposure to negative content, cyber-bullying, identity theft, and the opportunity to reveal detailed personal information, which may make kids more vulnerable to online perpetrators. Even though social networking can increase young people's risk of stranger contact, many teens seem to be aware of the risks involved in making some information public. In fact 21% of youth who create a profile do not make it available online, and 59% of teens limit access to their profiles to friends only (Lenhardt & Madden, 2007).

Many youth are aware that they need to protect their online information and they take this into account when they choose to post only some of their personal information on their online profiles. This awareness of the need to protect online information was reflected in some responses to Kids Help Phone's survey:

*NEVER give out personal information such as address, phone number, etc.*

*I would tell kids to never put their addresses and phone numbers on Facebook, because anyone can see it.*

## **Benefits of the Internet**

Before we discuss the risk factors, it is important to acknowledge the benefits of Internet use. By and large, the Internet is a positive influence on young people and can help facilitate a number of different educational and social skills.

One of the educational benefits of the Internet is that young people can use it to seek out support for school work. Apart from the factual information that is available online, many young people turn to their peers for online school support. Social networking sites can even be used for school purposes: youth can create and participate in discussion groups about school-based topics, such as which courses to take and how to do best tackle certain assignments (Tynes, 2007).

Using the Internet can also help youth to develop both critical thinking and negotiation skills. Even online games may help develop cognitive skills, such as spatial visualization, analog representation (the ability to read images), and divided visual attention, which are needed to be successful in math, science, music, and language (Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, Kraut & Gross, 2001; as cited in Tynes, 2007). Home Internet use has been linked to improved academic performance, particularly reading achievement, of low-income African-American children (Jackson, von Eye, Biocca, Barbatsis, Zhao, & Fitzgerald, 2006).

The Internet also offers a number of psychosocial benefits for its users. It can help young people develop their identity, self-worth, sexuality, health seeking behaviours, and leadership potential (Greenfield & Yan, 2006). A Canadian study by Media Awareness Network found that young people who spend more time online each day felt "...more confident about their ability to make friends, tell jokes and make people laugh" (Steeves, 2005, p.8).

Using the Internet can also expose young people to new information on a wide range of topics, from a variety of sources, that they might not otherwise have access to. Kids can connect with



people around the world whose experiences are different from their own; this cross-cultural and interracial interaction can help teach tolerance (Tynes, 2007).

Interacting positively with others online requires that teens be continually aware of their values, their strengths and weaknesses, and their perceptions of self; they are constantly thinking about who they are and who they want to be in relation to the information that they post (Tynes, 2007). Using online communication tools like social networking provides young people "...social cognitive skills such as perspective taking, and fulfill the need for social support, intimacy, and autonomy" (Tynes, 2007, 579). As they create profiles on social networking sites or share their ideas in chat rooms, teens are actually working on a major task of adolescence: developing their identities (Greenfield, Gross, Subrahmanyam, Suzuki, & Tynes, 2006, as cited in Tynes 2007).

Finally, as we know from our own experience at Kids Help Phone, the Internet offers young people a chance to seek out support for a variety of problems, from the everyday developmental issues that kids face, to the most serious crisis situations. In 2007, Kids Help Phone received more than 31,400 posts to our online counselling service; each question and counselling response is read an average of 80 times, allowing other young people to benefit from the supportive guidance of our professional counsellors. Research by Whitlock, Powers and Eckenrode (2006), indicates that youth who use the Internet for self-disclosure and social comparison benefit from reduced isolation and fewer distressful feelings. These findings echo our own awareness of the importance of the Internet as a positive coping resource and valuable means of social support for young people.

## ***Internet Dangers***

Nevertheless, most people are more aware of the Internet's potential threats than its possible benefits. For young people the main areas of danger on the Internet are:

- The risk of meeting strangers online and then later face-to-face
- The potential for online sexual solicitation
- The misuse of webcams for sending sexual images
- The potential for online harassment or cyber-bullying
- The risk of exposure to online violence, pornography or websites that encourage dangerous behaviour such as self-harm or eating disorders



## Results of our Online Survey

From February 8 to February 26, 2008, we asked visitors to kidshelpphone.ca and jeunessejecoute.ca to complete 20 survey questions about safety in online relationships. Seventeen questions were multiple choice and three were open-ended, requiring kids to answer in their own words.

Respondents accessed the survey from a graphic on the Kids Help Phone homepage that said: "Are you safe online? Take our survey." The link to the survey was also available from the first page of both the "Get Counselling" and "Get Informed" sections of the website, as well as on Kids Help Phone Windows Live Messenger tab.

More than 2,249 respondents (122 French) answered the survey. Over half of the responses (52.5%) were from young people aged 14 and under; 69.5% of the respondents were female; and 42% of the respondents used the Internet for "chatting and going on forums or discussion groups" less than five hours per week.

### Internet Friends

One of the main tasks of the survey was to access information about who young people are talking to online and how important those relationships were to them. The questions that tapped this information were as follows:

*Are your Internet friends the same people who you see in everyday life (for example, at school, in clubs or in activities)?*

They're the same people .....	39.7%
The majority of my friends are the same .....	43.7%
A minority of my friends are the same .....	10.0%
They're not the same people at all .....	6.5%

*I feel that having online/Internet relationships increases my feelings of well being.*

Often .....	15.2%
Sometimes .....	29.5%
Rarely .....	24.8%
Never .....	30.5%

*If you compare your online/Internet relationships to your face-to-face relationships, would you say that:*

Online/Internet relationships are more important .....	5.2%
Both are equally important .....	21.1%
Face-to-face relationships are more important .....	73.7%

Many respondents seemed to prefer a face-to-face friendship:

*Face to face is more personal and a lot more important to me.*

*I'd just rather speak to a person, face to face because it helps me express myself more, and I can tell if the person is being true or not.*

*You can tell when people are being honest, more so face-to-face, than online. When you're online, contact is anonymous; you have no idea, even if someone has a webcam, if they are telling the truth or not.*

*Face to face is seeing the person's body language and expression... you get nothing from online friendships except words.*

*You don't really know for sure the person is real online. Face-to-face is always better. Internet is ok when you've met the person before and they live in a different town or something like that.*

The most common themes that emerged were that face-to-face friendships were more personal – they make communication easier because of the visual cues they provide and it is easier to assess whether someone is trustworthy in a face-to-face relationship.

Some kids preferred online relationships, often because communicating online frees them from the confines of being judged by their appearance:

*You can be yourself more freely with online friends than face to face friends because there isn't any appearance judgement etc.*

*On the Internet you can be yourself and not be judged by the way you look or dress. They like you because of who you are, which is rarely the case in face-to-face friendships.*

*Well, an online friendship would be better because it's easier to say what you think without worrying if the person is judging you, plus before you hit the send button you can read over your thoughts and make sure you're expressing yourself in the right way.*

*For a face to face relationship it's much harder because I find that people just change. It's like they have a mask on. We become very judgmental about ourselves so we start to act fake. Maybe even the other way around where we say what we think fast and then we might say something that might come out wrong and offend the other person. I have a lot of friends I know in person and online but somehow when I see them in person it's like they don't know me and they sometimes even ignore me. Once I'm on the computer that person and I can connect quickly and talk for endless minutes without any problem.*

Some respondents were able to see the positive and negatives of both online and face-to-face friendships:

*It's easy to say anything to someone online if you don't have to look directly at them. Also, an online relationship doesn't give you any social experience like a face-to-face one does. You can't get any personal relations from someone over the computer like you can in real life. Online friendships also can never be as strong and as close as a face-to-face one. There's just something that isn't there over the computer.*



## Online Relationships

One common risk for young people using the Internet is the potential for them to arrange a face-to-face meeting with someone they had only previously met online. Some kids seem to know what they should and shouldn't do in order to stay safe online:

*Always let your parents know what you're doing before you do it...and no matter what DO NOT GO AND MEET SOMEONE YOU MET OVER THE INTERNET WITHOUT A PARENT.*

Other kids seem to face dilemmas, even when they know the right thing to do, like this 13-year-old who wrote into the "Ask a Counsellor" section of Kids Help Phone's website:

*Today, I met a 23 year old boy on the Internet. We talked a lot. He only talks about sex. But besides that, he is ok with me. He knows that I am 13 and he wanted us to meet soon...he wants us to meet in a location where there will be no one but us. I really want to meet him...BUT, a part of me thinks something might happen to me. Should I go?*

Obviously this meeting could prove dangerous for this child, but despite knowing the risks she is still contemplating meeting this person. This is a theme that we see again and again at Kids Help Phone: even when kids say they know the right thing to do, they still engage in dangerous behaviour. There seems to be a gap between knowing the rules and following through with them. So although 71% of young people who took our online survey "completely agree" with the statement: "I know what I should and shouldn't do in order to stay safe online," we cannot assume that young people will always make the right choices when it comes to ensuring their online safety.

Survey respondents were asked the following questions designed to access information about safe practices with online friends from the respondents.

*I have been in love with someone over the Internet without ever having met the person in real life.*

Yes..... 23.7%  
No..... 76.3%

*I've had an Internet relationship that I kept secret from my friends.*

Yes..... 27.3%  
No..... 72.7%

*When you meet someone new online, how many times do you have to chat/email before you trust them enough to confide in them?*

Once..... 6.3%  
Between 2 and 5 times..... 9.1%  
More than 5 times ..... 24.0%  
I never trust someone that much over the Internet..... 60.7%



Most online respondents seemed to know what they should and shouldn't do in order to remain safe online and many indicated that they wouldn't take a risk at all:

*I usually don't create friendships with a stranger. All the people I know on my MSN or Facebook are people I know/have known in my past.*

*I don't really trust anyone over the Internet. I only talk to people or email people that are friends who I personally know or my family...I don't look for anything in strangers...and I rarely trust someone over the Internet.*

*I just simply don't trust them. So if they want to meet me or something I'll say no 'cause you never really know.*

Some kids rely on their own "radar" to weed out inappropriate people:

*I try to find flaws in what they say; things that don't match up. I look for things that may or may not be too good to be true, or too outlandish. I usually have a good feel for if a person is telling the truth or not, but it's good to always have your guard up when you're online.*

*I need proof that it's not a child predator because it's not really that safe to have a friend over the Internet that you don't know about.*

*I make sure other people know that I have a friend I don't know. Usually I just make sure that someone I know knows that person just in case. Or I just ask questions like how old are you, where do you live, are you a boy or a girl? If I feel that they might not be telling the truth I just tell them my first name and that I live somewhere in Canada, but I think that's as far as I go.*

*Are they around my age? What school do they go to? Are they from my city? What kind of things are they into? And usually the same kind of stuff I'd look for before I trusted any of my other friends. I'd have to REALLY get to know them though before I'd share anything.*

While it's helpful to have some self-imposed rules about what to look for in an online relationship, kids should not just be relying on their own intuition in order to figure out which online relationships are safe and which ones are not.

The most at-risk group of kids don't seem to know how to assess other people's trustworthiness. When asked what they would look for before they could trust someone online, they give naïve answers like the following:

*That they are my age, they won't tell everyone something I tell them.*

*They tell me their secrets.*

These kids are likely more vulnerable to online sexual solicitation and harassment.



## Sharing Information Online

Survey respondents were asked to consider their own online habits and safety routines. They were also asked to consider what they would tell others about keeping safe when interacting with people online.

*I have had bad experiences in my friendship and dating relationships over the Internet.*

Often.....7.4%  
Sometimes .....17.6%  
Rarely .....24.8%  
Never .....50.2%

*I've met face to face, people who I first met online.*

Often.....9.9%  
Sometimes .....12.1%  
Rarely .....15.6%  
Never .....62.5%

*I've given personal information to someone online who I didn't know face-to-face to prove that they were important to me (e.g., phone number, full name, address, the name of my school, a personal picture).*

Often.....7.1%  
Sometimes .....12.8%  
Rarely .....20.4%  
Never .....59.6%

Many respondents gave helpful advice on themes such as protecting personal information and being cautious about meeting online acquaintances face-to-face:

*Never meet the person in real life. If you feel unsure about someone, stop talking to them right away. Trust your instincts.*

*Don't believe everything people say but also don't jump to conclusions that everyone is bad or lying.*

*Keep your computer around where everyone in the house can see what you are doing. Do not keep things secret.*

One of the most frightening dangers the Internet poses is the risk that someone will try to solicit sex from a young person. Unwanted sexual solicitation can be defined as "...the act of encouraging someone to talk about sex, to do something sexual, or to share personal sexual information even when that person does not want to" (Ybarra, Espelage, & Mitchell, 2007, S32). According to the Youth Internet Safety Survey (YISS), 19% of online youth experienced unwanted sexual solicitation in 1999, while 13 % of them experienced it in 2005 (Mitchell, Finkelhor & Wolak, 2007). While these numbers seem high, most of these contacts did not evolve into an offline sex crime, and many of the solicitations may have come from other youth, rather than from online predators.



Of more concern are “aggressive solicitations,” in which an online solicitor attempts to meet the young person face to face, by mail or by telephone (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007). These types of solicitations, which are more likely to lead to an offline sex crime, increased to 4% of online youth in 2005 from 3% in 1999 (Mitchell, et al., 2007). Girls are more likely than boys to be contacted by a stranger, as are youth with social networking profiles and those who post photos online (Smith, 2007).

## Online Safety Practices

The final set of questions asked of survey respondents related to their personal online safety practice.

*I know what I should and shouldn't do in order to stay safe online.*

Completely Agree.....	71.0%
Somewhat Agree .....	24.1%
Somewhat Disagree .....	2.3%
Completely Disagree.....	2.7%

*I've already discussed with my parents what I need to do to stay safe when I use the Internet.*

Many times (3 or more).....	35.2%
Once or twice .....	36.4%
Never .....	28.4%

*The computer I use at home has a webcam connected to it.*

Yes.....	45.2%
No.....	54.8%

*The computer I use at home is in my room.*

Yes.....	40.5%
No.....	59.5%

With increased publicity around online safety, especially for youth, it is not surprising that many respondents stated that they know how to stay safe online; however, those same young people also reported still having computers in non-public spaces like their bedroom at home and having access to a webcam.

*Webcams and computers in a bedroom are not unsafe. As long as the person is educated and knows better they are safe, if a computer in their room is too unsafe then they shouldn't be on one at all until they know better.*

*Your computer should be in a public place within your house, so your family can see what you're doing so you don't do bad things, and also, your time on the computer should be limited so you don't begin having an internet life and begin to forget about the real world.*



*I believe that as a child growing up, the computer should be in a central area. Once the child has gotten to an age where they know what is right and wrong, the computer can be put in their room, especially if the child does a lot of work on that computer.*

## **Webcams**

One way for someone to solicit sex from a young person online is through the use of webcams – cameras that allow users to take and send digital images online. Webcams are typically, but not always, video cameras. A 2007 study found that 4% of online youth receive requests for sexual pictures (Mitchell et al.). The same study found that boys and girls who have experienced physical and sexual abuse and girls who are African-American are more likely to be asked for sexual pictures. It also determined that young people who talk to adults online, youth who have a close online relationships, and young people who participate in online sexual behaviour, such as talking about sex with someone they don't know, receive more requests for sexual images.



This post, sent into Kids Help Phone's website from a nine-year-old, demonstrates how online abuse can begin via a webcam:

*I was in a chat room and I gave someone my e-mail and he showed me his privates on webcam. I know what I did was wrong but I'm really scared.*

The person who approached this young child knows that she has “broken the rules” by sharing her email address with a stranger. The perpetrator may try to capitalize on her feelings of wrongdoing and guilt in order to try to persuade the child to share more information (perhaps even her own sexual images) with him. If she doesn't comply, the perpetrator may then threaten to disclose to a parent that the child broke the rules – enticing her into even more dangerous behaviour in order to avoid punishment.

The process of online sexual solicitation often starts off slowly. Online predators look for vulnerable youth anywhere that young people gather online. Youth who are at greatest risk are those that are:

- new Internet users;
  - frequent computer users;
  - curious;
  - lonely;
  - rebellious;
  - risk-taking;
  - looking for attention and affection;
  - confused about their sexual identity;
  - and drawn to subcultures that are different from their parents
- (Finkelhor, Wolak & Mitchell, 2007)

Predators often try to build a relationship with a vulnerable young person, offering support, encouragement and flattery to kids who may not receive this kind of attention elsewhere. They typically don't mislead youth about the fact that they are adults and are often upfront about their

sexual intentions, taking advantage of young people's interest in adventure, romance, sex, and the desire for independence (Finkelhor, et al., 2007). They may then request sexual images from the young person in return or even try to arrange a face-to-face meeting.

This letter, posted to Kids Help Phone's website from a 15-year-old girl, demonstrates how online abuse can escalate:

*Hey. Ok now I'm really scared....this guy from England told me I was hot stuff then he added me on MSN asked me to go on webcam. Then he asked me to flash him. I guess I wasn't being smart and I did. I guess he took a picture of me doing it. Then I was talking to him today and he told me to flash him for a long time or he is going to send it to everyone and I don't want my life to be ruined ... I'm such a screw up... WHAT SHOULD I DO? I deleted and BLOCKED him but. I'm still REALLY worried. PLEASE HELP!!!  
A.S.A.P.*

Mitchell et al. explain the kind of thinking that can lead some young people to make mistakes when taking digital photos: "...for some youth it may seem a relatively harmless adventure to make sexual imagery on their own, and the physical distance of their correspondents may feel like some degree of protection so they might comply with a request that they would typically not, if it were made in person" (2007, 201). What might start out as a dare or a game can quickly turn into something much more dangerous for young people who post sexual images of themselves online.

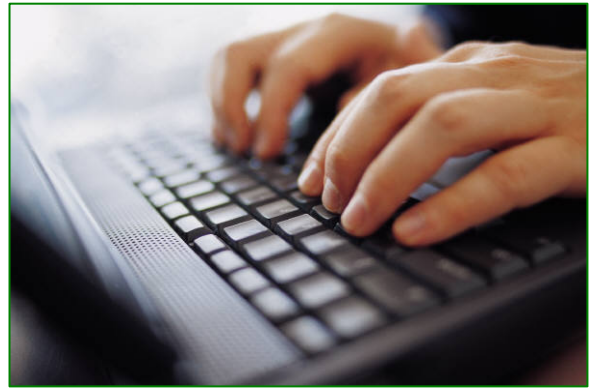
Kids who have been extorted by an online predator often feel terror, shame and guilt about finding themselves in this kind of situation. They frequently blame themselves for the abusive relationship, not realizing that they have been manipulated by the adult involved. Unfortunately these kinds of intense emotions can isolate young people and prevent them from reaching out for adult support and intervention. It is crucial that young people know how to reach out for help and who they can seek support from if they find themselves in an abusive online relationship.

Since teenagers are the largest group of Internet sex crime victims, it is crucial that education about how to avoid this type of crime be targeted directly at teens themselves. Teenagers need Internet safety education that is both respectful and credible, and acknowledges their need for independence and accurate, developmentally appropriate sexual information (Finkelhor, et al., 2007).

## **Cyber-bullying**

Requests for sexual photos can also happen with "friends" rather than strangers. It is not uncommon for young people to share sexual photos with a boyfriend or girlfriend online. Unfortunately, when relationships end, one party can use the photos as a way to humiliate the other by spreading the images across the Internet. This is just one example of cyber-bullying or online harassment. Other examples include sending harassing or abusive messages via instant messaging, text messaging, email, online games, blogs, and social networking sites; spreading online rumours; creating hate websites or polling websites (developed to rate someone's attractiveness or popularity); or assuming someone else's online identity in order to send messages that may damage that person's relationships (Belsey, 2005).

Kids Help Phone’s 2007 online cyber-bullying survey asked respondents why they cyber-bullied. The most common reasons selected by respondents were: there’s no supervision, it’s anonymous, and it allows for easy revenge (Lines, 2007). When asked how they felt about bullying others online, the most common themes given were: regretful, positive and powerful, and ambivalent (Lines, 2007).



Thankfully, between 82% and 84% of young people, ages 10 to 15, do not experience frequent online harassment or unwanted sexual solicitation (Ybarra, Espelage, & Mitchell, 2007). Between 2% and 3% of youth are victims of both online harassment and unwanted sexual solicitation, and 1% of young people are involved in both perpetration and victimization of online harassment and unwanted sexual solicitation (Ybarra et al., 2007).

Young people who are both perpetrators and victims of online harassment have a very high prevalence of psychosocial problems such as increased substance use; offline victimization; a history of perpetration of relational, physical and sexual aggression; more delinquent peers; greater likelihood to respond in anger; weak emotional connections with caregivers and poor caregiver monitoring (Ybarra et al., 2007). Since this group of young people is already experiencing breakdowns in their relationships with parents or caregivers, getting them the proper adult support and intervention is even more crucial. Because our service is anonymous and confidential, young people who may not reach out to other adults do make contact with our counsellors. As we learn more about this vulnerable group of perpetrator/victims, Kids Help Phone has the opportunity to support these young people in getting the help they need.

### ***Exposure to Online Violence, Pornography or Websites that Encourage Dangerous Behaviour***

In addition to potential exposure to harassment, Internet users may come across images that are disturbing: some online images are graphic and violent and pornography is rampant. Because young people are often both adventurous and curious about sex, they may search the Internet looking for something edgy or sexy. Sometimes they are surprised by what they find, like this writer to kidshelpphone.ca who was looking for more “mainstream” sexual pictures:

*The Internet seems even more sickening than I thought it already was. Aside from just straight legal pornography there is way more that I want to clear my head out of seeing. Here’s what happened. I was on Lime Wire looking for Playboy backgrounds for my computer then as I open the five files I downloaded at once, which were all from the same user, there were child pornography pictures. I was devastated, these pictures are sickening.*

Child pornography and other disturbing images, like this writer can attest, can accidentally be downloaded by users accessing file sharing programs. Illegal images, like the ones mentioned above, may be difficult to remove and upsetting to witness. Young people need to be encouraged to use file sharing programs with caution.



Another online risk is that of kids visiting websites and online forums that encourage dangerous behaviours like eating disorders or self-harm.

“Pro-anorexia” (pro-ana) websites encourage and support disordered eating, glamorize extreme thinness, and view anorexia as a lifestyle choice rather than an illness (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007). These sites typically offer tips about how to conceal an eating disorder, avoid food at all costs, and gather support and information from peers about extreme methods of weight loss. There are currently over 500 active pro-ana websites, predominantly created and viewed by young women, aged 13 to 25 (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007). Research indicates that even one viewing of a pro-ana website can result in immediate negative effects on viewers, such as decreased self-esteem, lower appearance self-efficacy, and the impression that they were heavier than they actually were; viewers were also more likely to think about their weight and exercise in the near future after viewing these sites (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007).

In addition to pro-ana websites, there are currently over 400 online message boards that focus on the topic of self-injury. These sites are mostly used by females between the ages of 12 and 20, who share ideas with their online peers about ways of self-injuring and avoiding detection (Whitlock, Powers, & Eckenrode, 2006). Although these sites do provide a source of peer support for their users, they may also normalize and encourage self-harm, and provide users with additional and more deadly methods of injuring themselves (Whitlock et al., 2006). Whitlock and colleagues say: “Although it is neither possible nor, perhaps, desirable to monitor all adolescent Internet use, particularly as youth age and become increasingly independent, it is very important for adults to know something about what adolescents, particularly vulnerable adolescents, encounter in the virtual communities they inhabit” (416).

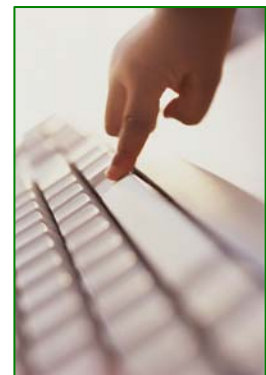
## ***What We Can Do to Help Kids Stay Safe Online***

As technology continues to evolve and become more ingrained in the everyday experience of younger generations, it is imperative that adults learn about and actively participate in online safety.

Because age makes a difference in how children conceptualize the Internet, adults need to be aware that different online safety strategies are applicable to different age groups; the tools needed to keep a six-year-old safe online are very different than the methods needed to keep a 15-year-old safe. In order to be effective, Internet safety education must be developmentally appropriate (Yan, 2006).

Very young children do not yet have the cognitive ability to understand the complexity of the Internet; therefore, adults must provide more strict supervision to the youngest age groups (Yan, 2006). The best way to protect very young Internet users is to give them access to specific age-appropriate websites to visit and use Internet filtering programs (Yan, 2006).

As children get older, adults can begin to give more access to the Internet, while continuing to use filtering software that blocks access to certain websites. At this point, adults may want to use Internet monitoring software that lets them know where kids are going online. According to Smith, 2007,



“Internet monitoring software that allows parental supervision seems to be more effective than online filter software in limiting contact with strangers online.” (2). Internet monitoring software may be more powerful because it allows adults to find out exactly which sites kids visit online, as opposed to filtering software, which only lets adults know which sites kids haven’t gone to.

Research by Yan (2006) indicates that both frequent Internet use and Internet education are associated with understanding the social complexity of the Internet. According to Yan, “...to complement filtering, the best nontechnical Internet protection strategy for fostering children’s virtual “immune systems” is to encourage frequent positive uses of the Internet and provide informal Internet instruction” (Yan, 2006, 427). Yan goes on to say that, “Since the relation between technical understanding and social understanding is unidirectional and asymmetrical, it is essential to teach children more scientific knowledge about how the Internet works in order to induce the social understanding that will lead to appropriate caution about online safety” (427).

One of the most important things that adults can do is to talk about online safety with the young people in their lives. This should not be a “one-time” discussion, but rather an ongoing dialogue that evolves as kids get older and require more freedom and complexity of information.

Here are some other tips for adults that may ensure that the young people in their lives are aware of online safety:

- Make sure kids know that anything they post online can leave a permanent record.
- Keep the computer and webcam in a central part of the house, rather than in a bedroom.
- Teach kids the skills to identify problems – tell them to trust any feelings of discomfort that they have.
- Teach kids how to ask for help. Make sure kids know that they can come to you if they run into trouble online.
- Don’t threaten to take away the computer in order to ‘protect’ or punish young people. They may not turn to you for help if they are worried you will cut them off from their online world.
- Use monitoring and filtering software to keep track of kids’ online activities and to block some dangerous sites.
- Teach kids the importance of keeping their passwords and personal information private.
- Teach children how to create a ‘dummy’ email account that they can use when joining online programs that require an email address.
- Don’t allow young children to go to chat rooms unless the chat is monitored; never allow them to go into private chat rooms.
- Know what your kids are doing online – check out the websites yourself or, better yet, have your child show you what they are doing online.
- Encourage kids to follow the age limits for signing up to social networking sites (usually 13 and up).
- Teach kids never to respond to email or IM from strangers.

- If your child does meet an online predator, it is not their fault. Support them any way you can and stop the relationship.
- Know the warning signs for online trouble: your child is online a lot, especially in chat rooms; they turn the computer off quickly when you come into room; you find pornography on the computer; your child makes or receives phone calls from people you don't know; your child seems withdrawn, anxious or depressed.

## ***How Young People Can Protect Themselves Online***

There are a number of guidelines that can help young people use the Internet more safely.

- Be careful about the kind of information you give out about yourself online. Remember that anything you post online can leave a permanent record, even after you've deleted it.
- Choose your online nicknames and photos carefully. Sexual pictures and nicknames might attract attention from people you don't want to hear from.
- If you visit websites and chat rooms about sex you might come across people who will try to harass you.
- Be careful about the websites you visit – some things you come across online can be disturbing and upsetting.
- File sharing and free downloads can put pornography on your computer. If you have any sexual images of children under 18 (even of yourself) you can be charged with possessing child pornography.
- If you want to create a profile on a social networking site, know that you have control over who can see the information you post online, and make sure you take the time to learn about the privacy controls offered by the site.
- Don't use webcams to take sexy pictures of yourself.
- Talk to an adult about anything that makes you feel uncomfortable online.
- If someone is acting weird or bothering you online, save the communication and report it to the website owner, your Internet service provider, [cybertip.ca](http://cybertip.ca), or the police.
- Know that adults who talk to kids about sex or meet underage kids for sex are breaking the law. Even if it seems risky, exciting or romantic, it can get everyone in trouble.
- Don't let your friends pressure you to do things online that you normally wouldn't do.
- Don't harass or threaten other people online. You never know what they might do to get back at you.

(Finkelhor, Wolak & Mitchell, 2007)



## What if Kids Have Already Done Something Dangerous Online?

Young people continue to take risks in their online relationships even when they know the right thing to do, like this 15-year-old girl who posted on kidshelpphone.ca:

*...a little while ago I added a guy to my MSN that I met online...I thought he'd just be a nice guy to talk to and stuff....but I think he might be a pedophile....he keeps trying to get me to do things on webcam, and doing stuff on webcam...except he won't let me see his face....and I would just report it to the police except I've done some things I regret ...'cause I don't know at first he seemed nice...but the point is I don't want my parents to know what I did or that I added him 'cause I'm not supposed to add people I don't know...I'm scared...he added everyone on my contact list even though I never sent him any kind of email so he couldn't know any of their addresses....and I blocked and deleted him but somehow he re-added himself and I'm scared.*

Kids need to know that they can reach out for support from trusted adults in their lives **even if they have made a mistake**. It is crucial that adults make themselves available in a supportive, non-judgemental way to help kids who have broken online rules and found themselves in dangerous or frightening situations.

Here are some tips for kids who have already made mistakes in their online relationships:

- If you decide to meet someone face to face that you have only met online, make sure to meet them in the safest way possible. Bring someone with you; meet in a public place; bring a cell phone; make sure someone else knows who you are meeting with and where you are going – even if you think you know them really well.
- Even if you have already shared photos with someone online, it's not too late to ask for help if you are being manipulated, threatened or intimidated.
- If you have an online relationship with someone that worries or frightens you, ask for help from an adult you can trust.

## Concluding Remarks

Teaching young people how to be safe in the online world is like teaching them how to be safe in the real world – it takes more than one lesson, it is learned in small steps, and many of the most important lessons are learned through trial and error.

Today's children and youth have a strong bond to Internet services for media, entertainment and, to an ever-growing proportion, to social utilities. It is how many of them socialize with friends they see every day. One wonder of the Internet is that you can go places where nobody knows you and completely reinvent yourself. This is especially appealing to youth who are just discovering themselves and who want to explore different aspects of their personalities before trying them out with their friends in the real world.



Because the Internet is so new in cultural terms, there are no rules of appropriateness and etiquette on the Internet like in the real world. In many ways, it is young people who are inventing the rules around how to socialize online.

However, while these technically savvy children may show adeptness in specific areas of the online world they access regularly, they can also be unaware of steps they should take to be safe or are unwilling to make use of online safety practices. Like real life, some kids will always want to climb the fence with the “Beware of Dog” sign on it just to see what’s on the other side.

The good news is that kids are listening to what is being said about online safety and they’re learning the safety tips being taught to them. Many are actively discussing online activity with their parents or other adults. The young people who participated in our online survey told us again and again about the key messages around being safe online:

- Be careful about any personal information you give out online;
- Sexy pictures or nicknames can attract the wrong kind of attention and people;
- Don’t talk to or meet strangers from the Internet;
- Don’t keep secrets from your family or friends that relate to your safety.

While kids are able to recite these precautions, and while they recognize the value in following the rules, we also hear from kids that they will deliberately act in ways that put them at risk. They tell us about wanting to meet people face to face who they only know from their online activities. They tell us about bullying and saying mean things about their classmates online. They take pictures of themselves and post them online.

The lesson here is one for all parents, teachers, coaches, guardians and anyone working with children and youth:

- Create a relationship with your children that encourages them to talk to you;
- Acknowledge that they will make mistakes and make sure they know that it is okay for them to talk to you when they do;
- Talk about online safety and talk about what they should do if they do make mistakes;
- There is an opportunity for parents, if they’re using social networking sites themselves, to model safe online behaviour with children and youth.

By taking an active role in our kids’ online activities, by understanding the safety features of websites and social networking sites, and by making an effort to talk to kids, not only about the potential dangers of the online world, but also about the many benefits of being active online, we can help ensure that our kids avoid serious risks as they learn and explore the Internet.

Jason Montgomery  
Kids Help Phone





# Appendix A - Kids Help Phone Online Survey

Kids Help Phone is doing a study on online safety and you can help! It will only take a few minutes, but it will help us understand how youth are staying safe online.

The answers you give are 100% anonymous.

We will be using the data and stories you share with us to develop our study – and any stories you share could be reprinted word-for-word in our report. We'll be releasing the study to the media and on this website in Spring 2008. But remember, we never know who you are and we won't ever ask for personal information, so your answers are always anonymous!

Thanks for helping us with our study!

## About You

1. Where are you from?
  - a. Canada
  - b. Belgium
  - c. South Africa
  - d. Everywhere else
  
2. Are you:
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Transgender
  
3. How old are you?

a. Under 12	g. 17
b. 12	h. 18
c. 13	i. 19
d. 14	j. 20
e. 15	k. Over 20
f. 16	

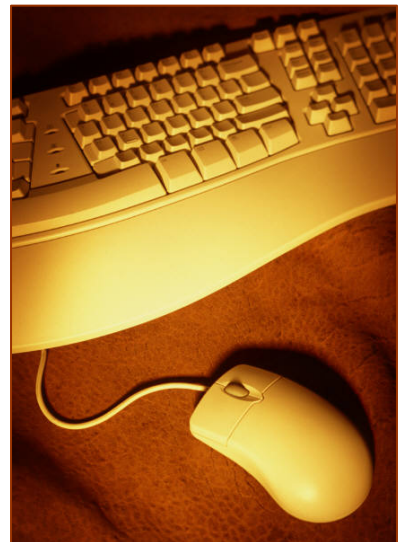
## Safety in Internet Relationships

1. How many hours a week do you spend chatting and going on forums or discussion groups?
  - a. Less than 5 hours a week
  - b. Between 5 and 10 hours a week
  - c. Between 11 and 20 hours a week
  - d. More than 20 hours a week



2. Are your Internet friends the same people who you see in everyday life (for example, at school, in clubs or in activities)?
  - a. They're the same people.
  - b. The majority of my friends are the same.
  - c. A minority of my friends are the same.
  - d. They're not the same people at all.
3. "I feel that having online/Internet relationships increases my feelings of well being."
  - a. Often
  - b. Sometimes
  - c. Rarely
  - d. Never
4. If you compare your online/Internet relationships to your face-to-face relationships, would you say that:
  - a. Online/Internet relationships are more important
  - b. Both are equally important
  - c. Face-to-face relationships are more important
5. What is the difference between an online friendship and a face-to-face friendship?
6. "I have been in love with someone over the Internet without ever having met the person in real life."
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
7. "I've had an Internet relationship that I kept secret from my friends."
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
8. When you meet someone new online, how many times do you have to chat/email before you trust them enough to confide in them?
  - a. Once
  - b. Between 2 and 5 times
  - c. More than 5 times
  - d. I never trust someone that much over the Internet.
9. What do you look for before you can trust a person over the Internet?
10. "I have had bad experiences in my friendship and dating relationships over the Internet."
  - a. Often
  - b. Sometimes
  - c. Rarely
  - d. Never

11. "I've met, face-to-face, people who I first met online."
- a. Often
  - b. Sometimes
  - c. Rarely
  - d. Never
12. "I've given personal information to someone online who I didn't know face-to-face to prove that they were important to me (e.g., phone number, full name, address, the name of my school, a personal picture)."
- a. Often
  - b. Sometimes
  - c. Rarely
  - d. Never
13. "I know what I should and shouldn't do in order to stay safe online."
- a. Completely agree
  - b. Somewhat agree
  - c. Somewhat disagree
  - d. Completely disagree
14. "I've already discussed with my parents what I need to do to stay safe when I use the Internet."
- a. Many times (3 or more)
  - b. Once or twice
  - c. Never
15. "The computer I use at home has a webcam connected to it."
- a. Yes
  - b. No
16. "The computer I use at home is in my room."
- a. Yes
  - b. No
17. Do you have any suggestions to help other kids increase their safety when they connect with people over the Internet?



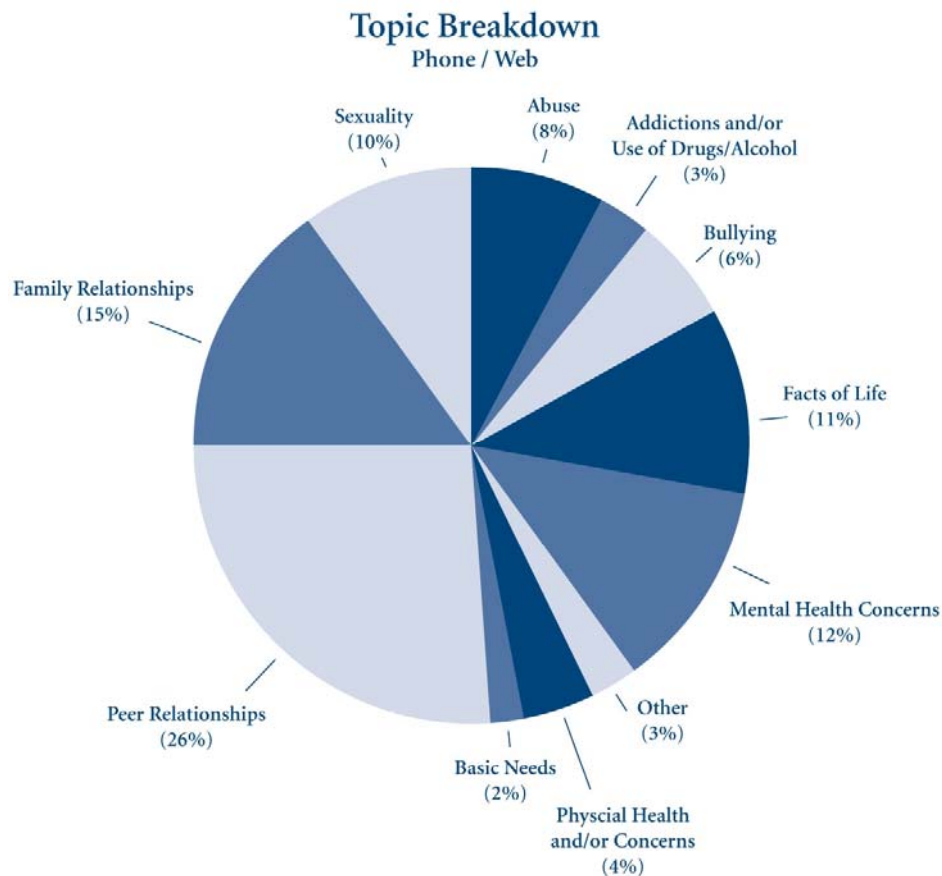


## Appendix B - About Kids Help Phone

- Kids Help Phone provides toll-free, bilingual, confidential and anonymous phone and web counselling, referral and information for children and youth across Canada, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.
- More than 10,000 committed volunteers help Kids Help Phone be there for kids by raising funds and awareness in their communities.
- Kids Help Phone is a Canadian not-for-profit organization that receives no core government or United Way funding.
- President and CEO: Tom McAllister
- Board of Directors Chair: Jerry Patava, Toronto

### Our Services

- Kids Help Phone helped kids in need from almost 3,000 communities more than two million times on the phone and online in 2007.
- Age of clients: five to 20 years.



- Counselling and information services are offered by phone and online, allowing kids to connect with a counsellor whenever and through whichever medium they choose.
- Kids Help Phone maintains a comprehensive national computer database of children’s services (currently 37,000 listings) which enables counsellors to connect kids to resources in their own communities.
- Approximately 70% of the young people who contact Kids Help Phone are well-functioning kids dealing with the everyday problems of growing up or facing a problem they cannot handle using their normal support systems; 30% of contacts are from children at risk, who don’t have the confidence or the skills to approach the challenges of growing up and are at risk of turning to potentially dangerous solutions because they lack the support necessary to deal with their problems.
- Kids Help Phone’s online services include: entries to the “Express Yourself” section; visits to the informational topic and link libraries; and reading questions from other kids in the “Ask a Counsellor” sections and benefiting from the counsellors’ responses.
- Almost 80 young people read and benefit from the counselling responses to each question asked online.

### **Our Counsellors**

- Kids Help Phone is one of the few help lines that uses highly-trained, professional counsellors on the phone and online.
- There are approximately 100 full-time and part-time counsellors working at Kids Help Phone.
- Counsellors working at Kids Help Phone are all trained professionals with a minimum of three to five years of relevant experience in the social service sector and a wide variety of backgrounds including: child and youth work, education, public health, sexual health, social work, psychology and sociology.



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