Kid online? Relax, experts tell parents

Internet - While adults worry about unknowns, teens bond and learn social and leadership skills

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ST. LOUIS -- Despite parents' fears about how much time their teenagers spend sitting in the glow of a computer screen, social scientists say to just chill. The kids are doing just fine, thank you.

A panel of researchers told an international science conference Sunday that the online generation of teens is gaining valuable social and leadership skills, developing their sense of identity, creating their own space separate from adults and educating themselves about their world in often more effective ways than in classrooms.

"Although there are concerns about what our youth are doing on computers, they're primarily going online to meet with their peers, not to meet strangers," said Danah Boyd, a researcher at the University of California at Berkeley. "Just as teenagers had their burger-joint hangouts in the '50s, today's teens are just trying to create their own space separate from adults."

Boyd said teenagers' lives are filled with classes and organized activities that limit their "hang-out" time. Groups of teens often are banned from socializing in malls and other public places, so they have turned to popular online sites such as MySpace, LiveJournal and Xanga to express themselves and connect with others their age.

Most teens don't want adults interfering in their sites and usually just delete unwanted messages from older male predators, she said.

Amanda Lenhart, a researcher with the Pew Internet & American Life Project, released statistics showing how the Internet is a key part of teenagers' daily lives. She said the number of teens going online has grown 24 percent in the past four years. In a survey of 12- to 17-year-olds and their parents, she also found that:

Nearly 90 percent of Americans ages 12 to 17 go online and use e-mail;

More than half have created content for the Internet, and one-third have built a Web site for a group they belong to;

19 percent have created their own blogs, or online journals, with older girls leading the blogging activity;

Even with their devotion to technology, teens report they spend about 10.3 hours a week doing social activities outside of school, compared with 7.8 hours communicating with friends via computers or cell phones.

Henry Jenkins, director of the Comparative Media Studies Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said the notion that being a good parent consists of not allowing or heavily restricting computer time needs replacing. "Being a good parent is being aware of what kids are doing online, engaging in their activities, understanding the value of those activities, and helping them acquire skills that will allow safer participation in those

activities," he said.

Jenkins said teenagers learn valuable social communication and multitasking skills online. "Some schools are not preparing kids for the real world as these online communities," he said.

Justine Cassell, director of the Program on Technology and Social Behavior at Northwestern University, agrees. She said teens are learning a variety of skills -- such as listening to others' viewpoints -- they will need in the work force.

Despite worries that young people are not concerned about their communities, she has found that teens who go online are very interested in the world. "But they are fed up with the way adults are running things," she said.

A program that Cassell developed eight years ago called "Junior Summit" formed an online community of 3,000 youngsters ages 10 to 16 in 139 countries. She said the participants care passionately about social issues. "They talk a lot about the world's problems," Cassell said.

When participants were asked to elect leaders from members they had never seen, the researchers found that more girls were elected than boys. Those elected were more likely to listen to the ideas of others rather than push their views.

"They also used the word 'we' rather than 'I' when communicating with others," she said. "These young people constructed their own leadership styles."

Cassell disputed the notion that spending a lot of time online tends to make teens anti-social. "There is no doubt that kids want to be social, not anti-social. They used online communication to explore their self-identity."

David Huffaker, a colleague of Cassell's at Northwestern, said his survey of 68 randomly selected teen blogs found that blogging is "not simply an individual pursuit in the way locked diaries once were. Instead, they are used by teens as a way to form a small or large community. Blogs give teens an opportunity to share their stories and feelings."

Huffaker said teens' blogs discuss topics that affect their daily lives. More than two-thirds of blogs discussed school-related subjects, such as grades, homework and college pressure. Almost half of the blogs discussed music, and the other half talked about relationships with boyfriends or girlfriends, or about attraction to someone, such as a crush. Of the bloggers who discuss their sexual identity, 17 percent discuss their homosexuality and "coming out."

Huffaker found that teens often reveal too much information, putting them at risk for "cyberstalking and cyberbullying." He said more than two-thirds of the teens disclosed at least their first names and ages, while 59 percent disclosed their city or state. About 20 percent gave their full names.

"Giving out that information raises some questions about whether they are mature enough to understand the risks involved," Huffaker said. Parents, educators and the news media can help make teenagers more aware of potential dangers, he added.

The researchers presented their findings at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

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