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Whoa! 28 Percent of Teens Chat With Strangers Online

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If you're anything like the average American mom, you worry about the time your teens spend online, who they're talking to and the kind of risky behavior that can get them into trouble on today's social-media sites such as Facebook and MySpace. A new study shows that your fears are *definitely* well-founded.



Getty Images

A shocking new report called "The Secret Online Lives of Teens" provides a revealing peek into just how much our kids risk when they interact online -- and one expert believes that it's more than just a wake-up call.

The study, conducted by Harris Interactive for McAfee, asked 955 American teens about their attitudes on Internet privacy. The results are troubling for any parents of teenagers:

- Sixty-nine percent of teens freely divulged their physical location.
- Twenty-eight percent chatted with strangers (defined as people they do not know in the offline world).
- Of the 28 percent who chatted with strangers, 43 percent shared their first name, 24 percent shared their e-mail address, 18 percent posted photos of themselves and 12 percent posted their cell-phone number.
- Girls make themselves targets more often than boys: Thirty-two percent of the girl respondents indicated that they chat with strangers online, vs. 24 percent of boy respondents.

We sat down with Mary Kay Hoal, a concerned mom and global media expert who addressed her Internet safety concerns by creating a social network exclusively for kids and teens: [Yoursphere.com](#). Moms, you just might want to take a few notes!

momlogic: Why did you create Yoursphere.com?

Mary Kay Hoal: The Internet is a powerful, beneficial and amazing tool offering so much to us and to our children. The Internet, though, has no filter, nor does it have the same everyday societal safeguards built in to protect our children. Because I was deeply concerned about the negative impact and ramifications to children due to this shortfall -- let alone exposure to inappropriate content, culture or people -- I created Yoursphere.com for kids and teens, and [YoursphereForParents.com](#) for parents.

Yoursphere is a free site for kids and teens offering the best the Internet has -- creativity, communication, exploration, education, inspiration, great content,



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games, a virtual world to play in, community, good digital citizens -- all in an age-appropriate, safety-first, positive place.

video gallery

ml: How do you monitor your own children's Internet use? You have a few kids -- both biological and adopted -- so it must be hard to keep tabs on everyone all the time.

MKH: I have to answer that question based on the age of my children, because it definitely varies. The basis of all monitoring in our house is: education, involvement and empowerment, combined with moderation and dialogue, dialogue, dialogue. Frankly, parents can't keep tabs on everyone all the time -- whether we have one child or many -- so it's important that we are educated and proactive.

My son is freshman in college. He's 19 and has his own computer. We talk consistently about the mistakes the college crowd makes on Facebook and elsewhere online. He's an adult, so I need to trust his decisions at this point, but be there to help him if ever needed. I've seen firsthand that he understands how important what he does online is, and how he clearly knows he doesn't want any digital tattoos. He's pretty vocal with his friends about showing them where things they never intended others to see show up online, such as showing his friend how his breakup with his girlfriend via Twitter was visible for all to read. When he was in high school, he liked to spend most of his time playing online games; he does a bit of that today, but has less time. We talked specifically about interacting with strangers online. He was in a group, or "guild," where it was just he and his friends that he knew in real life. He understood that that was very important.

For the rest of the family, the computers they use all have content filters restricting access to inappropriate content. There aren't computers in the bedroom. We use filtering and antivirus software as well. We use Google Safe Search and YouTube's safe-view feature. My younger kids (ages 11, 9 and 6) don't have e-mail [accounts](#), [because] in addition to phishing scams, a large percentage of pornography is delivered through e-mail addresses. Kids really don't need e-mail addresses at this younger age, anyway.

My 16-year-old daughter and I consistently talk about the fact that whatever is shared in the digital world -- and that doesn't mean just on social-networking sites, but via cell as well -- will be around forever and ever. We recently went through my old photo albums from my senior year in high school and my freshman and sophomore years of college. While none of the photos were compromising, there were a few photos of me in outfits that she was "definitely" glad weren't around now for the entire world to see. We had a good laugh.

momlogic tweets

A few days later, she told me about how she'd thought of our conversation when she was at school and her friends were showing her how they'd taken pictures of other kids without their knowledge while at a social event and posted them online. She said the girls were wearing outfits that they probably didn't intend for everyone to see, and she told me she realized then that anyone can take any picture of you if you're not really paying attention. She said she knew she needed to be more aware of what people were doing around her, because she wouldn't want that to happen to her. She and I also talk about how the mainstream media -- mainly reality TV geared at teens and the college crowd -- tends to sexualize girls. We talk about how that has spilled over into the online networks, where the more sexually you display yourself, the more attention you get.

We talked about how, in my opinion, what's been going on online has simply spilled over to the cell phone, and is now referred to as "sexting." We've discussed how it's so important for young women to have the chance to be recognized and supported for all the dimensions of themselves -- their intelligence, their interests, their strength, their aspirations, their creativity -- and not on simply how they look or how "sexual" they behave. We've discussed my concern about what it will be like in ten years when my daughter's younger sister is 16, and how this all sends the wrong message to boys about girls. Our children deserve so much more!

My 11-year-old and 9-year-old boys get to choose between Wii time, TV time or Yoursphere time. The Wii is not connected to the Internet. The TV has rating filters, and they can [only] watch shows in their age range. When they're on Yoursphere, of course, I have peace of mind, because they can look for anything in Yoursphere, play anything, interact with anyone, because we know who everyone is and I don't need to stand over their shoulder or worry about what they accidentally click on.

My 6-year-old daughter ... she just wants to play games! She has a Yoursphere account so that she can play dress-up or the peanut-butter-

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search the Internet, nor is she interested in the social part of Yoursphere just yet. She'll grow into her account.

Finally, all my kids hear me say repeatedly, "Be kind to others online. Treat others like you would want to be treated." And if someone is mean to them online, I've told them, "Don't respond, then come tell me."

ml: What's the riskiest behavior a kid can engage in on the Internet?

MKH: Sharing too much personally identifiable information. It can put them at risk, whether by someone who intends them harm, the potential of [identity theft](#), exploitation of their privacy or even harassment. It's fine to include a real first name. But not combined with last name, birth date, address, e-mail, cell-phone number, IM account and school information. That makes them very vulnerable.

While the largest networks ask for this information, it's wrong for children -- and frankly all people -- to provide this level of information. It's why there's a federal law in place to protect children from providing such information. That federal law is known as the Children's Online [Privacy Protection Act](#) (COPPA). On my social-media profiles, I limit the information I share and don't include -- even if mandated to -- things like my real birth date or e-mail address. At Yoursphere as part of creating your profile, we don't ask for last name, phone number, address, e-mail, date of birth, IM or any other personally identifiable information.

ml: What are the top three things that parents should do right now to protect their children?

MKH: Communicate. Keeping a consistent dialogue with your children is the most important factor when it comes to keeping them as safe as possible online. There may be times when they need to talk to you about something that happened online, something that they could really use your help or advice on, and being there for them when that time comes is more important than anything. Stay educated. Kids often run tech circles around their parents, but that's not an excuse. There are many great educational sites out there to help you create a safe and positive experience for your children online.

YoursphereForParents.com is one of them. Use the technology that exists to help you: content filters on your Internet browser and software protection. Though there are many browsers out there to choose from, the safest one for families is Internet Explorer. The reason I say that is because they have what they call a "Content Advisor." This tool allows parents to restrict and allow certain websites from being accessed on that browser. In addition, parents can attach their own password to the Content Advisor so that their children can't easily go in and change the settings. This tool is hugely helpful, and I recommend that parents use it. If Internet Explorer just isn't cutting it for you for whatever reason, there's a great content-filter plug-in for Mozilla Firefox called "Pro-Con Latte." Also worth [checking](#) out.

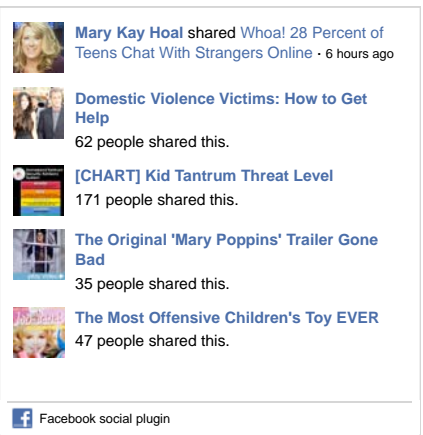
Finally, I'd be remiss if I didn't ask each parent to apply the same standards towards their child's safety online as they do offline. We didn't buy our kids a bike and drop them off on the freeway to let them learn to ride. We didn't throw our kids into the deep end of a pool when they didn't know how to swim. Our kids didn't get the keys to the car when they wanted to drive. Instead, our kids were given the opportunity to do what they wanted to do in a place that allowed them to learn -- one that helped them, showed them the right way *and* how to avoid the wrong way, and one that was appropriate for their age. That is what Yoursphere does for them online.

ml: You've been studying this issue for more than four years. What's the most surprising thing you've found?

MKH: While the Internet has become a utilitarian, rich and beneficial part of all of our lives, what has surprised me the most is that many people truly have no idea what their children are exposed to online, and what's allowed to go on online -- not in all places, but in many where kids are participating. I've seen or experienced firsthand on a myriad of networks and sites [things that] I know no parent would ever accept happening to their child in real life if a computer wasn't in front of them.

ml: Do you think a lot of parents are totally unaware of their children's Internet usage?

MKH: No, I think parents are very aware of their children's Internet usage. After all, if recent research says kids are spending more time online, watching TV or, in some cases, sleeping, then an involved parent knows how their



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parents, for the most part, truly have no idea what their children are exposed to, and what's allowed to happen in sites children are members of. Second, I can tell you that 99.9 percent of the parents I speak to -- and I was one of them four years ago -- have no idea about COPPA. This law is in place to protect children and their privacy online. It is against this law for a child under the age of 13 to join a site without first getting verifiable parental consent and allowing that parent to be able to remove anything their child posts online. Children click boxes all the time telling a site they're 13 or older. Parents don't always know.

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