



At Risk Online:

National Assessment of Youth on
the Internet and the Effectiveness
of i-SAFE Internet Safety Education



School Year 2005-06

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REPORT SUMMARY

Millions of school-age American children possess naive attitudes about their online safety and are engaging in a range of high-risk behaviors. i-SAFE, Inc., is the world leader in Internet safety education, annually training more than a million students in grades K-12 throughout the nation and abroad. During the past school year, approximately 170,300 students completed i-SAFE pre-assessments exploring their Internet-related beliefs and behaviors. Post-assessments measured the extent to which i-SAFE Internet safety education changed beliefs and impacted behaviors.

Analysis of the data found that the vast majority of students are Internet users, often interacting with strangers online. One-half (50%) of students in grades 9-12 “talk” in chat rooms or use instant messaging (IM) with Internet strangers, while 25% of students in grades 5-8 do so.

One in five students (20%) in grades 5-12 report having met in person with someone they had originally met on the Internet. Meanwhile, most parents appear oblivious to such risky behavior. Only 3% of parents surveyed by i-SAFE believe their children have done so.

Children are at risk of becoming targets of child predators or cyber bullies when they share revealing types of personal information online or in excessive amounts. Many young children have their photos posted online (16% of 3rd and 4th graders), and many older children share photos and uniquely identifying personal information—such as their full names or home addresses—on their own Web pages or blogs. Many are reckless with personal information. Nearly one quarter (23%) of students in grades 9-12 have shared uniquely identifying personal information with someone they had only just met on the Internet, while 13% of students in grades 5-8 have done the same.

Females in grades 5-12 are more likely than males to keep a personal blog (32% vs. 25%), have a personal Web page (37% vs. 28%), use chat rooms or IM (58% vs. 47%), and have a personal e-mail account (68% vs. 59%).

The Internet can be an unpleasant experience for children. For example, 11% of high school students have been “cyber-stalked,” meaning repeatedly pursued or contacted by another person online and against their wishes. Nearly one-third (32%) of high school students admit they sometimes say mean or hurtful things online, and 25% know someone who has been cyber bullied.

The Internet offers children myriad opportunities to engage in inappropriate behavior, often in tempting anonymity. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of high school students admit to unsafe, inappropriate, or illegal activities online. More than half (56%) of middle school students do.

Hiding online activities from parents is common among high school students (38%) but also found among those in middle school (21%). High school students also often lie about their ages (40%) to gain access to inappropriate Web sites. Nearly one quarter (24%) of middle school students do so. Moreover, nearly one-third (31%) of 9th through 12th graders say they sometimes lie about their age to people on the Internet. Among students in grades 5-8, 20% sometimes do.

Males in grades 5-12 are more likely than females to have circumvented Internet filtering software intended to prevent them from viewing objectionable sites (22% vs. 16%), visit gambling sites (24% vs. 8%), actually gamble online (12% vs. 4%), visit alcoholic company Web sites (17% vs. 7%), and meet face-to-face with someone from the Internet (23% vs. 17%).

Intellectual property theft is rampant among youth. Among the students in grades 3-4 who download music, 69% do so illegally, or without paying for the music. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of students in grades 5-8 who download music and/or videos do so without paying. The illegal downloading rate for music and videos increases slightly in grades 9-12 (77%).

Nearly one-half (47%) of students in grades 5-8 do not give appropriate credit when they copy or use material from the Internet for use in their schoolwork, and a smaller percentage (29%) of students in grades 9-12 fail to give credit.

The students completing i-SAFE Internet safety education were highly likely to change a number of their Internet beliefs and behaviors and thereby reduce their online risks. Among the students in grades 3-12 with unsafe online habits prior to completing i-SAFE, 91% indicated that they would make better choices about where they go and what they do on the Internet. Similarly, 88% indicated that they would be more careful about sharing personal information on the Internet. Furthermore, 91% said they are now equipped to see and stay away from dangerous things on the Internet, and 75% indicated they are now less likely to meet someone from the Internet face-to-face.