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## **“Be Careful Who You Friend:” Early Adolescents’ Reports of Safety, Privacy, and Family Monitoring of Facebook Use**

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## **“Be Careful Who You Friend:” Early Adolescents’ Reports of Safety, Privacy, and Family Monitoring of Facebook Use**

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**Abstract:** With the growing popularity of social networking sites (SNS), parents, educators, youth development workers, researchers, and policymakers are increasingly concerned with Internet safety issues. In this paper we highlight a study designed to understand how young people describe how much (or how little) social network monitoring is happening in their home life, including who is doing the monitoring, when, why, and how. Participants included 33 middle school youth (aged 11-14) who were participating in a 9-week sexual health curriculum. Teens reported that their parents were most concerned about “friending” the wrong people and swearing on Facebook postings. In contrast, teens talked more about using Facebook to keep in touch with their known social circle and were not as preoccupied with adding people they didn’t know or wanting to meet strangers online. Teens also reported that female family and community members were the most frequent monitors of their Facebook pages. Implications for youth development programs and future research directions are discussed.

### **Introduction**

Research shows that the “net generation” (born between 1980 and 2001) spends much more time online than watching television (Tapscott, 2009), and young people’s most frequent use of the Internet centers on communicating with their peer networks through social media (Subrahmanyam, & Greenfield, 2008). Adolescents spend time within online spaces to explore their identity (Livingstone, & Brake, 2010; Subrahmanyam, Smahel, & Greenfield, 2006) and sexuality (Suzuki, & Calzo, 2004), and to find romantic partners (Smahel, & Subrahmanyam, 2007). Among young adolescents the popularity of social networking sites (SNS) has been growing fast — from a 55% usage rate in 2006 to 73% in 2010 (Lenhart, et al., 2010). A national poll showed that about one-fifth of teenagers log on to their favorite SNS more than 10

times a day (Common Sense Media, 2009). These SNS have different capabilities (e.g., for uploading audio and visual information) and different levels of anonymity that users can explore depending on their developmental needs for identity exploration, sense of autonomy, need for intimacy, or desire for a public audience (Christie, & Viner, 2005; Erikson, 1959; Subrahmanyam, & Smahel, 2011). As noted by Reich, Subrahmanyam and Espinoza (2012), overall, little is known about what adolescents actually do with SNS and with whom they interact.

### **Early adolescent media risk-taking**

The transition from middle to high school is a critical period for risk-taking, increased peer influence, and potentially perilous online and social networking behaviors as adolescents seek autonomy and separation from their familial networks (Bearman, & Brückner, 1999; Kinsman, et al., 1997; Miller, et al., 1997; Stanton, et al., 2002). Livingstone (2008) theorizes that social networks offer teenagers positive peer subcultures and can act as alternatives to face-to-face social embarrassment; noncommittal, playful online transactions may make behaviors such as flirting and innuendo more controllable for teens. On the other hand, some peer subcultures may condone alcohol use, dating many partners, cyberbullying, or spreading risqué photos of compromising positions. For instance, one survey study found that about half of Facebook users have discovered unwanted pictures of themselves posted by other people, linked to their own profiles (Tufekci, & Spence, 2007).

### **Parental media monitoring**

As with other adolescent social exploration, parents may have concerns about their children's Internet safety, and may attempt to regulate or monitor their teens' behavior by "friending" them on a SNS such as Facebook. Kanter, Afifi, & Robbins (2012) note that there has not been much research on how adolescents feel about their family members monitoring their SNS use, because this media-based form of tracking a child's whereabouts and activities is relatively new. Parental monitoring in the new media context is thought of as a mediation process wherein parents attempt to regulate how their children's media access, use, and perceptions will likely influence the adolescents' attitudes and behaviors (Hoan, & Cheon, 2005). In the case of SNS, Mesch (2009) argues that this includes both *restrictive mediation* (limiting access to media) and *evaluative mediation* (open parent-child discussions regarding Internet use). Although studies about TV and Internet monitoring by parents is not new, research concerning parental knowledge about their child's use of Facebook is scarce. To date, there have been no exploratory, in-depth qualitative interview studies about how young people describe how much (or how little) social network monitoring is happening in their home life, including who is doing the monitoring, when, why, and how.

### **Research Questions**

- What self-disclosing and peer-monitoring activities do adolescents engage in on Facebook?
- How do adolescents describe the level of monitoring from their parents or family members?
- From the adolescents' point of view, what are the main parental concerns and rules regarding Facebook usage?

## Methods

### Participants

The present research is from a larger qualitative interview study regarding family communication about sex, which obtained IRB approval from Wellesley College. We recruited a convenience sample of 7<sup>th</sup> grade students from 3 middle schools teaching *Get Real: Comprehensive Sex Education that Works*, a three-year comprehensive sex education program with 27 lessons developed by Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts, which includes a unit on media literacy. Family homework activities accompany each lesson and were designed to enhance parent-teen communication about sex and relationships, some of which involved discussing media messages.

Each school determined how invitations and consent forms were distributed, ranging from handing out forms during class or afterschool programming to mailing invitations directly to home addresses. One hundred seventy-seven 7<sup>th</sup> graders were invited to participate in interviews. Thirty-eight consent forms were returned. All students who obtained parental consent were contacted; 94% of those completed interviews between March and May 2011. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in English and took approximately 30 minutes; they took place predominantly at school during the afterschool hours, although a few were conducted over the phone. All teens were compensated \$15 in appreciation of their participation.

Within our sample of 33 (19 boys, 14 girls), teens ranged in age from 11-14, with a mean age of 12.88 ( $SD=.53$ ). Participants' self-reports for parental education had a mean of 2.81 ( $SD=1.14$ ), representing having finished high school, without starting college. Thirty-six percent reported living in a two-parent household. Their racial/ethnic backgrounds were 37% Black, 33% Latino, 18% White, 9% Biracial, and 3% American Indian. Nine percent reported that they had had sex by 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Of the 33 participants, 25 described the role Facebook played in their communication about relationships with peers. Therefore, only these participants were included in the current analysis. We obtained permission to audio-tape interviews and these recordings were later transcribed.

### Interview Protocol

The protocol contained a broad base of open-ended questions related to communicating about sexual health and relationships with one's family members. Interview questions relevant to the present study addressed how adolescents generally used Facebook or other social networking websites in their social lives on a daily basis. These were followed up with questions about how their peers interacted with them on Facebook, and probed how much they were aware of any family members monitoring their Facebook activities, including what they thought their parents' top concerns were.

### Data Analysis

A content analysis approach was used to code narrative interview data for overarching themes (Patton, 2002). The first author conducted the analysis, coding the transcripts for emergent themes. She developed a codebook that listed the types and properties of the themes and sub-themes that emerged. Two themes (Facebook activities and parental concerns) were not mutually exclusive; therefore each participant could report more than one response, often yielding more than one code for each theme. The second author performed an inter-rater reliability check in order to protect against investigator bias, coding a random selection of one tenth of the data and compared the independent coding with the first author's coding responses. In the cases where the authors disagreed, they met to resolve discrepancies in

thematic coding and to further clarify coding definitions. NVivo version 8 was used to facilitate the data analysis.

## Results

We present our findings according to the following main themes:

- (1) Facebook activities of self and peers
- (2) Parental monitoring of Facebook activities
- (3) Parental concerns and rules regarding Facebook usage

In reporting direct quotations from the interviews we note the gender and race/ethnicity of the speakers.

### Facebook activities

Participants reported a wide range of self-disclosing as well as peer monitoring activities on Facebook. The two most common types of behaviors were: (1) to be in constant communication and updated about what is happening in peers' lives; and (2) to talk about relationship-status changes and who currently likes whom. For instance, one African American girl discussed how she uses Facebook to bring up potentially sensitive questions about boyfriends:

Sometimes we talk about what are we doing like on weekends and sometimes like that. We really don't get into conversation about the boyfriends unless like—unless I usually start it, because my friend I like to tease her about it. Like, 'He likes you and you know it.' Because she didn't say anything yet, and he's been like hounding her for weeks saying, 'Hey, remember what I said?' And she's like, 'Yeah, I do.' But no answer to it. So that's the only time we've probably talked about that boyfriend/girlfriend thing.

Participants often talked about incorporating other aspects of Facebook, such as chatting and posting photos to their conversations about relationships:

Sometimes it's like you have a friend or something, or it's just like chat on chat and catch up on peoples' lives and look at their photos and what's happening...well like sometimes people post things like, 'Why is so-and-so mad at me just because like *something*.' Stuff that has to do with a relationship. So that kind of stuff...And then when you're on chat sometimes people will come on and they'll tell you who they like, if they like someone. (Mexican/White boy)

The ability to look at a peer's wall of comments from others allowed some an opportunity to see a relationship unfold over Facebook: "My friend is just now getting comments from this boy that has been in her class since the whole year and is just now asking her out when school is almost over" (African American girl). Many teens also enjoyed the "Relationship status" function of Facebook as a way to keep up-to-date with the fast changing nature of adolescent relationships, or used it as the attention-seeking "buzz" starter: "Because sometimes they just do it as a joke. Like, they marry people on Facebook as a joke" (Irish/French girl).

Less frequent responses about Facebook activity concerned top ten lists/polling, announcing parties or events, discussing current events like sports, and posting quotes for fun or "inspiration" — all activities that the teens considered normal and G-rated communication

among friends. Rarely did these teens report any personal inappropriate conduct on Facebook such as spreading lies or rumors, though some talked about hearing other people experiencing those behaviors:

Well, I know a lot of people on Facebook who like write a lot of stuff that I just don't understand what they're writing. People I know, they say a lot of swears. They reference sexual stuff...and they write on my friends' wall because they called them swears, and it just seems sort of wrong to me. (Irish/English girl)

Both boys and girls shared that they occasionally use foul language on Facebook: "I swear sometimes but not all the times. Most of the times I go to Facebook, I'm happy and say good things, but I swear sometimes." A couple of teens talked about helping each other with homework answers: "Sometimes we cheat on the homework... Or like when somebody hasn't done their homework they just go online and go, 'Yo yo, you do your homework? What's the answer for this?'" (Dominican boy). Lastly, one respondent recounted a story about having his personal information compromised on Facebook:

Well there was this one thing where this person ... somebody hacked me. And they posted this really.... I'm not going to go into details. This picture. And I was like "Oh." It would be inappropriate for a thirty-year old. So I canceled that Facebook and started a new one with my alias, which everyone knew me by. Everyone that I knew, anyway. So after that, then no one hacked me and I had no problems after that. (Black/Puerto Rican boy)

### **Parent and family member monitoring**

The majority of teens reported that their parents did some form of monitoring of their Facebook account and generally, mothers were reported as the main person taking on this function in their families. The type and level of reported monitoring ranged from parents telling their teens to watch out for certain inappropriate activities to having access to their teens' Facebook accounts and actively monitoring and taking action when necessary:

I gave her the code to my Facebook, and she says she checks it at work sometimes just to see what my friends are saying 'cause if my friends are emailing me nasty stuff or talking about something about raunchy or putting weird statuses, she says that she's just going to delete it. So I need to approve friends that I know that wouldn't say that... And she actually never said anything about it. (Cape Verdean boy)

Sometimes I want to do something with my status, but I realize that if my mom sees it, she'll like grab me or something. Like if I disobeyed her. Like if she tells me not to be at the computer or something. You know, if I change my status, she's going to know I'm on the computer. (Irish/English girl)

Some students observed that their mothers were more firm with Facebook limits at certain times of the day, such as at bedtime: "My mom tells me like I can't bring my phone upstairs to my bed, and I use it like when I'm supposed to go to bed. But it's because she wants me to go sleep and [not be on Facebook]" (Irish boy). A Dominican boy commented that he was grounded after he was caught using Facebook when he was supposed to go to bed: "My mom said, 'Go to sleep,' and I didn't hear her. And I was in my room listening to music on their laptop when she walked in. She was like, 'Give me the laptop. You're grounded'."

A recurring theme in at least half of the teens' reports was other adult family members and even non-family members stepping in to share monitoring of their Facebook pages. Often this happened because the parents or mothers themselves were not on Facebook. Other times the extra monitoring was in addition to parental monitoring, when parents realized they could not always be aware of every incident: "My dad doesn't have [a Facebook page], but my mom does. She doesn't have me as a friend, but my friends' moms who are friends with her, they check their kids' Facebooks, and they usually go to my wall and stuff" (African American girl).

Most adolescents revealed that their female family members were checking Facebook pages (mothers, aunts, sisters, female co-workers, and peers' moms):

I have my mom and my aunt and whole bunch of people. My aunt, when she goes on Facebook, she checks my page to make sure I'm not swearing or anything. And if I swear or something, she says in the comments, "Don't do that." or "Ok, get off of your Facebook" when it starts getting inappropriate because she has some of the people she works with to look up my Facebook just to make sure I'm not doing anything bad (Dominican girl).

### **Parental concerns and rules regarding Facebook usage**

Teens reported that parents mainly expressed concerns about the addition of the wrong people to the teens' friendship network, in particular strangers or "bad" friends. They would worry about the possibility of their teens meeting up with a stranger or being stalked or jumped by strangers: "That I'm going to add them and then start talking to them, and then I'm going to meet them somewhere and end up having sex" (Dominican female).

In the example below, an Italian-American boy talks about his parents discussing what they saw on his Facebook page and their unspoken desire to delay teen sexual relations, yet providing a reason that pertained to more sinister dangers beyond a school-age crush:

Isaiah (pseudonym): I was talking to [a girl at school], and she was talking about she wants to marry me and have sex.

Interviewer: SO SHE WAS TALKING ABOUT SEX WITH YOU? WHAT DID YOUR PARENTS DO?

Isaiah: Took it away for five days.

Interviewer: WHAT DID THEY SAY?

Isaiah: That if they see that again, they're going to take it away for two months or a year.

Interviewer: DID THEY SAY WHY?

Isaiah: It could be a setup and there are like stalkers out there. They like might want to kill you, but that girl, she wasn't like that. She always came over, and hung out with my mom and my sister and stuff. And me and my family. So, we were all close and stuff.

The second most common theme was the rule about no swearing on Facebook: "They have our passwords and stuff, so if we do anything or write anything inappropriate or swear on it, we cannot use it for like two weeks or a month" (Italian-American boy). Although most teens did not openly express concerns about their parents monitoring Facebook activity, a few students expressed frustration over strict rules about swearing: "Sometimes, they can over exaggerate on things. Like if someone wrote a swear on my wall, then I get in trouble, but it's like I can't control what they wrote on my wall, and if I haven't been on when I wrote it, then I can't like delete it" (African American girl).



Parental concerns about trash-talking and spreading rumors were themes that were reported by both boys and girls, particularly when it came down to preventing cyberbullying:

'Someone is talking trash about someone; they're talking rude about someone on Facebook, so can you go see what they're saying?' My mom doesn't know how to write on Facebook, and my sister does, so she'll check it. She'll make sure that nobody's bullying me, and if someone is, I can go tell them. (African American girl)

Adolescents described cyberbullying scenarios where someone would hack into a personal account and post negative comments or pictures designed to spread rumors or humiliate. These incidents made the adolescents more cautious about Facebook, particularly about whom they allowed into their friendship network:

Yeah, be careful who you friend. Because she's like, 'I don't want someone to hack your Facebook.' Because it happened to my sister's boyfriend. Someone hacked his Facebook account and they said a lot of bad things about my sister. And so yeah, that was bad. (Mexican/White boy)

The least frequent parental concerns, as reported by these teens, included the posting of offensive photos, revealing of personal contact information such as an address or phone number, and the possibility of their teens jeopardizing their future job prospects because of what is posted on their Facebook page:

My mom was saying that people when I'm looking for a job could go on my Facebook and look at my history... Because my cousin lost his job because of all the stuff he was posting on Facebook... My mom keeps checking on him. She signs on my Facebook and keeps looking on his profile to check him out. He had to cancel his account to get a job. (Irish/Italian boy)

## Discussion

With the growing popularity of social networking sites (SNS), parents, teachers, youth development workers, researchers, and policymakers are increasingly concerned with Internet safety issues including knowing the identity of those with whom adolescents are interacting. In our study, teens reported that their parents were most preoccupied with being influenced by or meeting up with strangers who could do inappropriate things, as well as with using foul language in Facebook postings. These concerns have most likely been fueled by news stories about online sexual predators (Kreiser, 2006; Wortham, 2009) and cyberbullying incidents that have led to suicide (Associated Press, 2008).

Most teens in our study used Facebook for keeping in constant communication with their peer networks and for getting inside information on dating relationships from friends. They talked more about using Facebook to keep in touch with their known social circle and were not as preoccupied with adding people they didn't know or wanting to meet strangers online. This is consistent with a prior study, which demonstrated that adolescents aren't particularly worried about being contacted by strangers on the Internet (Lenhart, & Madden, 2007). A minority of adolescents in the current study reported being worried about cyberbullying and hacking, which their parents and family members warned them about.



At this stage most students were fully aware that either a parent or a family member was closely monitoring their page and restricted their usage accordingly, in terms of amount of time spent on Facebook and content created for public consumption. Although the vast majority of research on SNS has been conducted on college-aged populations as opposed to young adolescents, researchers have speculated that high levels of parental monitoring during adolescence may be interpreted by the child that he/she is untrustworthy and teens may resent the monitoring (Mounts, 2000), as was the case in a few of the interviews when teens were punished for actions of others. Except for the few who asserted that their parents did not monitor their usage at all, many students acknowledged that this monitoring was for their own good, unless they were being punished for something that was not under their control, such as a friend's posting. Since the lower age limit for Facebook is 13, many studies about social networking habits have not focused on early adolescents. The current study showcases that the majority of teens are carefully and frequently monitored on Facebook — even sharing passwords with parents to have easy access. The earliest stages of having a Facebook page may be the most crucial ones for parents to set appropriate online etiquette and privacy boundary setting. This may be a critical transition period before high school, as older adolescents may be less open to parental involvement, yet may feel distressed when they accidentally post information that they do not want their parents to read (Child, Petronio, Agyeman-Budu, & Westermann, 2011). Other studies have shown that this trend of distancing from parents can reverse itself once adolescents enter college when Facebook offers a cost- and time-effective opportunity to maintain close ties with family members while living independently (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Kanter, Afifi, & Robbins, 2012; Vogl Bauer, 2003).

Prior studies on parental monitoring of teen Internet usage found that mothers were more likely to be aware of their adolescents' Internet behavior, which is consistent with studies indicating that compared to fathers, mothers are generally more aware of their adolescents' lives in general (Bumpus, et al., 2001; Liao, Khoo, & Ang, 2008; Waizenhofer, et al., 2004). To date, there have been no studies that examine which family members tend to monitor a teen's Facebook page. In this study, most students reported being monitored by either mothers or female relatives. Often parents had a difficult time keeping pace with the ever-changing nature of Internet technology and enlisted the help of their families and communities to fill in the media-savvy gap. This is particularly the case among Black and Latino families where there is a higher extended-family involvement in childrearing (Collins, 2000; Jones, & Lindahl, 2011), as reported here also in the monitoring of Facebook use. This caretaking role extends to communication about sex and relationships, where studies identify older siblings, stepmothers, as well as aunts, sisters, and family friends as teen sources of sexual information (Crohn, 2010; Guerrero, & Afifi, 1995). These findings suggest that extended family can serve as a family resource to support teens' safe and appropriate use of Facebook and other SNS. This sets the stage for health educators and youth development professionals to provide additional guidance and programming that would complement the information learned at home. The role of trusted community adults in teens' lives other than parents becomes critical in the transition between younger and older adolescents, when they have been found to skirt the preying eyes of their parents by setting up "hidden" pages (see boyd, 2007).

### **Implications for youth development**

Parental monitoring, in general, has been associated with positive youth development (Eaton, Krueger, Johnson, McGue, & Iacono, 2009; Smetana, 2008), whereas adolescents who are not monitored closely are more prone to being antisocial or delinquent (Weintraub, & Gold, 1991). Adolescents with a higher level of parental monitoring demonstrate lower sexual risk, lower

alcohol consumption, marijuana use, and cigarette smoking, and lower rates of gang involvement and arrest (Huang, Murphy, & Hser, 2011). The majority of the types of monitoring reported by teens in this study fell into the category of restrictive mediation (i.e., limiting access to Facebook) rather than evaluative mediation (i.e., open communication about Internet safety issues). Parents, health teachers, and youth development staff could create opportunities for more family discussions about online privacy issues and appropriate content for posting, emphasizing healthy behavior rather than being punitive without being warranted (O’Keeffe, et al., 2011).

Limited opportunities during the school day to discuss media literacy, cyberbullying, online predators, and other Internet safety issues suggest the importance of tools that are easily accessible and useful for a broad range of youth development workers, who can receive training in these topics as a part of their professional development. Several websites have ready-made conversation-starter material for educators and youth development staff to use, such as the NetSmartz Workshop, which is a program of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (<http://www.netsmartz.org/Educators>). They offer a middle school kit designed for those with limited time to develop these tools, including teachers, youth program coordinators, counselors, law-enforcement officers, social service providers, and religious leaders. The kit contains a resource manual, safety presentations, animated videos, lesson plans, and posters in English and Spanish. Other web-based guidelines and tips for keeping young people safe from social networking include the U.S. Department of State’s website (<http://www.onguardonline.gov/articles/0012-kids-and-socializing-online>), the American Academy of Pediatrics (<http://www.aap.org/>), and the Girl Scouts (<http://forgirls.girlscouts.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/STCResourceforKids.pdf>).

### **Suggested activities and youth program elements:**

- Train youth development workers and health educators to understand the need to discuss Internet safety issues since online activities may become precursors to offline activities
- Conduct focus groups with youth to understand their online peer networking culture
- Post posters throughout programs and create a physical environment that would increase engagement in healthy social networking habits
- Create a Facebook network for the youth development program so that youth workers can “friend” their youths, keeping tabs on their online activities but also creating a shared online space to build community
- Develop lessons on adjusting privacy settings on Facebook as well as on how to invite healthy engagement in Facebook activities that do not include bullying, trash-talking, and spreading rumors
- Conduct parent workshops or generate brochures on how to manage social networking monitoring and opening up a dialogue with teens about usage rules
- Review youths’ Facebook pages during workforce development programs as a critical element to supporting future employability

### **Conclusions and Future Research Directions**

This qualitative interview study advances our understanding of youths’ online social networking activities, perceived monitoring from family members, and perceived worries of their parents about their Internet use. Findings highlight the importance of beginning the conversations

about Internet safety in middle school, setting privacy limits, and supporting adolescents' competence at managing their own boundary setting even without constant monitoring from parents, family members, or other caring members of their communities.

While the present study provides crucial insights into how to enhance positive development and protect our young people from harm, more research is needed to understand the impact of monitoring from family members versus a caring adult mentor. This study explored the experiences of purposefully sampled youth who volunteered to participate and were enrolled in a sex education program. While the curriculum did not directly address Internet concerns, the sample may not be representative of the general youth population. More research with a larger sample, particularly with adolescents who are not monitored at home regarding their Facebook usage, is needed. Since this study focused exclusively on adolescent perceptions about their monitoring and messages received from parents about Facebook, it is limited by the fact that we cannot account for the parents' perspectives, which may be different. Studies that explore family communication about Internet use from both parents' and teens' perspectives could help to clarify these interactions and develop interventions to enhance how parents talk with teens about SNS. Future research may also explore how and when do early adolescents begin to restrict access to their Facebook pages from family members, other adults, or peers. Perhaps that need to have an "undercover" life away from their parents' eyes develops at an older age than during early adolescence. Future studies should also assess the prevalence of social networking safety guidelines discussed at youth development programs or during professional development of youth workers. Finally, studies should consider the effectiveness of partnering up with local community organizations that may provide the needed materials and lessons to youth programs, health educators, and parenting groups.

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