

Teens like to hide identity on Net, study finds

BY CAROLINE ALPHONSO

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 2005

POSTED AT 4:28 AM EST

FROM TUESDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL

Almost six in 10 teenagers are disguising their identities on the Internet, according to a new study that looks at a generation of Web-savvy young Canadians.

Whether it's pretending to be older or a different gender, those in Grades 7 through 11 said they have experimented with social roles either to see what it was like to be someone else, talk to older kids or even flirt. About 17 per cent said they did it so they can act mean to others and not get in trouble.

"[Parents] should be aware that kids are doing this," said Cathy Wing, director of education for Media Awareness Network, the non-profit group that released yesterday's study. She added that the activities are only on-line versions of normal adolescent behaviour.

"We should not get too hysterical about it, because there's some developmental stuff that is happening that is totally typical of the age group," she said.

Still, Ms. Wing said that the fact teenagers are going on-line to bully others is cause for concern.

This year's survey of 5,200 students in Grades 4 through 11 shows that young Canadians are more connected than ever, with nine in 10 having access to the Internet at home. And by their late teens, more than half have their own Internet-connected computer, separate and apart from the family computer.

In the 2001 survey, less than 80 per cent of students reported being connected to the Web at home.

With more kids having Internet access at home, parents are increasingly complaining about the time spent on it. Adults contacted in this study said their children were wasting time in chat rooms and playing on-line games instead of doing schoolwork.

One father in Montreal said: "My daughter is on-line all the time. She doesn't seem to me that she has a life at all, except for MSN."

But the study found that the Internet is another vehicle for youngsters to connect with friends, pursue interests and to research information for school assignments. Today's wired children feel more confident about their ability to make friends, tell jokes and make people laugh, the study says.

"For a parent to remove the computer, you're basically really having a major impact on your kid's social life," Ms. Wing said. "They're incredibly adept at the technology. They've totally integrated it into their lives. It's just an extension of their lives, particularly their social lives."

Even younger children in Grade 4 are active Internet users.

"They're doing all the same activities that older teens are doing. They're downloading music and movies. They're playing games. They're using instant messaging on a daily basis."

Other findings in the study include:

75 per cent of households have rules about meeting an on-line acquaintance in the real world, compared

with 54 per cent of homes in the 2001 survey;

A large majority of children -- 79 per cent -- have never met an on-line acquaintance face-to-face;

Of the 12 per cent of students in Grades 7 through 11 who say they have been sexually harassed, more than half said it happened over the Internet. Others report being harassed at school. A small percentage reported being bullied on Net.

© Copyright 2005 Bell Globemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.

