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## Teenagers Find Information About Sex on the Internet When They Look for It – And When They Don't, UCLA's Children's Digital Media Center Reports

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Contact: Stuart Wolpert ( [stuartw@college.ucla.edu](mailto:stuartw@college.ucla.edu) )

Phone: 310-206-0511

American children live in an "all-pervasive sexualized media environment" that produces a "tremendous amount of inadvertent exposure to pornography and other adult sexual media." Teenagers are routinely exposed to values on the Internet that would disturb many parents; teens often search the Internet for information about sex that they would be embarrassed to discuss with an adult. Race is another popular topic in teen chat rooms.

A special issue of the Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology devoted to research on children and the electronic media, conducted at the National Science Foundation-funded Children's Digital Media Center, includes these findings, among many others.

Not only will children seeking pornography "find it all over the Internet," but children who are not seeking pornography are often inadvertently exposed to it when they conduct Internet searches on perfectly appropriate subjects, said Patricia Greenfield, UCLA psychology professor and director of UCLA's Children's Digital Media Center (CDMC).

"Childhood used to be a time of relative innocence for many children," Greenfield said, "but with today's all-pervasive sexualized media environment, that is no longer the case. By late childhood, it has become very difficult to avoid highly sexualized material that is intended for an adult audience."

What effects does the "all-pervasive sexualized media environment" have?

"Pornography and sexual media can influence sexual violence, sexual attitudes, moral values, and sexual activity of children and youth," she said.

"These research results, taken together, demonstrate how teen Internet use has evolved

### UCLA NEWS

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over a short period of time," said Amy Sussman, National Science Foundation (NSF) program officer. "They illustrate both the dangers and opportunities on the Web, as well as debunk popularly held but incorrect notions about teen Internet use. The guidelines based on the research should be helpful to parents and policy-makers alike."

To find out what young people are exposed to on the Internet, Greenfield entered a Web area devoted to teenagers — whose motto was "Be seen, be heard, be you" — and was "shocked" by what she found there, including unsolicited sexual advances from strangers.

"The sexuality expressed in a teen chat room was public, linked to strangers and had nothing to do with relationships," Greenfield said. "It was very explicit and focused on physical acts, and often associated with the degradation of women. I started to receive private instant messages, including a crude sexual advance, just by hanging out at the chat room, even though I had not participated in any of the ongoing conversations.

"The unsolicited nature of these messages could be daunting for adolescents, particularly younger ones," she added. "I was not looking for unsolicited personal messages, sexual or otherwise, but once I decided to enter the chat room, I could not avoid being exposed. I was pursued sexually. I also found aggression, racism and prejudice in this chat room (which no longer exists). Racism and hate are not limited to hate sites.

"We often consider the Internet to be a repository of information, but my experiences in the chat room led me to conclude that we need to question the values that we wish to convey, and the disparity between those values and the ones to which teenagers are being exposed. These are not only Internet issues, but issues of our culture in general, and youth culture in particular."

Greenfield also visited a teen chat room that had adult monitors and rules to reduce offensive and crude comments. She found that the chat there was quite different from the chat in the unsupervised site; still, sex and aggression did not disappear; rather they became hidden in code.

"The participants in this teen chat room were talking about sex a lot of the time," Greenfield said. "They were referring to various forms of sex, all in code, without using words about sex. The coded sexual allusions were still devoid of feelings and relationships."

These visits to teen chat rooms inspired the research program just released in the current issue of the Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology.

A chat room is a "room" in cyberspace where people congregate for online conversations, writing and reading messages. Multiple conversations take place simultaneously and anonymously. Although people in teen chat rooms often ask others to identify themselves by age, sex and location in the coded lexicon of chat — "a/s/l/" — they do not know who the others are. Kaveri Subrahmanyam, a professor at California State University, Los Angeles, and a researcher at UCLA's Children's Digital Media Center, found (with co-authors Greenfield and CDMC researcher Brendesha Tynes) that chat participants were using this code to advertise their own characteristics and find out those of others in order to engage online in the normal teen activity of "pairing off." Subrahmanyam notes that "Relative to offline dating, benefits are reduced; but so are the risks that come with face-to-face interaction. For example, rejection in an online setting with strangers probably stings less" than rejection from someone you know.

Teenagers and children use an elaborate code to protect their privacy online, Greenfield said. When a parent is nearby while a child is on the Internet, for example, the child may type POS to indicate "parent over shoulder," Subrahmanyam said.

### **Teenagers and sex information on the Internet**

Health and sex information on the Internet can be found 24 hours a day on Web pages, bulletin boards, newsgroups, listservs and chat rooms — and teenagers are searching for, and finding, such information in cyberspace.

In the first study of peer health advice on teen bulletin boards, members of UCLA's Children's Digital Media Center found that while previous research indicates teens are reluctant to seek face-to-face advice about sex from parents and other adults, adolescents are readily accessing this information from their peers on online health bulletin boards.

"Internet health bulletin boards may circumvent the awkwardness associated with asking sexual and relationship questions, while seeming to satisfy adolescent needs by allowing teens to candidly discuss issues about relationships and sexuality in their replies to one another," report Lalita Suzuki, a CDMC member and a research associate at HopeLab (a nonprofit organization in Palo Alto developing interventions for young people with chronic illnesses) and Jerel Calzo, another member of the UCLA center.

Suzuki and Calzo analyzed the content on two public health-oriented bulletin boards that addressed general teen issues and teen sexual health.

"Questions referring to sexual techniques prompted a lot of interest in the teen sexual health

issues board, and so did interpersonal aspects of sex, such as problems with boyfriends and girlfriends regarding whether or not to have sex," Suzuki and Calzo write. "The general teen issues board also elicited many questions about what to do in romantic relationships. Adolescents are actively using bulletin boards to ask a variety of sensitive questions online, and they receive numerous replies from online peers. The responses are filled with personal opinions, advice and concrete information, and are often emotionally supportive."

Suzuki and Calzo cite examples of the questions and comments teenagers post on online bulletin boards, revealing fears and insecurities on a variety of topics, such as:

- "My boyfriend wants to have sex and I agreed, but now I don't want to ... I'm afraid that if I say no he'll break up with me."
- "Are there a good number of people that go to high school parties that don't drink?"
- "I just want to gain the self-confidence to feel better about me ... where do I start?"
- "I'm embarrassed around my mom."
- "How do I ask a girl out, or at least talk to her?"
- "I am not mean to anybody but for some reason nobody likes me!! HELP!!!"

Questions about romantic relationships were most frequently posted, such as tips for asking someone out, as were questions about sex, pregnancy and birth control.

While replies were sometimes critical ("Don't be talking 'bout how you ain't superficial, 'cuz honey, you ARE," "Forgive me if I don't give you a standing ovation"), many more replies were helpful and supportive, and some who posted the questions expressed gratitude for the advice and information they received ("Thank you soooo much," "I don't feel as freaked out any more").

### **What teenagers do online**

In a separate study, the center's Elisheva Gross studied more than 200 students in seventh and 10th grades (with average ages of 12 and 15), in upper middle class suburban California schools to learn what they do online, and why. Among her findings:

- Instant messaging is the most common online activity among these students, and the one to which the students devote the most time: 40 minutes per day, on average. The students also

spend much of their time visiting Web sites, largely to download music (31.4 minutes per day), and sending and reading e-mail (22 minutes per day). They spend time on many activities at once.

· The most frequently cited reasons for instant messaging are to "hang out" with friends and relieve boredom. The most common topics discussed are friends and gossip. "The Internet appears to serve social functions similar to the telephone's," Gross said.

· Communication with strangers is relatively infrequent. Eighty-two percent of instant messaging is with friends from school. This pattern was similar for boys and girls, and for the seventh- and 10th-grade students. The students spend the majority of their time online interacting with close, offline friends.

· About half the students reported they had never pretended to be anyone else; about 40 percent reported they had done so only "a couple of times." Ten percent said they do so occasionally or more often. A majority of those who pretend to be someone else said they do so in the company of friends. Nearly half of those who pretend to be someone else (48 percent) said they do so as a joke. Eleven percent said they pretend in order to be more interesting to another person (for example, "because mature 20-year-old guys don't like to talk to 15-year-old girls"). One 10th-grade girl said pretending allows her to be "someone I wish I could be."

· Boys and girls do not differ much in their daily Internet use. Boys and girls both described their online social interaction as occurring in private settings such as e-mail and instant messaging, and with friends who are part of their daily offline lives. They discuss ordinary topics, such as friends and gossip. "The notion that boys' Net use is from Mars and girls' is from Venus turns out not to be true," Gross said.

### **Race: a popular topic in teen chat rooms**

Conversations about race and ethnicity in teen chat rooms were studied in a research paper on the racial experiences of adolescents online. Is the "Net-generation" more accepting of diversity than previous generations?

CDMC researcher Brendesha Tynes found that race is a common topic on teen chat rooms, and that teens identify themselves on the basis of race (such as a "Puerto Rican hottie"). She found plenty of ugly racial slurs, but encouraging news as well.

"Many forms of racial hostility and negative stereotypes that exist offline are repeated in teen chat on the Internet," Tynes said. "However, for the most part, adolescent discussions were positive in nature. We found positive racial comments in 87

percent of the transcripts we studied, neutral comments in 76 percent, and negative references in 47 percent. In contrast, previous research has indicated that when race is discussed in adult online forums, it is often negative."

"The taboo often associated with discussing race may be dissipating," Tynes said. "We believe we are approaching a time when diversity is valued and a common topic of conversation, which is an essential component of healthy race relations. Still, a good deal of work remains before we are free of negative racial attitudes and the expression of those attitudes."

Tynes and co-authors UCLA undergraduate Lindsay Reynolds and Greenfield found significantly more racial and ethnic slurs in unmonitored teen chat rooms than in chat rooms with adult monitors and rules of conduct (do not harass or threaten, do not use hate speech, etc.). In a popular teen chat room, one chat session focused on music until the adult monitor announced that she was leaving for a short time. One of the teens wrote, "The HOST is gone ... !" and the conversation immediately changed to an antagonistic questioning of one of the participant's racial identity.

White children, as well as minorities, are often victims of prejudice in teen chat rooms, Tynes found ("I hate when white boys act black," one teen said). She also found minorities criticized for "sounding white" in chat rooms.

Examples of teens identifying themselves by race in chat rooms include: "hey, any one wanna chat with a hot 13/f/oh blond hair blue eyes 5'2 im me" (from a 13-year-old female in Ohio, asking to be sent private instant messages), "Any guys wanna chat wi a blk/rican gurl IM me Ill be waitin" (from a girl who identifies herself as black and Puerto Rican, also asking to be sent instant messages).

### **Advice for parents**

Nearly half of students in grades three through eight reported visiting Web sites with "adult" content, according to a 1998 study, and that figure is likely to be higher today, Greenfield noted.

Greenfield recommends that parents allow young children to use the Internet only under close supervision. "Without supervision," she said, "the risks far outweigh the potential benefits of unsupervised Internet use for young children."

How can parents protect their children from material on the Internet offensive to their values without cutting their children off from everything on the Internet that is beneficial?

"A warm parent-child relationship with open

channels for communicating is the most important non-technical method that parents can use to deal with the challenges of the sexualized media environment," Greenfield said. She advises parents to discuss media experiences with their children, and to be open about discussing sex with their children.

Parents should use the Internet and other media with their children, Greenfield advises, and should keep computers in a public room in the house, not in the child's bedroom.

For boys at risk for aggressive, antisocial behavior, parents should carefully monitor and severely limit access to pornography on file-sharing networks and elsewhere, Greenfield said.

Greenfield identifies another area of concern for parents: Children below age four or five typically cannot distinguish commercial from noncommercial content, and children younger than seven or eight do not realize the purpose of commercials is to sell products — yet the Internet is filled with commercials intermingled with content.

"Worries about the effects of Web commercialism on children are more than justified," she said, adding that the Internet is successful in persuading children to convince their parents to buy them products they see advertised and promoted. "We should expect Internet use to lead to parent-child conflict when a parent has to fight such a persuasive socializing environment as the Internet."

UCLA's Children's Digital Media Center studies the virtual worlds that children and teens create on the Internet and how those virtual worlds relate to their real-world lives and development. When the federally funded National Science Foundation established the Children's Digital Media Center, Greenfield said, "We hope to get deeper than researchers have before into the hidden lives of teenagers."

"The UCLA researchers and the NSF-funded Children's Digital Media Center have produced some fascinating insights — and this center is just one part of NSF's Children's Research Initiative Centers, which are also studying family, school and community factors that contribute to children's success," said Peg Barratt, National Science Foundation division director for behavior and cognitive sciences.

The current issue of the *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* is dedicated to the memory of Rodney Cocking, a scholar whose interests included the relationship between child development and the electronic media. Cocking, who was murdered in 2002, established and served as program officer for the National Science Foundation's Developmental and Learning Sciences Program.

The Children's Digital Media Center, funded for five years, has branches at Georgetown University, Northwestern University and the University of Texas, Austin, as well as UCLA. The lead branch, Georgetown's, is directed by professor Sandra Calvert. All four branches have contributed research articles to the special issue of the Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology. At UCLA, the center includes researchers and students from departments of psychology, anthropology, education and psychiatry/biobehavioral sciences, as well as researchers from other institutions.

Greenfield and her colleagues hope the centers' research will contribute to public policy decisions and will offer beneficial information to parents.

"While many children and adolescents use chat, many parents have never been in a chat room, or even know what it is. Parents should know what is happening, and be involved. They need to be aware of what their children are doing in chat rooms, and be aware of the possible dangers, as well as the benefits. Some children are not ready for the content they are finding there," she said.

Greenfield — an expert in developmental and cultural psychology who has published on children and computers, video games, and television — believes the Children's Digital Media Center can provide a unique window into an important world for children and teens, the world of electronic media.

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