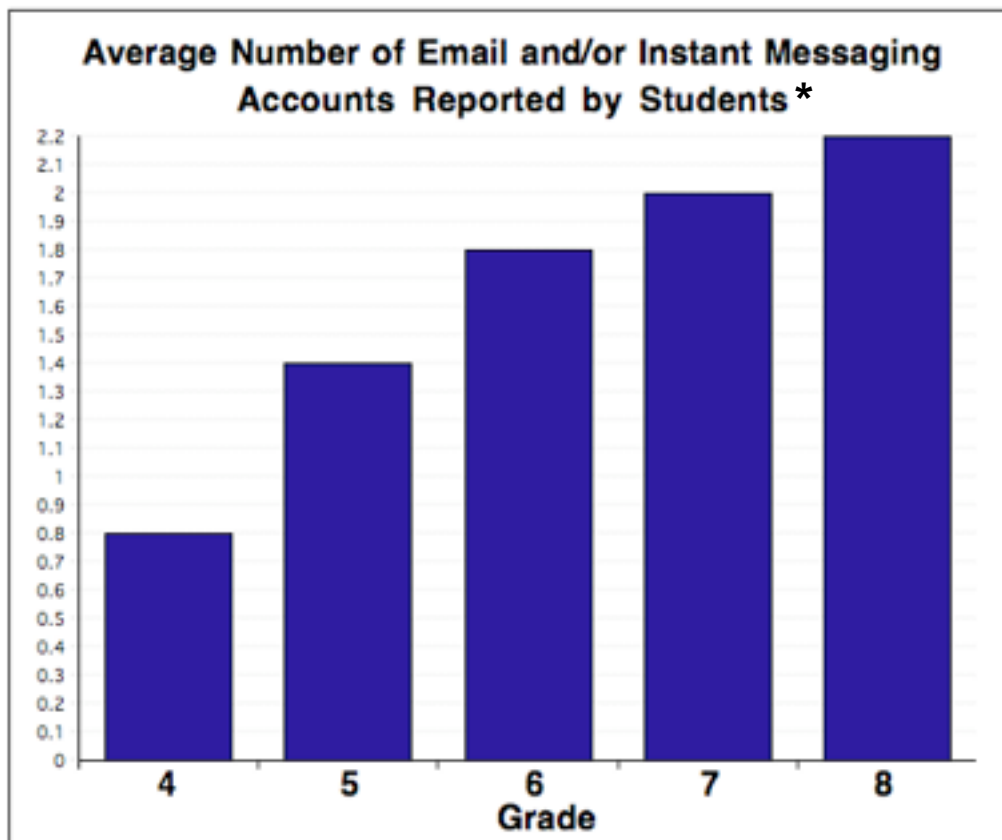


# Internet Safety - Are We Doing Enough in Grades 4-8 ?

by Doug Fodeman, Director of Technology and Communications, Brookwood School

As internet usage by children and teens has grown both in schools and at home, issues and concerns have risen about their usage and safety. The U.S. Congress has proposed a new federal law that would require schools to prevent students from gaining access to social networking sites such as MySpace, Xanga, LiveJournal, Facebook and others. Schools are fielding questions from concerned parents about their child's internet behavior and safety more than ever. Organizations such as Peacefire are making it increasingly easy for students to circumvent school web filters in the name of fighting censorship through web sites known as "anonymizers". Ultimately, schools find themselves in the quandary of trying to assuage parent concerns, protect children from inappropriate content and teach students how to use internet resources in developmentally-appropriate ways while avoiding the many dangers that lurk a keystroke away.

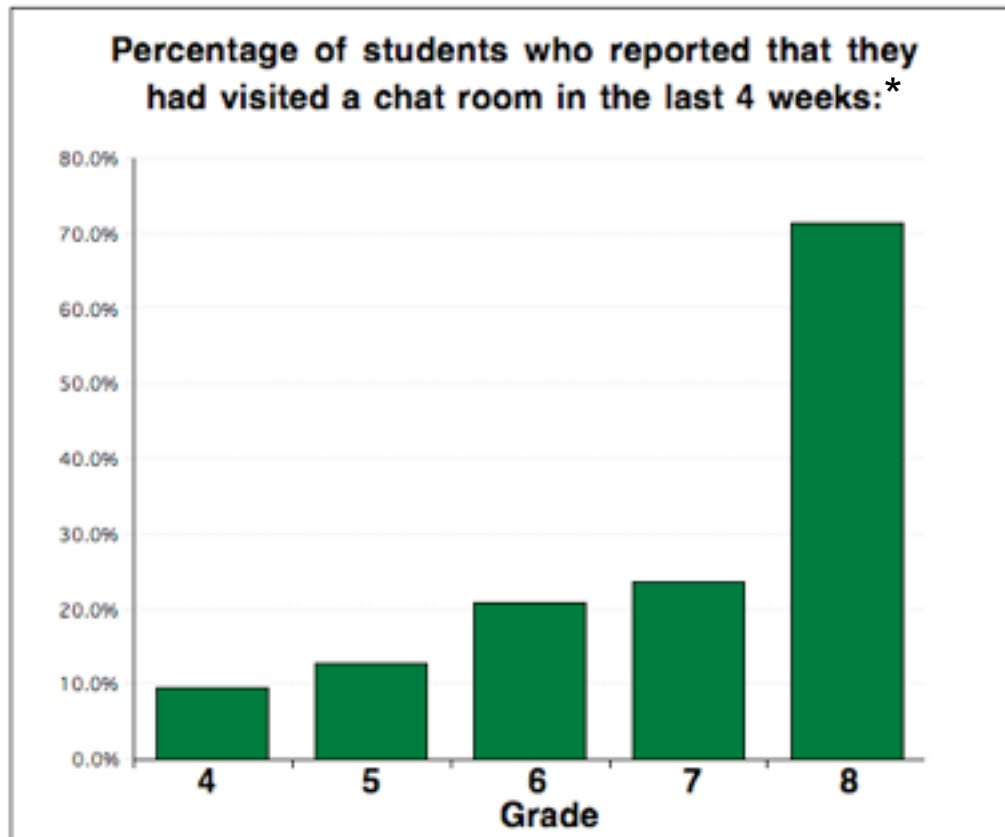
For educational institutions what obscures our mission and directives is our lack of understanding exactly *what students are doing on the internet*. In order to know *what to teach* we need to know what students are doing on the Internet and when. While statistics about the internet behavior of children are becoming more available they are still limited. And where they appear to be most limited is for children in grades four through eight.



\* Fodeman 2006 study of 2096 fourth through eighth graders of independent schools.

\* Fodeman 2006 study of 2096 fourth through eighth graders of independent schools. For more than six years Marje Monroe and I have been visiting schools around the country and speaking to parents, teachers, administrators and students about issues concerning children and teens online. [www.children-online.org] In the perpetually changing world of the internet, one of the few constants is that whatever children are doing now online, they will be doing the same thing at a younger age next year. For example, from our experiences we knew that it was unheard of for fourth or fifth graders to have their own email accounts just four years ago. Today we find that most 5th graders of independent schools who participated in our study [n=368] report having their own accounts (71.5%) and half of all fourth graders [n=358] (50.8%) do as well. Remarkably, we have even learned of third graders with their own email and instant messaging accounts. With the use of these accounts come many problems in the hands of these young inexperienced communicators. At every school we visit we continually hear from anxious parents about problems effecting their young children's use of telecommunications tools. Identity theft and impersonation, bullying, pranks, harassment, contact from strangers including sexual predators, and exposure to inappropriate content are a sample of the problems our students face daily. These telecommunication tools are becoming a part of our students' culture faster than we can keep up with understanding the emotional and developmental ramifications of their use. And once again we are on the cusp of another wave of technology. Cellphone use by younger students is exploding. In addition to voice these cellphones can include web access, text messaging, cameras and other features. My parental wake-up call and portent occurred when my 13 year old daughter began receiving "dumb blonde" jokes via text messaging at the cost of 99¢ a joke just two hours after getting her new cell phone. We hadn't signed up for this feature and were told by the cell phone provider that it must have remained active from the previous owner of the cell number. Later that evening she showed me commercials on Nickelodeon for subscribing to text messaging jokes by simply punching in a code on her cell phone. (Another 99¢ a day.)

In an effort to better understand exactly *what* children in grades four through eight are experiencing online, I solicited many independent schools to administer an informal survey about their students' online behavior. Twelve schools responded submitting nearly 2100 surveys. This included one rural school from Virginia, one urban school from California and the remaining 10 schools were suburban from Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, Florida and California. While these survey results have limitations due to self-reporting the results are important because they reflect what fourth through eighth graders report about their own online behavior. Moreover, many of these results support what Marje Monroe and I have learned in our experiences interviewing hundreds of students from the many schools we have visited over the last few years.



\* Fodeman 2006 study of 2096 fourth through eighth graders of independent schools.

By sharing these results I hope that more schools will consider instituting more comprehensive and in-depth curricula around internet safety. The risky behaviors in which our students are engaged on the internet are far more widespread than most adults realize. Some of the survey results are deeply troubling. For example, in response to the question "have you ever felt uncomfortable online?" a fourth grader said "someone in a chatroom told me to meet them at a gas station" and a fifth grader reported that he was solicited for sex via Instant Messaging. Every day online our children are bullied, sexually harassed, manipulated and exposed to content that is developmentally inappropriate at best and terrifying at worst.

Below is a small sample of student responses to the question "Have you ever been made to feel uncomfortable online by something that happened to you?" Additional responses can be read in Appendix A. The student's grade follows the quote.

*"A very gross thing popped up on my computer" (4)*

*"Someone in a chatroom told me to meet them at a gas station" (4)*

*"Someone said you wanna get in the bed with me on IM" (5)*

*"I played a game that I didn't know that they went topless if you reach a certain point" (5)*

*"Someone got my screen name who I did not know and gave it to someone else and said I was nice and*

*started talking to me" (5)*

*"Popups and people asking if I want to cyber" (6)*

*"Someone asked for my name/location and they wanted me to go to a chat room with them" (6)*

*"They were saying sexual things and I'm going to kill you" (6)*

*"When the person who I thought I was talking to wasn't the person who I thought I was talking to" (7)*

*"Flirting on IM gets me in awkward situations sometimes!" (7)*

*"I was sexually harassed" (8)*

*"[stranger contacted me and threatened me]" (8)*

Some of the results of our survey supported what Marje and I already knew to be true and other results were quite unexpected. It was no surprise that boys far outnumber girls using MMORPGs (Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games such as Warcraft, Everquest and Halo). On the other hand I was quite surprised to see that boys outnumbered girls in chat rooms in both 7th and 8th grades. Also while it was no surprise that girls are more active using Instant Messaging, it did surprise me that boys use of Instant Messaging actually surpassed girls, though by a small margin, in 8th grade. In all grades but fifth more boys than girls reported having online friends whom they had never met in person. I believe that online gaming was the primary reason for this difference. Also, girls at every grade level reported feeling uncomfortable online more often than boys reported it. This, I believe, is not because the Internet behavior of boys is better than girls. It is more likely due to the difficulty in our culture for boys to share their feelings, especially feelings of hurt and pain. [It is important to note that both Marje Monroe and I feel the number of children in the survey who report feeling "uncomfortable online" is much lower than reality!]

### **Key Points:**

- Though the 2005 PEW Internet and American Life Project reports that 54% of families with Internet access use web filters, only 32.1% of independent school students in 4-8 grades report the same. 40.2% of respondents reported Internet access from their bedroom. This figure does not necessarily include the 32.1% with web filtering software. All experts in the area of children's use of the Internet recommend that Internet access for children should be in public spaces at home, not from behind closed doors in a child's bedroom.
- More than 50% of fourth graders report having an email and/or IM account while nearly 72% of fifth graders report the same. When asked if parents knew about their email/IM accounts 53.4% of fourth graders and 69% of fifth graders said "yes". About 5-6% of each grade level said "no" and the remainder

chose not to answer the question.

- On average, seventh graders have two email and/or IM accounts.
- 19% of fourth graders and 38.3% of fifth graders reported using IM during the 4 weeks prior to the survey. By eighth grade the number reporting the same is 71.3%.
- Nearly 1 in 10 fourth graders reported visiting a chat room during the 4 weeks prior to the survey, while 1 in every 5 sixth graders reported the same. By eighth grade that figure rose to 71.3%.
- 8.9% of fourth graders reported having a friend online whom they have never met in person. That percentage continues to rise through seventh grade (33.9%) and then falls slightly in eighth grade (25.1%)
- Even fourth through sixth graders are beginning to explore and use online social communities that were intended for college students and older. 25.3% of sixth graders reported using online social communities such as MySpace, Xanga or Friendster. 32% of seventh graders and 45.2% of eighth graders reported the same.

As the data shows, even students as young as fourth grade are exploring telecommunications tools that carry a great many risks for which they are not prepared emotionally or developmentally. They lack the skills for dealing with difficult conversations and lack the sophistication to understand hidden harmful intent. Parents are equally perplexed. They feel overwhelmed because they do not understand the technology. Educational institutions must lead the way providing the most appropriate curricula to keep our children safe in the constantly changing world of the Internet.

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## **Survey Mechanics:**

All numerical values are rounded to the nearest 10th. After analyzing a particular question I often compared the responses of those who reported themselves as boys or girls, ignoring the few who left gender blank on the survey form. The surveys were taken during the months of January through April, 2006, by students at independent schools on the east and west coasts however most participating schools were in New England states and New York. Participating schools are not listed to protect their privacy. Nonetheless I wish to acknowledge them for taking the time and effort to administer and submit surveys to this research. A copy of the survey instructions and questions is below.

### **Internet Survey Instructions:**

1. Please tell students that "a researcher is trying to learn a little about the activities of kids online."
2. Before passing out the surveys please tell students that we do not want to know who they are and ask them not to put their names on these surveys. Tell them that a student will collect the surveys and put them in an envelope. (You will need an envelope large enough for all surveys collected!)
3. Please ask students to answer the questions honestly to the best of their ability. If they don't understand a question they should to leave it blank. (Please discourage any discussion/conversation during the survey)
4. Collect all surveys from each grade in an envelope and label the envelope with the grade level and your name and contact information.

### **Survey Questions:**

Circle the appropriate answer:

1. What grade are you in? 4 / 5 / 6 / 7 / 8      Are you: boy / girl
2. Do you have access to the internet from your bedroom?      yes / no
3. Do your parents have web filtering software on your home computer(s)?      yes / no / Don't know
4. How many of your own private email and IM accounts do you have ?      0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5
  - 4a) If you do have your own private email or IM, do your parents know?      yes / no
5. Are you allowed to use the internet without your parent's permission?      yes / no
6. In the last 4 weeks have you used Instant Messaging (IM)?      yes / no
7. In the last 4 weeks have you visited a chat room?      yes / no
8. In the last 4 weeks have you visited a web log (Blog or Online diary)?      yes / no
9. Have you ever played multi-player role playing games online?      yes / no
  - 9a) If yes, what games? (for example: World of Warcraft, Everquest, Halo)
10. Do you have friends online that you have never met in person?      yes / no
  - a) If you answered 'yes', how did you meet these friends online?
11. Have you ever been made to feel uncomfortable online by something that happened to you?      yes / no
  - 11 a) If you answered 'yes', briefly explain what happened to make you feel uncomfortable?
12. Have you used any of the following: Limewire / KaZaA / MySpace / Friendster / Hi5 / Xanga

## **Related Resources:**

1. Family Safe Media: Pornography Statistics ([www.familysafemedia.com/pornography\\_statistics.html](http://www.familysafemedia.com/pornography_statistics.html)) e.g.

The average age of first exposure to Internet porn is 11 (Family Safe Media, Dec. 15, 2005)

The largest group of viewers of Internet porn is children between ages 12 & 17 (Family Safe Media, Dec. 15, 2005)

2. Internet Safety: Realistic Strategies & Messages for Kids Taking More and More Risks Online, Polly Klaas Foundation. ([www.pollyklaas.org/internet-safety/pkfsummary.pdf](http://www.pollyklaas.org/internet-safety/pkfsummary.pdf)) e.g.

Half of teens ages 13-18 often communicate through the Internet with someone they have not met in person (Internet Safety: Realistic Strategies & Messages for Kids Taking More and More Risks Online. December 21, 2005. Polly Klaas Foundation. February 17, 2006.

One-third of youth ages 8-18 have talked about meeting someone they have only met through the Internet (Internet Safety: Realistic Strategies & Messages for Kids Taking More and More Risks Online. December 21, 2005. Polly Klaas Foundation. February 17, 2006.

Almost one in eight youth ages 8-18 discovered that someone they were communicating with online was an adult pretending to be much younger (Internet Safety: Realistic Strategies & Messages for Kids Taking More and More Risks Online. December 21, 2005. Polly Klaas Foundation. February 17, 2006 ).

3. Pew Internet and American Life Project: Protecting Teens Online.

([www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/152/report\\_display.asp](http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/152/report_display.asp))

4. Parent's Internet Monitoring Study ([www.cox.com/TakeCharge/includes/docs/results.pdf](http://www.cox.com/TakeCharge/includes/docs/results.pdf))

5. Kaiser Family Foundation Study "Kids & Media: The New Millenium" ([www.kff.org/entmedia/1535-index.cfm](http://www.kff.org/entmedia/1535-index.cfm)) - 1999; slightly dated

6. CyberSmart Curriculum - A free K-8 curriculum empowering students to use the Internet safely, responsibly and effectively. (<http://www.cybersmartcurriculum.org>)

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## **Appendix A:**

Additional quotes from students when asked "Have you ever been made to feel uncomfortable online by something that happened to you?" The grade follows the quote in parentheses.

*"Someone asked me where do I live" (4)*

*"I clicked on a picture of a bird at Google and when I got there it said and showed inappropriate things" (4)*

*"Someone emailed me to die" (4)*

*"Someone emailed me and I didn't know who it was" (5)*

*"Someone made fun of me" (5)*

*"People said mean things to me in a chat room" (5)*

*"I was playing an online game and a guy said to me "Fuck you, you fucking asshole"" (5)*

*"Somebody that I know cyberbullied me" (5)*

*"A disgusting popup" (6)*

*"Someone I didn't know started talking to me and I didn't know who they were. The person knew personal info about me" (6)*

*""Someone played a prank on me, then they told me." (6)*

*I gave away some information by accident" (6)*

*They acted as if they knew me and when I told them I wasn't who they thought they asked me personal information. When I wouldn't tell them they started swearing at me." (6)*

*"Gave out too much personal information to someone I didn't know" (6)*

*"Someone was IMing me things like "I know who you are, I know where you live"" (6)*

*"People saying things to you that they don't mean to say" (7)*

*"Pornography popups" (7)*

*"It was an inappropriate popup and I've googled names and bad things popped up" (7)*

*"Weird guys emailed me asking me out and told me how pretty I was." (8)*

*"They were talking to me with many sexual references and not telling me who they are" (8)*

*"People I don't know IM me and say weird things" (8)*

*"People threatened me on AIM" (8)*