



YOUNG CANADIANS IN A WIRED WORLD

**PARENTS AND YOUTH FOCUS GROUPS IN
TORONTO AND MONTREAL**

By: Environics Research Group

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.0 BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE.....	3
2.0 RESEARCH APPROACH.....	3
3.0 STATEMENT OF LIMITATIONS.....	3
4.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	4
5.0 DETAILED FINDINGS.....	9
5.1 CONTEXT.....	9
5.2 EXPERIENCE & USE.....	14
5.2.1 <i>The Internet as a Tool</i>.....	14
5.2.2 <i>The Internet as a Toy</i>.....	16
5.2.3 <i>The Internet: The Other World</i>.....	18
5.3 “REAL WORLD” – LOSS OF AUTONOMOUS PLAY.....	20
5.4 FAMILY INVOLVEMENT.....	23
5.4.1 <i>Location, Supervision, and Control</i>.....	23
5.4.2 <i>Conversing and Sharing</i>.....	30
5.5 PRIVACY/SAFETY & VALUES.....	33
5.6 ADDITIONAL ISSUES OF CONCERN ABOUT THE INTERNET.....	37
5.6.1 <i>Technology Issues</i>.....	37
5.6.2 <i>Competencies</i>.....	38
5.6.3 <i>Other Issues</i>.....	38
6.0 HIGHLIGHTS – SITES KIDS VISIT.....	40
7.0 THOUGHTS FOR CONSIDERATION/RECOMMENDATIONS.....	42

1.0 BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

In March of 2000, Environics Research Group conducted a survey on behalf of Media Awareness Network. The survey was conducted among parents of children between the ages of 6 and 16 years. All of the survey participants in this first phase survey live in computer-equipped households.

Following the completion of the initial survey, further exploration requirements were identified. A second phase qualitative investigation on issues related to child safety on the Internet, conducted among parents and children, was completed in July 2000.

This report summarizes the findings of that qualitative research. The study was conducted among young people between the ages of 9 and 16 who have access to the Internet and who use it. Parents of children between 7 and 16 years of age were also recruited to participate in these exploratory discussions.

The purpose of this series of focus groups was to explore in greater detail some of the Phase One findings, and to explore and identify key issues that will be included in a follow-up survey to be conducted in the school system in the fall of 2000.

2.0 RESEARCH APPROACH

Eight focus groups were conducted among children aged 9 to 16 – four groups in Toronto and four in Montreal. In each group, participants were within six months of each other in age. Groups were organized by gender.

Four focus groups were also conducted among parents who have children between the ages of 7 and 16 living in their households. Some of these households have computers and Internet access at home. In other cases, parents reported that their children are users of the Internet, but there is no Internet access in their home.

In addition to the focus group discussion, young people participating in the study were provided with computers. They were encouraged to visit sites that they like to use and/or to explore new sites. Their site visits were observed, and the history of their on-line activity captured for review and analysis. (See Appendix for detailed method and lists of sites visited.)

3.0 STATEMENT OF LIMITATIONS

Qualitative research is, by its nature, exploratory. It is designed to gain an understanding of the range of opinions held about the topic area, not to determine the weight of those opinions among the general population. Therefore, the results of research of this type may be viewed as indicative, not projectable.

4.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Context

- Although most parents would assert that they supervise their children's on-line activities properly, it seems clear that the perception of most young people (even those as young as 9) is that their use of the Internet is almost wholly unsupervised. This disparity in perception and experience arises in part because parents, lacking a full understanding of how their children see and use the Net, approach the supervision of Internet use much as they approach the supervision of their children's television viewing. Many parents believe that if they place the computer in a nearby room and "check up" on their child from time to time, they are providing meaningful supervision.
- A progression in Internet usage can be observed across the age groups from youngest to oldest. Younger children use the Internet as an extension of their existing interests and hobbies, and as a connection to their existing "real world" friends and family. As time passes, however, they begin (usually between the ages of 11 and 13) to integrate into various self-chosen Internet communities (described as "clans" by one participant). The importance of chatting increases and the Internet becomes a way to meet new people and maintain relationships with those they have never met in "real life." While the oldest teens seem to use the Internet much as the youngest do – as an extension of existing interests and connection to existing friends – this does not mean that this understanding of the Internet as an "alternate universe" is a phase that passes. None of the participants in any group reported that they are using the Internet less than they had been, or that it was becoming a less important part of their lives. The differences observed in the mid-range kids can more likely be attributed to their earlier access to the technology.
- Though overall knowledge of Internet safety is low, the message about viruses has reached users. Most users, even the youngest participants, are aware of what viruses are, how best to avoid them and the fact that software exists to help protect them. If this message has reached young computer users, it seems reasonable to expect that other Internet safety instruction can reach them as well.

Experience & Use

The Internet as a Tool

To parents, the Internet (as it is with computers in general) is often simply something one uses for work. Even those who use it in connection with hobbies tend to see it as a tool, using it for making volunteer work easier or as a way to explore family genealogy. Some parents, whose purpose in securing an Internet connection at home was primarily as an aid to schoolwork, lament that their children "play" too much on the Internet instead of working more. These parents see the "games" their children play as diversions or time wasters.

Older youth (aged 11 to 16) see the value of the Internet for school study, though this is not the major role of the Internet in their lives. There is also some recognition among the younger children that one can “use” the Internet as a source of information, both for use in school and for furthering hobbies and free time activities.

The Internet as a Toy

For the 9 to 10 year-olds, the Internet is a place where they can find games and information that relate to their day-to-day interests. For the most part, the Internet sites they visit are media-related. Their introduction to the Internet is through media, and Net use begins as a more interactive way to experience the various passive media they already know. Entering contests is an early means by which they learn that their actions on the Internet can affect the “other world.”

Personal connections begin to form as those in the younger age segment discover chat rooms and message boards. The ability to choose where they go and with whom they will interact is often their first step toward identifying their own “communities” and perceiving the Internet as an “other world,” an attitude which is more fully realized among the mid-range age cohort (11 to 14 years).

The older groups (15 to 16 years), however, also tend to view the Internet as both a tool and toy, rather than an integrated “place.” While their interests have broadened, boys are more likely to look for cheat codes for PC games than for on-line games to play, while girls are likely to go to fashion and entertainment sites. Both boys and girls in this age group are inclined to treat the Internet as an extension of their interests.

Some parents have also realized the potential of the Internet as a toy. They use it to explore their own interests, play games or “travel on-line.” Some parents reported taking a “virtual tour” of far away places where they have never been – the technological equivalent of astral projection.

The Internet: The Other World

For a small group of participants, mostly children in the 11 to 14 age range, the Internet is more than something one uses for work or for play. The Internet is a *place* where they *go*. They meet and make friends on-line. They join communities that exist on-line only. While this development grows from their initial attraction to the Internet (extending their interests and hobbies), the communities eventually take on an attraction of their own.

Many feel open to and comfortable with exploring ideas and on-line experiences that are outside their “real world” boundaries. The Internet is, for some, a way to “try out” alternate identities or even behaviour that is outside their normal pattern.

Ironically, the parents most likely to describe the Internet as “another world” are those who are using it the least. For them, there is a vague fear that the Internet is a whole other world, a world that is leaving them behind.

“Real World” – Loss of Autonomous Play

In Toronto, youth reported that their time is highly structured. Many parents seem to fear that there are “evil people” just around the corner and that if a child is left unaccompanied for even seconds, they could be in danger. As a result, some children in Toronto feel they are restricted in terms of independent play outside their homes. These children said that they often do not have the freedom or opportunity to meet with friends in a social environment where they can set their own rules or give vent to imagining. For some of these Internet-connected children, the only avenue for imitative play and unstructured, social “imagining” (as opposed to structured play based around games with clearly defined rules) is on the Internet and it is only there that their autonomy begins to develop.

To their credit, Toronto parents are very aware of techniques for “street-smarting” their kids and feel an obligation to teach their children how to handle themselves. However, they seem to be fundamentally unable to see the Internet as another world and do not connect street smarts with Net smarts.

Montreal parents are more likely to connect street smarts with Net smarts, but most do not seem to share their Toronto counterparts’ fears about the safety of their neighbourhoods or the wellbeing of their children when they are out of their house playing with others. Many parents in Montreal reported that their children are not involved in parentally supervised, scheduled activities and further reported giving their children far more freedom during their spare time than was reported by parents in Toronto. Montreal kids are also much more likely to report using the Internet primarily in the evening or when the weather is too unpleasant to venture outside.

In the earlier quantitative phase of the study, 65 percent of parents reported that their children used the Internet for schoolwork. Sixty-six percent of parents also considered educational uses as the biggest benefit of being on the Internet for their children. Only 10 percent of parents listed e-mail or socializing, exposure to the world or meeting new people as the biggest benefit. Though they may not have used those terms, the identity exploration reported by some participants (particularly in the 11 to 14 age-range) is clearly a key benefit that the kids recognize but their parents overlook or don’t understand.

Family Involvement

Location, Supervision and Control

It seems clear that most young people (even those as young as 9) use the Internet almost wholly unsupervised. Parents believe that they supervise their children, but the nature of the supervision they provide is similar to their approach to supervising television. Many parents believe that if they place the computer in a nearby room and “check up” on their child from time to time, they are providing meaningful supervision. Very few parents know what exactly their kids were doing online, other than to say that they play games or chat. Only a very few indicated any real concern or interest in the sorts of games or the nature of “chat” in which their kids are engaged.

Some parents restrict access by keeping the computer locked in a room or not giving their children the password required to log on; however, even these parents do not stay with their children while they are on-line. Controls and rules governing the use of the Internet are most often related to the parents' interest in keeping phone lines open, ensuring that schoolwork takes priority over play or keeping peace among multiple users.

Those parents who understand filters feel their children are either too young to visit inappropriate sites or are old enough to understand how filters work (better than their parents) and could easily defeat them. Those who do not understand filters (who also tend to be less familiar with the Internet in general) often long for software that would stop their children from visiting inappropriate sites.

Younger participants (aged 9 to 10 years) choose to visit commercial sites that restrict their searches to sites that the kids consider age appropriate. Many young people reported that they like to use such sites because it keeps them from having unwelcome surprises on-line. One youngster even suggested it would be better if there were two Internets – one for adults and one for kids.

Kids 15 to 16 years of age feel they should have unrestricted use of the Internet, free of parental blocks or controls. Most feel that, although their parents may not think they are ready for this freedom, there is in fact very little their parents can do to restrict them when they are on-line.

Most parents respect their children's on-line privacy, but some believe that setting rules and guidelines for their children's Internet use does not constitute an invasion of their children's privacy, but simply sets a framework within which their children can learn from their experiences and from their mistakes. Some parents feel that chat should be monitored closely and that checking Web page histories is an acceptable practice.

Other parents feel that their children deserve private e-mail that could not be monitored. Among parents who believe in educating their children about proper Internet use and trust them to know right from wrong, such "checking up" on children constitutes a betrayal of their children's trust.

Conversing and Sharing

Children aged 9 to 11 feel they can ask their parents for help if they find themselves accidentally arriving at a "bad site" on the Web. Most kids aged 12 and over feel they can get themselves out of any "bad site" they encounter on the Net and, since they believe they are more knowledgeable about the Web than their parents, rarely discuss Net issues with them. Some youth mentioned other adults from whom they seek Internet advice, some of whom they initially met on the Internet.

Parents are more likely to discuss the Internet with their kids if they themselves are more knowledgeable users.

Only a few parents reported going on-line with their kids. A few parents of children under 12 years of age reported playing games on-line with the kids, while only a couple of the parents of older children reported playing the on-line equivalent of TV game shows with their kids on-line.

A few parents and kids reported that, in their household, working on homework and doing research sometimes involves parent and child working together. Some of these parents reported that they “supervise” their kid’s work on-line to make sure that it is being done “properly.”

Privacy, Safety & Values

While children know that giving out private information to strangers is dangerous, their definition of “strangers” does not include corporations whose logos or brand names they recognize. As well, there is no single definition of what kind of information is private. Some will give out e-mail addresses, feeling that this is not identifying information. Others will give their e-mail addresses only in on-line environments that they perceive as “safe,” where they feel this information cannot lead to a person finding their home. Phone numbers are considered too much information to give out, but for some children, the name of their city or neighbourhood, or even their postal code, are not considered to be identifying information.

Additional Issues of Concern about the Internet

Technology Issues

Most users, even the youngest participants, expressed concern about viruses. They are aware of viruses, the damage that they may cause, and how best to avoid them. They also know that there is software to help protect them. Other technology issues addressed by participants included hacking, connection speeds and slow download times.

Competencies

The Internet’s reliance on typing can disadvantage some users. For young users, who fear that every mistyped URL may lead them to a “bad” site, this creates considerable concern, given their developing spelling skills. Even older teens find themselves unable to navigate the Internet successfully if their literacy skills are underdeveloped.

French youth seem adept at surfing in French and even use the Internet to help them learn English, while bilingual and multi-lingual youth navigate and chat in any language (or a mixture of those they know).

5.0 DETAILED FINDINGS

5.1 Context

During the focus group sessions, participants in all groups were asked to draw a floor plan of their homes, and then to indicate the location of various items – including telephones, televisions and computers.

In most homes with younger children (under 12 years), televisions are placed in family use areas such as the living room or a family room adjacent to a kitchen. Both children and parents explained that this allowed parents to know what their children are watching, and when they are watching – parents can simply “walk by” and know if the rules are being followed. House “rules” for most children under 12 years include time restrictions – “I can't watch until my homework is finished” – as well as content restrictions – “I'm not allowed to watch shows with too much murder or violence.”

Only a few children reported that their parents have and use “filters” to control viewing. A few of the participants under 12 years of age reported that their parents have installed filters to protect them, and to be sure that the sites they visit are “age appropriate.” Kids aged 12 and over told us that they know how to disconnect these filters.

Many also reported that when they are away from their own home, or when their parents are away from the house, they “cheat” and watch some of the restricted television programs, visit sites that their parents have not approved or chat on-line.

In homes with more than one telephone, the placement of phones is often arranged to allow the telephone user to have privacy when they are on the phone. Both parents and children reported that, over the age of 12 years, children “need” privacy to talk to their friends.

Only a few parents reported placing family telephones exclusively in more public areas of the household. In most cases, this placement of phones is a way for parents to monitor the time spent on the phone, allowing them to ensure “fair” access to the telephone by other members of the household, not a means of monitoring their kids' conversations.

The placement of a computer in a household with younger children seems to be related primarily to the parents' use or non-use of the computer themselves.

In households with children under 12 years, if there is only one computer in the household and parents view the computer primarily as a tool or for their own work, the computer is most often located in a quiet place away from family use areas – an office or computer room or the parents' bedroom. Thus, young children using the computer in these households are rarely “at the computer” with any direct supervision.

In households where children under 12 years have their own computer, this PC is often located in their bedroom, but not linked to the Internet. Many children over the age of 12 years are provided with a phone for their rooms and, soon thereafter, Internet access.

Rules that govern the use of computers are most often related to how long a child may use the computer, to keeping peace among other siblings and to allowing the parent to also use the computer. Generally, there are also rules, much like those for television viewing, which state that only age appropriate sites can be visited. Specifically, “sex” sites and those that contain violent material are not “allowed,” although what constitutes a “bad site” is often left to the discretion of the child.

Many parents with children under the age of 12 years instruct their children not to use chat lines, or to give personal information on-line.

Rules restricting the use of chat lines or ICQ or visiting “bad sites” do not keep most children from participating in chats or visiting inappropriate sites from time to time, as they have opportunities to do so when visiting friends’ homes, where the rules or supervision may be different. Some children reported that they will choose to go to the house of a friend where they can go on-line, over visiting another friend’s house where they can’t “chat” on-line.

Children in Toronto (10 to 15 years) reported that their “free” time is mostly spent in structured/program oriented activities, including “play dates,” sports, music, camps, and other such organized activities. In Montreal, most children reported that they have less structured play and more “free time” to spend at play with other children.

Nine year old females (Toronto)

In discussing how they spend their free time, participants in this group reported that they play on the computer, watch television, play with friends and pets, and read. Playing with friends includes activities such as skipping, as well as spending time talking.

Participants use the Internet at home and at school. Those who do not have Internet access at home often use the Internet at a friend’s house. At school, computers are present in some classrooms as well as in the library.

Most participants started using computers at a very young age, as early as 4 or 5 years of age.

Nine year old males (Montreal)

The 9 year old males who participated in this group reported that their free time activities include playing Nintendo, Play Station, sports and computer games, watching television and “chatting” on the Internet.

Boys who live in homes where a computer is present reported that it is usually located in the living room, the office room, in one of their siblings’ bedrooms or in their own bedroom.

In discussing their computer use, a number of boys identified SimCity as a preferred game. Some boys talked about entering on-line contests; the parents of some of these boys mention contests to their children, although the parents prefer being present when their children are entering contests. In some cases, parents enter their children in contests; one boy reported that his mother entered him in 30 contests for summer camps. Although the boy has permission to enter contests himself, he chooses not to, as he “always loses.”

These children reported that their parents or older siblings are the most experienced people in their households with respect to computers and the Internet.

Eleven year old males (Toronto)

By the age of 11 most of the boys indicated that their “free time” is spent primarily in organized sports or other activities arranged by their parents. Their free time outside these activities is spent at home watching television, having friends visit their homes or going to a friend’s house (where a parent or caregiver is present). Their time to “talk” to friends is mostly computer/Internet based rather than face-to-face.

A few of the participants reported that they have their own personal computer, or that they are the member of the household who uses the family computer most often. Most of the participants have been using computers for three or four years and have access to the Internet at home and at school.

In the homes of these boys, the computers with Internet access tend to be located in a room that is set up as an office/study room or in a room that is referred to as the “computer room.” Other rooms in which the computer may be set up include the living room and the basement.

Parents were often identified as the ones who taught their children how to use the Internet, but now some of the boys feel that their skills have surpassed their parents’ abilities. One participant mentioned a class he had taken on computers as his best source of information.

Twelve year old females (Montreal)

The favourite free time activities of participants in this group include being on the computer, playing with friends at the park, swimming, watching television, talking on the phone, skating, playing the piano, going out with friends to the movies, going to the mall and “chatting” with friends.

These girls reported that their parents have not been their major source of information on the Internet. Rather, their school and friends have been their main sources. Some of the girls reported that the Internet was taught to them in grade four at school.

Thirteen year old males (Montreal)

The free time activities reported by these boys include reading, going to the library, using the computer, going on the Internet, playing with friends, playing tennis, soccer, Nintendo 64, Tae-Kwon-Do and watching television.

The participants feel that, at their age, many boys move from playing console-based video games to playing PC games. Being able to play on-line with someone else or with multiple players and being able to network is an advantage for them. The Net is also considered more “realistic and powerful.”

Fourteen year old females (Toronto)

The participants in this group reported that they enjoy listening to music, swimming, going to the movies and going to the mall to shop.

Most of these girls said that someone else in their home knows more about computers and the Internet than they do.

Fifteen year old females (Montreal)

The participants in this group reported that they enjoy talking on the phone, listening to music, dancing, going to movies and discotheques, sports, shopping and accessing the Internet. These girls did not initially mention the Internet when asked about free time activities, however, as they often find it difficult to access the computer(s) at home because of other household members' computer use. As a result, some of the girls use the Internet primarily at school or at a friend's house.

Some feel that they are the most knowledgeable person in the household with respect to computers, but others feel this would be another household member, usually a sibling.

Sixteen year old males (Toronto)

The free time activities of the participants of this group include watching television, playing games, meeting with girls, listening to music, going to parties and going on-line. Some participants reported having near total personal freedom, far more so than any of the younger groups, with one participant claiming he could stay out all night without his parents caring.

These participants feel that they are fairly knowledgeable about the Internet. Some feel that they are the most knowledgeable household member, and others feel that they are as knowledgeable as another family member. (Within the focus group itself, some participants became aware that their Internet savvy, compared to other participants, was far lower than they had initially thought. Some less knowledgeable participants even seemed to be ostracized by others as a result.)

The ages at which the participants started using the Internet ranged from about 10 years to 14 years.

Parents (Montreal)

Many of these parents have only recently brought computers into their home, with some taking advantage of the government subsidy program to help defer the cost. Some who have computers do not have access to the Internet. Even those parents who feel that they are the most knowledgeable computer user in the family often reported that their teens are even more Net savvy.

Parents of younger children (Toronto)

All the parents reported that they enjoy taking part in activities with their kids, both indoors and outdoors. Most reported that their kids are enrolled in many organized activities that require them to drive their kids from one place to another. Interestingly, many said that having their kids in organized activities is a key element in organizing their own social activities.

They tended to report that their kids are the most knowledgeable on computers of all the members of the household.

The Internet philosophies of these parents are primarily related to the educational aspects of the Internet. The Internet is also considered a “resource centre” for education, entertainment, games, recreation and relaxation. Some parents thought that the Internet would be used more for educational purposes at home, but are now finding the Internet a “waste of time.”

These parents do not feel that age decides when kids should be able to do certain things, as all kids are different. Some said that when their children reach age 18, they could do what they like. Most parents agreed that “good parents” could not totally restrict their children, because if they did, their children would not be prepared for the real world.

Parents of older children (Toronto)

Not all the households represented in this group have a computer. In those households that do, the locations mentioned include the bedroom of the oldest child, the computer room, the basement and the den. In homes with only one phone line to access the Internet, computers located in the bedrooms were not usually connected to the Internet. In homes that have more than one line for Internet access, computers located in bedrooms or less “public areas” are common.

Internet philosophies:

- Education is really valuable and the Internet can contribute to this.
- Provides a lot of information, very informative (“have a reference library at home”).
- Good source of worldwide information, can use e-mail.
- Could live without it and feel that it is making children more lazy (i.e., don’t have to go to the library anymore).
- “The good outweighs the bad.”
- Easy to travel the world.
- Can read newspapers on the Internet.
- Would rather have son look at pornography in front of him than “sneak around” secretly visiting sites. One father said, “I tell him if you want to see porno sites, go ahead.”

5.2 Experience & Use

5.2.1 *The Internet as a Tool*

To parents, the Internet (and computers in general) is often simply something one uses for work. Even those who use it in connection with hobbies tend to see it as a tool, using it for making volunteer work easier or as a way to explore family genealogy. Some parents, whose purpose in securing an Internet connection at home was primarily an aid to schoolwork, lament that their children “play” too much on the Internet instead of working more. These parents see the “games” their children play as diversions or time wasters.

Older youth (aged 11 to 16) see the value of the Internet for school study, though this is not the major role of the Internet in their lives. There is also some recognition among the younger children that one can “use” the Internet as a source of information, both for use in school, and for furthering their hobbies and free time activities.

Nine year old females (Toronto)

Some participants feel that the Internet has now resulted in better education because they “can look up stuff for research.”

Nine year old males (Montreal)

For these boys, the positive aspect of being on the Internet is the ability to get information for school and to access “games for when you are bored (if you don’t have any CD’s).” Their interests also include chatting on the Internet.

Eleven year old males (Toronto)

These boys see working on the computer as involving looking for an “exact thing for something for school.”

Twelve year old females (Montreal)

For these girls, the positive aspects of the Internet are that there is “lots of amusing things” and “lots of stuff to do.” The ability to learn English through the Internet was also a key benefit. Being able to do research quickly was also mentioned.

Being able to “chat” on the Internet is also seen as a good feature because it allows them to develop new friendships and meet new people from around the world. One participant mentioned communicating with the children who were going to be at her summer camp, so that when camp began, they all felt that they already knew each other.

Thirteen year old males (Montreal)

The main positive aspect mentioned by the participants in this group is the ability to find information on the Internet. The information of interest to them relates not only to schoolwork, but also to games and hobbies.

Fourteen year old females (Toronto)

For these girls, working on the computer involves doing things that are related to school, such as researching information for a project. Playing on the computer involves using the Internet to socialize and “try on new identities and experiences.”

E-mail is used by most of these girls to communicate with friends. ICQ was used by some to speak with “real world” friends, primarily after school “when everyone goes on.” The parents of one of the girls do not know she uses ICQ, as she only uses it when they are not home. Even participants who do not have Internet access at home use e-mail and ICQ at their friends’ and neighbours’ homes.

Fifteen year old females (Montreal)

These participants identified having access to “everything” worldwide and being able to meet people on-line as the main positive aspects of the Internet. They also mentioned being able to use different identities as a “fun” aspect of the Internet.

Sixteen year old males (Toronto)

For these participants, being able to access “almost anything” was identified as an advantage of the Internet, as was Internet shopping, although for them, shopping was confined mostly to browsing, rather than purchasing. There was some feeling that those who are not connected to the Internet are at a disadvantage.

These youths also felt that, with Internet access, doing research is easier and going to libraries is no longer necessary. Some participants reported, however, that teachers require students to limit their Internet sources of information and use books instead. Some participants said that students submitting projects that are not their own work but are taken from the Internet has become an issue in their schools.

Parents (Montreal)

Even those parents who use the Internet frequently often see it as “a big filing cabinet full of files,” rather than as a means of social interaction, or other interactive exchange for work or play.

5.2.2 The Internet as a Toy

For the 9 to 10 year olds, the Internet is a place where they can find games and information that relate to their day-to-day interests. For the most part, the Internet sites they visit are media-related. Their introduction to the Internet through media and Net use begins as a more interactive way to experience the various passive media they already know. Entering contests is an early means by which they learn that their actions on the Internet can affect the other world.

Personal connections begin to form as those in the younger age segment discover chat rooms and message boards. The ability to choose where they go and with whom they will interact is often their first step towards identifying their own “communities” and a realization of the Internet as another world. Given the usage progression we observed across the age ranges, it is safe to predict that the Internet will fill a similar role in the lives of these young people as they reach early adolescence as it does for those now 11 to 14 years of age, for whom the Internet is indeed often an alternate world.

The older groups (15 to 16 years) also tend to view the Internet as a tool and toy, rather than an integrated “place.” While their interests have broadened, boys are more likely to look for cheat codes for PC games than for on-line games to play, while girls are likely to go to fashion and entertainment sites. Both boys and girls in this age group are inclined to treat the Internet as an extension of their interests. Participants in this group “window shop” on-line but do not make purchases. They reported that, even if they had a credit card, they would never give out the number on-line.

In many ways, the 15 to 16 year old youths treat the Internet in much the same fashion that the 9 to 10 year olds do. While it would be possible to deduce that the importance of the Internet fades as teenage years advance, this assumption is not supported by the findings. It appears instead that, having been introduced to the Internet (and computers in general) at a later stage in life, they have not formed the same connections and skills with the Internet or Internet content as the younger (11 to 14 years) age cohort has.

Some parents have also realized the potential of the Internet as a toy. They use it to explore their own interests, play games or “travel on-line.” Some parents reported taking a “virtual tour” of far away places they have never been – the technological equivalent of astral projection. Among these parents, e-mail among friends and family is often an important part of their daily life, although only a few seek “new friends” in the same way their children do.

Nine year old females (Toronto)

When playing or working with the computer, these participants like “having to do research,” playing games (adventure games and spelling games), communicating with “real world” friends by e-mail, making cards and doing other art activities. Those who do not use the Internet to talk with friends said their friends do not have e-mail. After going on-line, one participant discovered that she could listen to music on the Internet.

Nine year old males (Montreal)

These boys like to “surf the Internet” looking for “interesting things” and games. They expressed a desire for being able to “discover new things.”

Eleven year old males (Toronto)

For these participants, playing on the computer involves “looking through for things to find,” and downloading games. None of these participants mentioned using chat sites, and their use of e-mail was very limited.

Their favourite sites are mostly devoted to video games (i.e., sites where they can find coaching for the games they play, or shopping sites where they can look at action figures related to the computer or video games they enjoy).

Twelve year old females (Montreal)

Among these girls, the use of MSN and ICQ are common, and chat lines are also popular. They stated that ICQ is popular with them because their school friends use it, and because it gives them an alternative way to communicate if the phone line is occupied. Some of their parents do not permit the use of chat lines.

Sites such as “Go France Site,” “Dromaderie,” “Banners” and “Caramel” were mentioned as favourites by these girls.

Thirteen year old males (Montreal)

These boys like finding access codes and tips for “cheating” in video and computer games on the Internet. They do not know whether these sites are legal, and find the idea that they might be illegal titillating.

These participants also use chat lines such as Caramel, SCQ, MERC, Palace, MSN, Voyome and ICQ. They prefer chat programs that allow the participant to authorize and delete names; being able to personalize the chat program is a desirable quality. Some of the participants described ICQ as more “personal”; their ICQ number is given to someone who has become their friend. The participants who do not use chat programs indicated that they are just not interested in them.

Fourteen year old females (Toronto)

These participants tend to have larger ICQ lists than do participants in the younger age groups. They also report an awareness of negative aspects of ICQ, such as issues of allowing or not allowing certain people to participate in an ICQ session, and having fights over the Internet.

One of the advantages of the Internet identified by the 14 year old girls is e-mail; mention was made of the reduction in long distance bills. E-mail is used to communicate with both “real world friends” and those they meet on-line.

Fifteen year old females (Montreal)

These participants reported that one favourite activity is finding pictures of male actors and singers on the Internet. One star who is highly popular with this group, as well as with the 14 year old girls in Toronto, is Tupac Shakur. Many of these girls said they view pictures of the rap star and speak of him as attractive; none mentioned that Shakur is dead. Future research could be done to see how the alternate universe of the Internet allows a star's impact to continue even after his or her death.

They also enjoy chatting with friends and going to music, game and sport sites. Chatting is done through SRQ, MRC and Moosekey. MRC is identified as a favourite chat program by some because "there are more people to talk to" in comparison with some of the other chat programs. Downloading and e-mailing are also common free time activities.

Sixteen year old males (Toronto)

These youths use the Internet for music, chat lines, ICQ, pornography, games and e-mail. They reported that the time they spend on the Internet ranges from half an hour to five hours (on an average day in the summer).

For these youths, "cool" Web sites are those that have contests, pictures or "ventures." Some swearing is considered "cool," as is the use of music on the Web site. Waiting during the download period is considered all right if the picture is "good," but quick downloading is preferred.

Parents (Montreal)

The perception of parents in Montreal is that their children use the Internet primarily to "play." Some parents have begun to embrace the Internet's potential for fun themselves. One participant joyfully described inviting a friend to his home to take him on a virtual tour of the Louvre.

5.2.3 The Internet: The Other World

For a small group of participants, mostly children in the 11 to 14 age range, the Internet is more than something one uses for work or for play. The Internet is a place where they go. They meet and make friends on-line. They join communities that exist on-line only. While this development grows from their initial attraction to the Internet (extending their interests and hobbies), the communities eventually take on an attraction of their own.

Many feel open to and comfortable with exploring ideas and on-line experiences that are outside their "real world" boundaries. The Internet is, for some, a way to "try out" alternate identities or even behaviour that is outside their normal pattern.

Con conversationally, these participants still referred to the off-line world as "the real world." Thinking of the Internet as something other than the "real world" signifies that, for them, the on-line world is separate from the off-line world, without denying its independent existence.

Females in the 11 to 14 age range embrace the concept of romance being formed on-line without losing sight of the disconnection between the real person on the other side of the computer versus their persona on-line. While they freely admit to lying about themselves in chat rooms, they also feel that maintaining that lie after a period of time (ranging in length from 15 minutes to several weeks, based on the individual) is impossible. It is this belief that may leave them most vulnerable to a skilled manipulator. At the same time, girls in this age cohort also revel in the power the Internet gives them. It allows them to reinvent themselves, test out new identities (age, personality and even gender), escape judgement based on appearance or other superficial values and to seek out people with whom they choose to interact (as opposed to the more structured and forced associations with schoolmates, neighbours or others involved in shared activities).

For females in this age range, this “identity play” crosses over to the physical world when they decide to actually meet face-to-face with those with whom they have chatted on-line. Their trips/adventures between their on-line and off-line relationships are described in terms of fantasy. Those who choose to take an on-line “relationship” to a “new level” often reported “travelling” with a friend or friends to “see” their on-line “friend” in the “real world.” Many believe that this is a way to protect themselves from danger, but still allow them to see just who it is they have managed to entice, almost like the prize in a contest. In this “contest,” the girls are often trying on identities that may not have much to do with who they are or how they behave in the “real world.” It is, for some, a form of play similar to playing “dress-up.” It provides them a way to experiment with different identities and roles.

Males in the 11 to 14 age range reported joining on-line communities; some of the 11 year old boys have been involved with such communities for up to three years. While these communities (message boards and chat rooms) are initially sought out based on shared interests (anime*, gaming, music), the communities themselves eventually gain an importance of their own. Among the males of this age group, hacking begins to gain interest; however, they tend to view hacking as a skills challenge or a hobby rather than as an attempt to accomplish some specific damage or to make a “hacker statement.”

Among both males and females in this age group, experimentation and imagination are the means by which they explore their own personal power and freedom.

Most parents appear not to have the same sense of the Internet as an alternate world that the children in this age range expressed. Ironically, the parents most likely to describe the Internet as another world are those who are using it least. For them, there is a vague fear that the Internet is a whole other world, one that is leaving them behind.

* Anime is a style of animation that originated in Japan; popular examples of anime include *Sailor Moon*, *Pokemon*, *Dragonball Z* and *Princess Mononke*.

5.3 “Real World” – Loss of Autonomous Play

In Toronto, youth reported that their time is highly structured. They indicated that many parents seem to fear that there are “evil people” around every corner and that if a child is left unaccompanied for even seconds they could be in danger. As a result, some children in Toronto reported that they feel they are restricted in terms of independent play outside their homes. These children often do not have the freedom or opportunity to meet with friends in a social environment where they can set their own rules or give vent to imagining. This development has profound implications for these youths. As renowned expert on early childhood development Jean Piaget noted, unstructured imitative play is an important part of children’s development. For some of these Internet-connected children, the only avenue for imitative play and unstructured, social “imagining” (as opposed to structured play based around games with clearly defined rules) is on the Internet and it is only there that their autonomy begins to develop.

Among Toronto youths, participants in all groups except the oldest group reported that their free time was increasingly being taken up by activities organized by their parents, activities they did not necessarily want to be part of. While many of these activities were sports related, some mentioned theatre, music and others. These youths also expressed an awareness of differences between their own childhood circumstances and the childhood experiences of their parents; they mentioned the technology they have access to which their parents did not, but also mentioned that opportunities for direct personal contact and casual outdoor play are less available to them than they were for their parents when they were children.

Overall differences: Montreal vs. Toronto

Montreal participants reported using the Net as a tool to learn English. Participants in Toronto surf only in English.

Children and youth in Montreal did not report their time being taken up largely by organized activities. They feel that they can go outside unsupervised, and the comments of the Montreal parents confirm this. The organized activities they are involved in appear to be of their own choosing rather than prescribed by their parents. As a result of this, they are more likely to report using the Internet only in the evening or on days when the weather prevents them from going outside. Parents are less likely to report using their children’s activities to build their own social circles.

Montreal parents tend to make the connection between “Net smarts” and “street smarts” that Toronto parents seem almost incapable of making.

Quebec participants use French language sites most often, even though many of these sites are generally considered by the kids to be lacking in quality and interest. Some parents reported that they look for resources on the Net to make more Francophone material easy for their kids to find and use.

Parents in the Toronto groups confirmed these observations, saying that organized social activities were safer for their children. Some also admitted that one of the real reasons they enrol their children in such activities is to give themselves a chance to meet and socialize with other parents.

To their credit, Toronto parents are very aware of techniques for “street smarting” their kids and feel an obligation to teach their children how to handle themselves. However, they seem to be fundamentally unable to see the Internet as another world and do not connect street smarts with Net smarts.

Montreal parents are more likely to connect street smarts with Net smarts but most do not seem to share their Toronto counterparts’ fears about the safety of their neighbourhoods or the wellbeing of their children when they are out of their house playing with others. Many parents in Montreal reported that their children are not involved in parentally supervised, scheduled activities and further reported giving their children far more freedom during their spare time than was reported by parents in Toronto. Montreal kids are also much more likely to report using the Internet primarily in the evening or when the weather is too unpleasant to venture outside.

Toronto parents are also far more likely than parents in Montreal to desire, and believe they are capable of, protecting their child’s “innocence;” to this end, parents generally want to control what the “little ones are seeing on the Internet.” Some feel that their child’s innocence can be protected until the child reaches the age of 17, 18 or even 23. They also express the hope that the children will learn values along the way.

Eleven year old males (Toronto)

These children identified the differences between being a child now and to their parents’ childhood as the availability of e-mail, being able to download games, chat lines, buying things from the Internet, paying bills on-line and doing on-line banking.

Twelve year old females (Montreal)

For these children, the big differences between life today and when their parents were children is that their parents had no cable, no televisions, no phones “like ours,” no computers, no Internet, the cost of things was cheaper, they did not make a lot of money, they started working young and the walk to school was very long.

Thirteen year old males (Montreal)

These boys feel that today there is more technology, and also more freedom and openness compared to the childhood their parents experienced. They also said that their parents spent more time outdoors in the past, because there were no computers.

Fourteen year old females (Toronto)

These girls feel that their parents had more freedom because there was less violence when their parents were young. They also think that their parents “chatted more” in person, because they did not have computers.

Fifteen year old females (Montreal)

These participants suggested that when their parents were about 15 years old, they had more fun outdoors and did not need expensive things. However, they feel that now there are more things for young people to do.

Sixteen year old males (Toronto)

In comparing differences in the participants' lives to their parents' lives, these youths mentioned that now there is more technology and more electronics. They also said that there is more crime and more drug use, but that life is still better now than it was then (i.e., students no longer walk half a mile to go to school).

Parents (Montreal)

Parents said that kids today are more materialistic and more impatient, but that overall they have a better life. They feel that their own parents were far stricter with them than they are with their own children. One parent lamented the loss of the physical aspect of a child's imagination; she said that she could be entertained for hours by playing with nothing more complicated than a piece of string, yet her children constantly need new games or toys to stimulate their imagination.

Parents of younger children (Toronto)

Among these parents, there is a sense that everything now moves at a much faster pace and that less time is spent outdoors. Over-organization of work and play in today's society is also a big difference observed between "then" and "now"; some parents feel it destroys spontaneity.

The variety of subjects that are now openly discussed (such as being gay, becoming a woman, going from boyhood to manhood) was also identified as a big change since the time of their own childhood. Parents feel that they can, and should, talk more to their children about such topics.

Parents also noted that family-oriented activities are not as common today and life is not as simple as it used to be.

For these parents, the biggest influence on their children with respect to the Internet is their children's friends. One mother said that her son no longer likes going to the homes of friends who do not have Internet access; they used to play hockey but now she finds that the boys go straight to the computer.

Parents of older children (Toronto)

These parents commented that the advantages of their youth include more physical activity (i.e., children did not just sit in front of the computer), and fewer fads. They also noted that children now are more money-oriented, and "too stressed." Some parents referred to the world of the Internet as being much "wider."

5.4 Family Involvement

5.4.1 Location, Supervision, and Control

Based on the home layouts described by the young people and parents who participated in this study, as well as their reports of Internet use, it seems clear that most young people (even those as young as 9) use the Internet almost wholly unsupervised. Parents believe that they supervise their children, but the nature of the supervision they provide is similar to their approach to supervising television. Many parents believe that if they place the computer in a nearby room and “check up” on their child from time to time, they are providing meaningful supervision. Very few parents knew what exactly their kids were doing on-line, other than to say they play games or chat. Only a very few indicated any real concern or interest in the sorts of games or the nature of “chat” in which their kids are engaged.

Some parents restrict access by keeping the computer locked in a room or not by giving their children the password required to log on; however, even these parents do not stay with their children while they are on-line. Those parents who understand filters feel their children are either too young to visit inappropriate sites or are old enough to understand how filters work (better than their parents) and could easily defeat them. Those who do not understand filters (who also tend to be less familiar with the Internet in general) often long for software that would stop their children from visiting inappropriate sites.

For the most part, parents restrict their children from tying up the phone line for lengthy periods, ensure their children do not fight over access and ensure schoolwork takes priority over playing. Parents and children alike reported that parental control over the Internet resembles the type of control placed on television. Controls and rules governing the use of the Internet are most often related to the parents’ interest in keeping phone lines open or keeping peace among multiple users.

Kids 15 to 16 years of age feel they should have unrestricted use of the Internet, free of parental blocks or controls. Most feel that, although their parents may not think they are ready for this freedom, there is in fact very little their parents can do to restrict them when they are on-line. Younger participants (aged 9 to 10) choose to visit commercial sites that restrict their searches to sites that the kids consider age appropriate. Many young people reported that they like to use such sites because it keeps them from having unwelcome surprises on-line. One youngster even suggested it would be better if there were two Internets – one for adults and one for kids.

Most parents respect their children’s on-line privacy, but some believe that setting rules and guidelines for their children’s Internet use is not an invasion of their children’s privacy, but simply sets a framework within which their children can learn from their experiences and from their mistakes.

Some feel that their children deserve private e-mail that could not be monitored. Among parents who believe in educating their children about proper Internet use and who trust them to know right from wrong, such “checking up” on children constitutes a betrayal of their children’s trust.

Toronto parents are more likely to check the history and the logs to see where their children have gone on the Internet. They see their children's ability to access pornographic sites as a problem. Innocent entries such as www.boys.com, which can lead to inappropriate or pornographic sites, are a problem for kids who often try different words as the name of sites. However, among parents who do check logs, most only know about the master logs, rather than the more detailed logs that would allow them to review the stream of on-line visits from site to site via links. By only reviewing the master logs, parents may miss much about the substance of their child's Internet experience.

Nine year old females (Toronto)

Although one of the participants has a computer in her own room, she does not have access to the Internet on that particular computer. To access the Internet, she must use the computer in a shared studio room. Other participants reported that shared rooms for Internet access include the computer room and the living room. The parents' bedroom is another room where the computer may be located even though the parents rarely use the Internet themselves.

Some of the girls reported that their parents supervise their computer use on a regular basis, but most use the Internet on their own. "Supervision" in this context is most often related to a parent teaching the child how to use the computer, or find something on-line, and seems to rarely extend to "monitoring" the child's activities once the skill is mastered.

At school, the use of the Internet is usually limited; at some of the participants' schools, less restricted access is allowed for special events, such as birthday parties. Restrictions of the sort described are most often defined by the difference between traditional work and play activities (i.e., research versus games). At school, some participants are not allowed to play games. One girl mentioned the use of the computer as a reward at her school because "if you are a really good student, you get to stay in and play games."

Most of the participants must obtain permission from their parents before downloading anything from the Internet. For some participants, this was the only rule for their Internet usage. The downloading rule is thought to be in place to keep them from "filling up the computer brain." One participant reported that she is not allowed to print anything without parental permission and must always turn the computer off properly. A few participants said that there are no rules in place at home or at school.

Some participants stated that, while on the Internet at school, they are supposed to turn the monitor off right away and speak to the teacher if they "go to something by accident." One participant described this as the action to take if she sees "something you are not supposed to see," that is, anything that is not suitable to her age.

Free time at school can sometimes be used to access the Internet, although permission is required from the teacher. One participant said that students are not always given permission if a teacher thinks "a student is going to use the Internet to go to chat lines or stuff like that."

Nine year old males (Montreal)

Among these boys, being supervised while using the computer or the Internet is not a frequent occurrence. Using the computer or Internet alone or having their parents check on them periodically is more common. Parental supervision is most often a quick “visit” to the computer area, with a question such as “So, how’s it going?” before moving on. The parent appears more concerned about bothering the young person than with determining exactly what that young person may be experiencing.

The participants indicated that accessing “sex sites,” such as a site called “Joe,” is not permitted because “it is vulgar.” *South Park* – whether on the television or on Web sites – is prohibited in some homes.

Participants who have computers but do not have Internet access at home reported that their parents do not usually supervise them because most often they are just playing a computer game.

Eleven year old males (Toronto)

Most of these participants reported that time spent using the Internet is spent mostly alone. Although a parent may be nearby, making dinner or doing laundry, they are not providing constant supervision of the specifics of their child’s Internet use, nor do most feel that it would be appropriate for them to do so. Sometimes a sibling may be in the room, but this is not to provide supervision. Some of the boys mentioned that their parents help them occasionally on the computer but usually not with Internet related tasks (i.e., the parents may edit their schoolwork).

None of the participants had parents who put filters on their computer for Internet access. One kid had a “parental control” on at a certain point but it was removed because his parents felt he would not go to inappropriate sites. They did know that parents could look at their Internet history but none mentioned their parents having done so.

Some of these boys did mention household rules, both for television and for computer and Internet use. Watching movies with “nudity,” “porn,” horror or lots of swearing is not allowed in some of the participants’ homes. There are also time restrictions for some on watching television. Some parents put special restrictions on certain games or movies that are rated as adult material. For many, Internet access to “bad sites” is not allowed. “Bad sites” were described as sites with “naked people,” “viruses” and “swearing.” Sites that require one to enter a name and address are also restricted. Chat rooms are restricted for some. One participant is only allowed to access games on his own; everything else must be done with his mother present.

Some kids said that cancellation of Internet access would result if they went to inappropriate sites, however, other participants felt this would not occur because their parents rely on the Internet as well.

At school, there is limited access to those sites that are specifically permitted and games are not allowed. The Internet is to be used mainly for research. At one school, the rule for Internet use was described as accessing sites that “[are] appropriate for our age.” In one school library, only certain sites are to be accessed and the computers are visible to the librarians.

One participant accessed an inappropriate site accidentally when the students in his class were trying their names (www.their.own.name.Com). The instruction to try this “address” was given to the students by their teacher.

Twelve year old females (Montreal)

The participants reported that, in their homes, the computers are located in the parents’ room, living room, office or their own bedroom. Most girls in this age cohort who have a computer in their own room do not have access to the Internet on that particular computer. The computer with Internet access is located in a shared room, although often there is no supervision in this common room.

When there is no Internet access at home, the child’s computer use is not usually supervised; the children feel this is because their parents “trust” them.

Some of the rules that were mentioned by the participants regarding the computer and the Internet at home are not related to content on the Internet. For instance, the participants reported that they are becoming interested in downloading files, and their parents are very concerned with viruses. These girls also reported that their parents are concerned with ensuring that important files (the parents’ files) are not deleted.

At school, chatting was generally permitted. At one particular school, the students’ “chatting” time is limited to no more than one of the three hours per week spent on the Internet. Students are not permitted to access pornography sites and the students are instructed not to provide their telephone number or the name of the school (although they stated that “we still do it anyway”). Sites for those 18 and over are also not permitted.

Accessing English sites is a requirement for the students in intensive English programs. The students go against this rule frequently, preferring French language sites for chat.

Thirteen year old males (Montreal)

The participants reported that, in their homes, the computers are located in the basement, living room or in their bedroom. Those children who have computers in their bedroom indicated that the computers are located there because they use the computer the most often. Children with a computer in their room often have Internet access from that computer. Regardless of the location of the computer, the children reported that they are usually not supervised.

Most participants have more than one e-mail address; some have as many as four or five e-mail addresses. One reason given for this was the space restriction (as little as two MB) associated with some commercial Web-based e-mail providers. Some addresses are also only used for sites that are not seen as trustworthy (safe).

Those who do not have Internet access at home indicated that they use the Internet at the library, at school and with friends.

In some of the participants' homes, there are no rules regarding computer and Internet usage. Where rules are present, these are related to time limits because parents do not want the phone line occupied at all times due to the Internet connection. Some of the boys have been given specific time limits. In one such instance, the child is only allowed to spend 10 hours a week on the Internet; if the 10 hours are not used, the parents pay the child one dollar for every hour not used.

Although the boys did not report being supervised regularly, some of the participants reported concern about their parents seeing their "stuff," so they use passwords to protect their privacy.

While these boys did not report many restrictions on their Internet use, they felt that "triple X" sites were not really for them. Some said they have accessed pornography sites with friends simply to "fool around." In considering sites that are not appropriate for the participants, one participant referred to "half the sites" not being appropriate.

Sites such as PsychoMédia (an interactive psychology resource site, which contains material related to sexual violence and abuse) and Show No Mercy, which shows "horrible things ... even suicides," are not considered appropriate sites by some of the participants. There was an awareness of sites devoted to hatred and racism; participants said they do not usually visit these sites because they "already know the jokes." To these participants, racist sites seem nothing more than a source of bad jokes directed equally at every societal group including their own.

Fourteen year old females (Toronto)

These participants reported that, in their homes, the computer is located in a family member's bedroom, the dining room, basement, computer room or a spare room. These girls reported that having privacy when using the computer or when talking on the telephone is important to them. Most have access to the Internet at home.

Some indicated that there are no rules about computer or Internet access at home; others said that they are not allowed to use chat rooms (but even with this restriction they have experienced chat rooms at someone else's home). Some reported time restrictions for Internet use, to prevent tying up the phone line. They also mentioned rules about television viewing, particularly related to the amount of time spent watching it. For some, the television is not to be used all day and outdoor activities are encouraged. Some girls may not watch shows their parents deem inappropriate.

At school, time spent on the Internet is to be used only for research. Checking or writing e-mail is not permitted, although, as some girls said, "everyone does it anyway." The girls indicated that this is possible because the teachers leave the room. Going to "bad sites" – sites with nudity, swearing, and those that promote drugs – is also not permitted.

Fifteen year old females (Montreal)

In these youths' homes, locations of computers include the living room, office and bedrooms. Some of the computers located in bedrooms are not connected to the Internet and are only used for word processing. The Internet is widely used at school.

Participants indicated that their parents are not providing a lot of supervision; parents are usually in another room doing something else while these girls are on-line. They did note that they are not permitted to go to pornography sites.

If they were to give advice to a younger sister, these participants said they would want to supervise the child to show her the “good aspects” of chatting. They would also tell her not to open e-mails from people that they don’t know, as a precaution against viruses. Other advice would include not providing a phone number or family name to anyone.

Sixteen year old males (Toronto)

At home, the computers used by these participants are mainly located in a separate computer room; for one participant, the computer is used in the kitchen. Access to the Internet is available at home and at school.

At school, the Internet cannot be used for “anything other than educational purposes.” No pornography sites are permitted. Using the computers in some school libraries is only permitted for project purposes.

Some participants were not concerned about their parents looking at the browser history and others did not know that it could be done. However, most were aware of this possibility; one of the participants in the focus group cleared his browser’s history before leaving.

There was a feeling among these participants that there should be some control for younger children, perhaps some type of “device” that would trace all the sites visited and provide a transcript. Parents of younger children could then monitor their child’s Internet use and behaviour. However, there was no set age agreed on as the deciding factor for monitoring Internet usage. Most feel that it depends on the maturity of each individual.

Some of these boys questioned how some sites are “allowed” on the Internet, which suggests their concern over some of the material on the Internet. They were very aware of the various illegal sites on the Internet, such as those where one could download full versions of games.

Parents (Montreal)

Some feel their children will inevitably break the rules, but that it is their duty as parents to monitor their children and, as much as possible, punish them when they are caught. Some parents feel that chat should be monitored closely and that checking Web page histories is acceptable, but that their children deserve private e-mail that parents do not read. However, for some parents who believe in educating their children about proper Internet use and trust them to know right from wrong, any such “checking up” on children constitutes a betrayal of their children’s trust.

Some parents also fear that they will discover that their children are breaking the rules. They are less concerned by the fact that the rules will be broken than by the betrayal of their trust this entails.

These parents feel that schools and cyber cafes have sufficient safeguards to prevent their children from using them to access inappropriate sites. However, when asked what these safeguards are only the signs posted forbidding these activities were mentioned.

Parents in Montreal also expressed such concerns as:

- Children fighting over access to the computer or the Internet.
- Children playing too long and tying up the phone line.
- Children losing exercise or neglecting studies to “play on the computer” (though this concern appeared to apply equally to playing computer games off-line).
- Parents of younger children worry their kids will accidentally stumble upon undesirable sites (which are spontaneously defined as pornographic sites by most parents, although, with prompting, hate sites or sites operated by “undesirable” groups are also included).
- Isolated participants bemoaned the lack of proper grammar and spelling on the Internet. One participant banned his children from chatting when he discovered they were using abbreviations. The same participant reported that he would check his children’s writing to correct grammar and spelling (yet, later, also claimed he allowed his children to have private e-mail, which he did not read out of respect for their privacy).

Parents of younger children (Toronto)

These parents reported that the computers in their homes are located in the computer room, basement or living room. Some of their kids have a computer in their own room. One parent used to have the computer in her bedroom until her son moved it to the living room. She was better able to control her son’s computer use before this move, by locking her bedroom door, than she can now. This control, she reported, was important so that she could keep the phone line free while she was away from home.

As well as checking the history of the Internet browser, some parents have the only password for on-line access, so that the children have to come and ask the parents for permission to go on-line.

Rules set by parents for computer use and Internet access include:

- Having to ask for permission before using the Internet.
- Using the Internet only during certain times (for example, not past a certain time of night, not on school days, not when parents are expecting calls).
- No access to adult sites (some parents check to find out where their children have been but reported that the children say that, “it must have been their friends,” when it appears an adult site has been accessed).
- Wanting to know what is being downloaded (because of the viruses on the Internet and because of the memory that the downloaded material can occupy).
- Not providing personal information.
- No chat rooms.

- No violent games.
- No sites where you can learn how to make a bomb or sites related to “hate or cults”.

Television rules include:

- Time limits (parents are finding their children watching television less than before, with more time being spent at the computer).
- Content limits.
- Knowing the rating.
- Television is a privilege that can be taken away.

Parents of older children (Toronto)

Some parents said that they check the history and the logs to see where their children have gone on the Internet. One parent reported that he had discovered certain sites on the Internet where his son should not have been while looking at a travel site his son showed him; this site had highlighted links that indicated where the boy had been.

Rules:

- Time allowance (the eldest children do not always have a time restriction).
- “I don’t have any control over that because when they’re at school or at someone else’s house, they know what’s right and what’s wrong and if they get into a situation where they know they shouldn’t be, then they go for help”; some parents feel their children would come to them for help.
- No chat rooms or pornographic sites.
- Use the Internet for educational purposes.

Some parents feel that they are stricter than other parents are. Sometimes parents will speak to the older children about computer and Internet issues, and the older children will speak to the younger children in the household. The eldest child in one home has taken the initiative to block access to chats for the younger siblings.

5.4.2 *Conversing and Sharing*

Children aged 9 to 11 feel they can ask their parents for help if they find themselves accidentally arriving at a “bad site” on the Web. Most kids aged 12 years and over feel they can get themselves out of any “bad site” they encounter on the Net and, since they believe they are more knowledgeable about the Web than their parents, rarely discuss Net issues with them. Some youth mentioned other adults from whom they seek Internet advice, some of whom they initially met on the Internet.

Parents are more likely to discuss the Internet with their kids if they themselves are more knowledgeable users.

Only a few parents reported going on-line with their kids. A few parents of children under 12 years of age reported playing games on-line with the kids. A couple of the parents of older children reported playing the on-line equivalent of TV game shows with their kids on-line. Some parents in Toronto also reported “steering” their children toward what was beneficial on the Internet when the children were younger.

A few parents and kids reported that, in their household, working on homework and doing research sometimes involves parent and child working together. Some of these parents reported that they “supervise” their kid’s work on-line to make sure that it is being done “properly.” One child reported that he likes using sites that were shown to him by his father.

Nine year old males (Montreal)

These boys feel that their parents know what is really on the Internet. If the Internet is not available at home, then parents do not talk to their children about the Internet at all.

Eleven year old males (Toronto)

As with the 9 year old boys, these 11 year olds feel that their parents know what is on the Internet. Some reported that they have learned from their parents how to avoid uncomfortable situations; others said they have learned that it is “best” to not get parents “involved,” as “they get too excited about things that aren’t such a big deal.”

For Internet safety information, some would turn to their parents but some feel that they themselves should “write a book” on this because “kids know more for kids.”

Most said they would not speak to their parents after encountering an inappropriate site, but some said they might and one said he would.

Fourteen year old females (Toronto)

These girls do not often speak about the Internet with their parents; when there are conversations about the Internet, it is often related to e-mail or a Web site that one of them has seen.

The participants in this group feel that their parents would be surprised to find out about some of the girls’ experiences on-line.

Sixteen year old males (Toronto)

These youths said that their parents ask them questions such as “Who are you talking to? What are you looking at? How did you get there?”

Parents (Montreal)

The more familiar parents are with computers and the Internet, the more they tend to discuss the Internet and technology with their children. Some parents who are unfamiliar with the Internet never discuss it at all.

Parents of younger children (Toronto)

Parents reported that schools require the parents to sign a paper authorizing the children to use the Internet at school. Parents believe that Internet safety is taught at school as a part of the curriculum. For some, the fact that children use the Internet at school, along with the belief that “they wouldn’t do things like that [negative things] at school,” results in the parents seeing no problem with using the Internet at home. One parent said, “Whatever they are given at school, I trust it at home.”

Parents feel that they have lots of discussions about what is on the Internet and that there is a lot of sharing of information. Some find this difficult though, as they are not very familiar with the Internet themselves. One parent said that, “he [son] doesn’t want to talk to me about it, because he doesn’t want me to know how to do it.”

Some parents reported that their older children often teach the younger children about the Internet, so that the parents feel that they need not bother.

Parents of older children (Toronto)

These parents reported that their children learn about the Internet from their friends and from school. The school sends home a letter notifying the parents that the children will be using the Internet and asking for approval. Some parents assume that the children are being educated about the Internet, but others just do not know.

Some feel that it is not always useful to restrict Internet access at home or have other rigid rules, because the children still use the Internet at school, the library or a friend’s home. (“I’m not going to put these restrictions on the kids ... even if I don’t put restrictions, they’re still picking it up on the street.”)

During a discussion among several Toronto parents, some said they prefer their child to look at pornography on the Internet rather than embarrassing them by buying Playboy magazines or using a hooker. In this instance, when asked to explain why she feels this way, one mother said, “Well, if he is looking at stuff on the Internet, then I won’t be embarrassed at the corner store where he would buy his magazines ... and I won’t be embarrassed by having to pay bail if he gets arrested for being with a hooker. What other people think about our family is important to me.” Another parent, a dad, said, “It’s like a lot of things. I would just feel better about it if he learned about this sort of thing with me around to sort him out ... to help him work it through.”

5.5 Privacy, Safety & Values

While children know that giving out private information to strangers is dangerous, their definition of “strangers” does not include corporations whose logos or brand names they recognize. As well, there is no one definition of what kind of information is private. Some will give out e-mail addresses without reservation, feeling that this is not identifying information. Others will give their e-mail addresses only in on-line environments that they perceive as “safe,” where they feel this information cannot lead to a person finding their home. Phone numbers are considered to be too much information but for some children, city, neighbourhood or even postal code are not considered as identifying.

Nine year old females (Toronto)

Most participants said that they would not provide personal information unless their parents had given them permission to do so at specific, parent approved sites. One participant said that she would not give personal information “because you don’t know who those people are, and what they want from you.” She said that her mother had told her to be careful. Another participant was told by her parents that personal information is not to be given because “sometimes it can be a scam and they tell you stuff, then they take your money.”

At the school attended by one of the participants, the child’s name and year of birth must be entered to play some computer games. She felt that, because the teacher told her she could do it, it was okay.

Some girls are concerned that when looking for information, one could go onto a “bad Web site” and, for instance, find music with “not very good words.” Out of this concern, one participant suggested that there should be two Internets (one for adults and one for children). Other participants in the group promptly told her about “age appropriate sites.”

One participant said that when she encountered an uncomfortable situation, she used the “back button” to remove herself from that situation. One participant said that she would “change the Web site” and tell her mom if she encountered something that was inappropriate. Another participant said that, although changing the Web site works sometimes, by doing so, one is “often led to different things and it is hard to get out of.” In this case, she said, she would just close down the Web browser.

Nine year old males (Montreal)

These boys reported that, when using chat lines, not telling people with whom you are chatting about personal information such as age is common; however, telling the truth soon after was also common. One boy said that he tells the truth when he really knows someone; he also said that after “about 30 minutes, I guess, then you really know them.” Not all participants would provide personal information. Some would give the city and the street but were aware of the possibility of someone “coming and knocking on [their] door” if the information they gave was too specific.

Eleven year old males (Toronto)

For these youths, giving out information over the Internet is prohibited by their parents. One participant pointed out that, although one can provide false information on the Net, one's real e-mail address is sent; he had warned a friend about this.

Some said that they should "write a book" on this topic because "kids know more for kids." Asked about what they would include in such a book, they said they would advise that kids should mostly go to games and not "on things you are not sure about." It was also suggested that sites inappropriate for their age should not be accessed and that kids should not download "because of viruses and stuff." No pornography, violence or real swearing, no chat rooms and no releasing of personal information were also mentioned as guidelines for kids on the Internet.

Participants are familiar with chat rooms that are monitored for inappropriate language. Many participants indicated that they actually preferred "age appropriate" sites, because they felt "safer" there.

Twelve year old females (Montreal)

There was general agreement among these participants that never providing one's phone number and being aware of viruses on the Internet are important rules to remember. These girls said that, in filling out forms over the Net, when the address is optional they usually leave it blank and that when parental permission is advised on a site, most would ask for it. Providing information to an "official site" such as Sony or Volkswagen is considered acceptable; brand names are thought of in the same way as friends, in terms of privacy of information on-line.

A few of the girls were familiar with situations where someone had met an on-line "friend." One participant's sister had met a boy with whom she had first communicated on-line, and another girl's father is seeing someone he met over the Internet. One of the girls mentioned the case in which a 14 year old girl was raped by someone she met at a hotel after talking to him on-line. In another case, a participant's friend had met a boy she had been talking to on-line after speaking with him on the phone. Some of the girls felt that this was all right because the girl had spoken with the boy on the phone first. They said, "It couldn't have been somebody bad because he gave a phone number. If somebody had something to hide they don't give their phone number."

One girl made reference to the "Cyber Dad" she met on-line, who teaches her things about the Internet. She admitted that she had met him in person; he is 23 years old and, because of a picture he had sent her, she was able to identify him at a restaurant. She described a situation in which he "helped" her after someone sent her a virus on-line. To get even and make her feel better, her "Cyber Dad" sent a virus to the original person.

Thirteen year old males (Montreal)

For these boys, providing information over the Internet is considered safe if the site is known (i.e., ShowBiz.net, Video.com); some participants would feel comfortable providing name, phone number and e-mail address in such a case. Sites that require the input of credit card numbers are not generally used (mostly because they don't have access to a credit card).

Fourteen year old females (Toronto)

Some of these participants feel that they have the right amount of privacy while others would like more privacy. Wanting more privacy did not seem to be related to less parental supervision for these girls, but was rather related to siblings coming into the same room or their parents wanting to help them.

Some participants have provided their name, phone number and e-mail address for contests. Whether or not the company is known (i.e., Chapters, Skittles) was mentioned as a deciding factor for feeling comfortable about providing this information on-line.

None of these participants have met in person with a stranger with whom they have communicated on the Internet, and most indicated that they were unlikely to take that "next step," although most knew of at least one person who had met an Internet friend in the "real world."

Negative aspects of privacy issues are related to "stalkers," pornography, and security. One participant mentioned that someone found her e-mail address and is now sending her "crazy e-mails."

Fifteen year old females (Montreal)

Most participants would not provide personal information such as their name and address on sites where it is requested. One reason given for this decision was that, as a result of giving identifying information, advertising material for things that they are not interested in knowing about or buying is often sent to them. Some participants did not see sending a picture over the Internet as inappropriate. Some would provide their address for a contest. One referred to having a "critical mind" in decision-making, a skill that is being taught at her school.

Most wanted a little more privacy in the home, but this was not related to a feeling of too much supervision from parents.

Only a few participants in this age group are concerned about their personal safety or privacy on-line. One participant reported that someone with whom she spoke on the Internet had come to her home, even though she had not given him her address. Not all meetings between Internet "friends" are considered negative; one participant's brother met his fiancée over the Internet. The girls' concern over chat lines and meeting new "friends" is present because of all the stories they hear. Only one participant speaks to her parents about this and, as a result, only chats with people she knows really well.

Some feel that it is possible to distinguish between an adult and a child on the Internet and that they can protect themselves from potential problems: “people talk differently so you can tell if it is an adult... [for example] certain expressions... spelling mistakes... kids don’t finish words, they are chopped up... use codes.”

Parents (Montreal)

Most parents respect their children’s on-line privacy, but instruct them to avoid divulging personal information and to restrict ICQ chats to school- and activity-related topics between friends. Some believe that setting rules and guidelines for their children’s Internet use does not constitute an invasion of their privacy, but simply sets a framework within which their children can learn from their experiences and mistakes.

Parents are wary of interaction between their children and other Internet users, especially in chat rooms. However, in Montreal, parents feel the dangers of the Internet are no worse than the dangers in the “real” world; some feel that it is safer for kids to experience these dangers in the controlled environment of their home.

Even more interesting are the concerns that some parents expressed about their own Internet safety and boundaries. Some are worried that it is somehow easy to fall in love with someone on the Internet. These parents have very real fears that their spouse will meet someone on the Internet and wind up having an affair or leaving them. Even more troubling is the fear that they themselves will log onto the Internet and fall in love in a chat room, forcing them to make some very unpleasant choices. It is as though the Internet is somehow a magical/uncontrollable “love trap” and they fear being ensnared.

Parents of younger children (Toronto)

Privacy is looked upon in two ways by these parents. Some parents said that young children do not need any privacy. Others feel that privacy should be given when parents can trust and feel comfortable with their children’s decision-making skills. There is a sense that the parents trust their kids but “do not trust what is out there.”

The need to be cautious, and particularly not to release personal information, on the Internet is a concern of these parents.

5.6 Additional Issues of Concern about the Internet

5.6.1 Technology Issues

Though knowledge of Internet safety overall is low, the message about viruses has reached users. Most users, even the youngest participants, are aware of what viruses are, how best to avoid them and the fact that software exists to help protect them. Other technology issues addressed by participants included hacking, connection speeds and slow download times.

Thirteen year old males (Montreal)

When speaking of negative aspects of the Internet, one concern of these boys relates to the issue of “hackers” invading one’s computer system or being able to “bug a system.” Being secure, including being protected from viruses, is crucial.

There is awareness among these youths that, because of the potential problems created by the Internet, there has been an increase in Net police. These participants are well aware of the Montreal hacker known as Mafiaboy. While some of the participants seem to have explored hacking themselves, they are also concerned that the police could catch them. While clearly considered inappropriate, even illegal, some found the idea of hacking to be macho, and thus a desirable skill to acquire.

The time required to download information from the Internet is considered to be a negative aspect of their Net use. There was also a feeling of the presence of “too much personal information stock” because of the ability of hackers to access files. Accessing information about someone was said to be too easy. Programs such as those that generate credit card numbers that will be accepted by merchants is also a concern.

Sites, such as WAREZ, where many screens appear are seen as troublesome. Patches or simply closing the Internet browser were offered as solutions to this problem.

Fifteen year old females (Montreal)

Among these participants, the negative aspects of the Internet were confined primarily to concerns related to viruses.

Slow connection to the Internet is also an issue with some teen girls. Some complained that it is difficult to find things on the Internet.

Sixteen year old males (Toronto)

Among the negative aspects of the Internet mentioned by these youths were the activities of “hackers.” One participant has a firewall for security purposes at home, but many do not worry about security.

5.6.2 Competencies

The Internet's reliance on typing can disadvantage some users. For young users, who fear that every mistyped URL may lead them to a "bad" site, this creates considerable concern, given their developing spelling skills. Even older teens find themselves unable to navigate the Internet successfully if their literacy skills are underdeveloped.

French youth seem adept at surfing in French and even use the Internet to help them learn English, while bilingual and multi-lingual youth navigate and chat in any language (or a mixture of those they know).

Twelve year old females (Montreal)

Some of the participants only speak French at home, while others speak French and English. When using the Internet, English language sites are mostly used as "the French ones are badly done [and it is] easier in English." French language sites were also criticized for not being as interesting or having less information than English sites.

Thirteen year old males (Montreal)

All these boys speak French at home, but visit both English and French language sites on the Internet.

Sixteen year old males (Toronto)

Some participants said that, at times, an accident during the execution of a search or a mistake in typing has led them to an inappropriate site. Their solution to escape these sites is to "go back" or turn off the computer.

5.6.3 Other Issues

Twelve year old females (Montreal)

Participants expressed concern over the "exaggerated violence" found on the Internet.

Some of these girls feel that sites that charge a fee without warning are a problem. (Participants believe that there are sites you can visit and be charged for visiting without giving a credit card number.)

Thirteen year old males (Montreal)

Some of these participants said they do not like the sites whose intention is to sell them something.

Fourteen year old females (Toronto)

Some of these participants have experienced images that “pop up on your screen,” such as advertisements for pornography videos or sites. Generally, they prefer that pop-ups be related to things, which are of interest to them. Pornography is not considered interesting even to “explore.”

Some participants have encountered games that are only for those 18 years or older, but these are not regularly played, not necessarily because of the violence, but because the games are often too difficult or too expensive.

Fifteen year old females (Montreal)

Sites that charge a fee are a concern for these participants, especially if the user is not told about the fee.

Sixteen year old males (Toronto)

Among these participants, there is concern over being “scammed” by doing on-line shopping; some also said on-line shopping was “impersonal for buying things.”

One participant ended up at a gay and lesbian site where he did not feel comfortable.

Another participant expressed concern over “20 sites opening up at one time,” which made it difficult to move away from the material.

6.0 HIGHLIGHTS – SITES KIDS VISIT

During the course of the focus group sessions with young people, respondents were given the opportunity to visit sites of their own choice. They were encouraged to visit the sites that they consider to be their favourites and then to explore other sites if they found something interesting. (See Appendix for a summary of site visits.)

Findings and Observations Related to Site Visits

Respondents make no special effort to visit Canadian sites except where those sites are of particular interest to them (MuchMusic being the most common example). Some reported feeling disadvantaged at times, as a Canadian user on the Web, since some contests and offers are open only to U.S. residents.

Respondents in Quebec reported that they enjoy chatting on French language sites. Some also said that they like to visit English language sites to practice their English; they also like to do this because there is a greater variety and more extensive content among English language sites than among French language sites.

Some respondents reported chatting in languages other than English or French. For most, the alternative language is often their first language. Most communicate on-line in their first language, mostly with family and friends, using e-mail or chat.

While having free access to all that the Internet has to offer is desired by many respondents over the age of 14, younger respondents often reported that they seek sites that are, in their words, “age appropriate.”

Most of the young participants firmly agreed that protecting one’s privacy is important. However, specifics about what information should remain private and what is appropriate to share vary widely. Few respondents have hard and fast “rules” about giving out personal information on-line.

- Some reported that their parents don’t want them to enter contests without permission. Others reported that their parents love on-line contests and often sign up for contests that have prizes that would be of interest to the kids.
- Many said that they would consider a face-to-face meeting with a person that they have met on-line. Most don’t think of it as particularly dangerous. Some have parents or adult relatives who have met partners on-line, or who regularly date people that they first met on-line.
- Some reported that they would not purchase things on-line using a credit card. (Most indicated that they do not currently have access to a credit card, but that they do not expect that their position on using credit cards for on-line purchases will change.) The key issue is not privacy, but rather a concern that the items offered on-line might be a “scam,” or not good quality.
- Some reported that they are comfortable giving some identifying information to both individuals and companies on-line. This information might include their name, school, age or

town. Most consider it inappropriate to give their real name or their full street address, but most feel that giving a postal code is OK.

- Even among those who indicated that they are generally careful about giving too much information about themselves on-line, some feel that it is acceptable and appropriate to give both their phone number and address when the information is requested by a “big company” whose products/brands they know and trust. In this circumstance, the “brand” is treated as though it were a “friend.”
- Others reported “lying” about all sorts of personal information as a means of protecting their privacy.
- The responses of some of the young people who took part in the study suggest that they have been told by their parents to not share too much information about their family, particularly related to “troubles” at home. This aspect of privacy seems to be related more to the notion of “don’t tell the neighbours” or “what will the neighbours think?” than it is to protecting the identity of the participants.
- Some respondents indicated that they feel confident that they are able to get to know another person very quickly when chatting on-line. When asked how long it might take to feel comfortable about giving someone personal information, many respondents indicated that around 15 minutes was usually enough to get to know the person with whom they are communicating well enough to “trust them, or not trust them.”

The concept of “privacy” does not appear to be well understood among these young Internet users. It may be that the existence of “privacy policies” leaves the young person feeling that they are in a protected environment when visiting a site.

Note:

The majority of sites these kids reported visiting have extensive, if not entirely clear, privacy policies.

Most of these sites set a default option that will cause a user who quickly agrees to the terms of usage to forgo aspects of their privacy guarantee. The onus is then left on the user to make a special effort to fully protect their own privacy.

Also, among those sites that require registration and expect users to read their terms of use agreement and privacy policy before registering, there are often a number of opportunities to waive the privacy policy to receive “special offers.” While the information requested is not actually required for registration, the urgency of the tone or the graphic format may suggest that the information is indeed “mandatory,” rather than optional.

In response to recent rulings in the U.S., some sites have created special rules that apply to those under the age of 13.

Some sites have extensive safety tips for children using the Internet. As respondents noted, however, without asking for a credit card number, sites cannot verify their users’ ages.

7.0 THOUGHTS FOR CONSIDERATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to continue to understand the emerging Internet environment, we must endeavour to constantly look at it with the openness and wonder of children.

It will be difficult for many parents and decision-makers to respond to the implications of the Internet and child safety until it is viewed as something more akin to an integrated “place” – as young people are more likely to experience it – than as either just a tool or a toy, which is currently the more common adult perspective.

Young people using the Internet today are the voyageurs of a new frontier. As with any frontier environment, it can become “wild and woolly.” To protect these young explorers, it is important that they be given the tools they need to stay safe and feel confident in their quest.

Many of those whose lives are most integrated with the Internet will not even reach voting age for about five years. And, by then, Net technology will likely have moved to a new level of pervasiveness in everyday life.

Piaget and his followers have written extensively about the importance of time and opportunity for children to grow and mature through autonomous play and identity exploration. For some of the youngest respondents in this study, their communications on-line offer one of the few opportunities that they have for autonomous play.

It is clearly important to provide young people with guidelines for personal safety on-line. This will likely be most effective if they are given the skills to make informed decisions rather than by trying to establish a set of arbitrary rules, which will be ever more difficult to monitor and/or enforce.

This study indicates that there has been success in communicating Net safety related to computer viruses. As well, Street Smart programmes are common in schools today. The successful communication of these two issue areas suggests that it will be possible to develop appropriate information on Net safety that will be both useful and relevant to young people. The following is a preliminary list of ideas and initiatives suggested by this research:

- Basic Internet policies need to be developed for teachers and librarians teaching Internet skills. (Most of the young people involved in this study tell us that they are learning the more formal aspects of their computer and Internet skills in school.)
- Guidelines for parents on what aspects of the Internet are best introduced to children at various ages should be further researched and published. (Parents in participating in this study often indicate that they are discomfited by their own lack of knowledge. They are concerned that they can't teach what they don't know themselves. Many parents sense that this is a New World that will pass them by, and their frustration creates ennui.)

- Partnerships with media Web sites that young people often visit could be useful in communicating information about Internet safety, since these sites are already credible to young people and have some existing Net safety policies. Information on these sites may take on the characteristics of an “idea virus.”* The wonderful thing about a successful idea virus is that those who “catch” it feel ownership for it, and pass it along.
- The nature of any policies or programmes will need to be reviewed on a routine basis, to ensure that, as the technology moves on, policies stay on target to meet the objective – fostering “Net-smart” Internet users. Programmes should be designed in a manner that serves not only the Net-literate and more mature users, but also the youngest and most vulnerable.
- To understand how best to create these policy guidelines or education training programmes, it will be necessary to understand more about how young people are using the Internet to find and build very personalized “communities” on-line.
- Research among young people should not be confined to large urban centres. The Internet is clearly not an urban-only phenomenon.

*The concept of the idea virus is discussed at: <http://www.fastcompany.com/online/37/ideavirus.html>