# *Young Canadians in a Wired World*
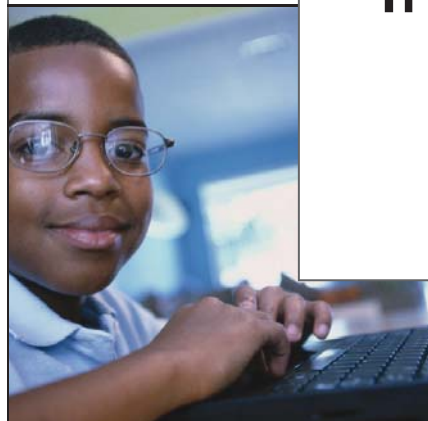
## Phase II

## Trends and Recommendations

November 2005

MEDIA AWARENESS NETWORK

RÉSEAU ÉDUCATION MÉDIAS

Industry Industrie
Canada Canada

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# 1. Introduction

In 2000, the Media Awareness Network (MNet) initiated a research program to better understand what Canadian young people are doing online and whether or not they are engaged in risky behaviours. The initial study[1] demonstrated that Canadian children and teens were already extremely active online users by 2001 but that there was a significant gap between what parents thought their children were doing online and what they were actually doing. Much of the gap reflected the fact that parents typically thought of the Internet as a useful tool that would help their children with their school work and prepare them for the work place. Young people, on the other hand, saw the Net as a place to play and socialize. In the course of playing and socializing, they were often exposed to sexual or hateful material or activities that carried certain risks, like chatting in adult-only chat rooms and meeting online acquaintances in the real world.

The overall picture in 2001 left many people concerned that the Net posed a danger to young people because it made them more vulnerable to online pedophiles and exposed them to offensive content. Children and teens were "out there," and parents were generally unaware of the risks they faced. But the initial research also raised more questions than it answered. Twenty-five percent of kids reported that they had been asked to meet an online acquaintance in the real world, but who were they meeting? Was the Net bringing them into contact with strangers or was it extending their local communities? What did their willingness to divulge personal information online say about their experience of or desire for privacy? Were they using new technologies, like Webcams and cell phones? What skills did they need to cope with the risks they faced? And what innovative or creative uses were they making of the technology?

To answer these questions, MNet decided to return to the field in 2003. We started with a series of focus groups with parents and with young people between the ages of 11 and 17[2] and followed up two years later with a national school-based survey of 5,272 students in Grades 4 to 11, conducted by ERIN Research.[3] This survey focussed on getting a more accurate snapshot of where today's youth are at when it comes to the Net, with

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[1] *Young Canadians in a Wired World* – Phase I consisted of a phone survey of more than 1,000 parents, a series of focus groups with parents and kids in Montreal and Toronto, and a survey of 5,682 students in Grades 4-11 from across the country. (MNet [2001a], *Canada's Children in a Wired World: The Parents' View,* Ottawa <http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/research/YCWW/phaseI/parents.cfm>; MNet, [2001b], *Young Canadians in a Wired World: The Students' View,* Ottawa <http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/research/YCWW/phaseI/students.cfm>).

[2] For the full report on the focus groups, see MNet (2004), *Young Canadians in a Wired World* – Phase II: *A Qualitative Research Report*, Ottawa <http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/research/YCWW/phaseII/focus_groups.cfm>.

[3] For the full report on the survey, see MNet (2005), *Young Canadians in a Wired World* – Phase II*,* Ottawa <http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/research/YCWW/phaseII/students.cfm>. Please note, the statistics set out in this document are taken from the full report, unless otherwise stated. The survey refers to grade levels outside Quebec, whereas the focus group report refers to children's ages. Please see Appendix 1 for the correspondence between grade levels in Quebec, grade levels in the rest of Canada, and ages.

less emphasis on risky behaviour and more on the significant ways in which young people are using – and driving – this technology.

One of the most interesting changes we discovered was in the way parents and children now see the Net. Parents' hopeful belief that a home computer would give their children a leg up in school seems long gone. The mothers and fathers we talked to in Edmonton, Toronto and Montreal in 2003 almost universally complained that their children are wasting their time online chatting and playing games.

They also told us that the Net has become a point of contention in their households, drawing their kids away from their supervision and into a world that is closed to them.

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My daughter is online all the time. She doesn't seem to me that she has a life at all, except for MSN. She says that I just don't understand, and she is right, I don't.

Father, Montreal

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Young people, on the other hand, do not see the Net as a distinct entity or environment. It is simply one more space in which they live their lives – connecting with friends, pursuing interests, figuring out what it means to be a teenager and a grown-up. Questions that asked how the Internet has changed their lives did not seem to resonate. To them, the Net has become wallpaper, seamlessly blending with the social spaces they inhabit

in the real world. And one of its draws is the way it provides them with a window into a teenaged or adult world that is otherwise closed to them.

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People talk to you more when you are 15 or 16. If you are 12 or 13, they will really think you are like a baby.

11 and 12 year olds in Montreal, discussing why they pretend to be older in chat rooms

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Our focus groups and the survey that followed make it very clear that the Net has become an integral part of young Canadians' social environment. This report provides a snapshot of that environment and explores what we have learned so far about the kinds of technologies young people are using, the ways in which those technologies shape their social experiences, and the challenges they encounter in networked spaces. Throughout, we attempt to portray that environment from the kids' viewpoint so that we, as adults responsible for guiding and educating them, can better understand what the Internet means in their lives.

The underlying message is a hopeful one. The majority of young people have integrated the Net into mainstream activities that strengthen their connections to their real-world communities and enrich their social interactions with peers. At the same time, the commercial nature of the sites they visit and their own concerns about offensive content raise serious questions about how to provide them with the tools they need to wisely navigate the risks. In order to provide young people with the

support they need, it is essential that we begin to look at the medium from their eyes and come to understand the ways in which they use it to explore their world and themselves.

This report starts by looking at how young Canadians have integrated communication technologies into their lives. We then explore the ways in which they use the online spaces opened up by these technologies to carry on social relationships and explore social roles. To provide adults with a better understanding of the online environment that kids now inhabit, we examine the sites that young people identify as favourites. Although the majority of kids' online experiences are positive ones, the commercial messages, privacy invasions, and violent or sexualized content that are often embedded in these sites raise concerns. We conclude by exploring how rules, parental supervision and education can help provide kids with the tools they need to wisely navigate the online environment.

# 2. The Mainstreaming of Networked Technology in Kids' Lives

The Internet has been a ubiquitous presence in young Canadians' school lives since 1999, when Industry Canada connected all of Canada's 5,000 public schools to the Internet.[4]

However, the Net is also now a pervasive element of young people's home lives. Ninety-four percent of kids report that they have Internet access at home, and a significant majority of them (61 percent) enjoy a high-speed connection. By the time kids hit Grade 11, half of them (51 percent) have their own Internet-connected computer, separate and apart from the family computer.

But that is only part of the story. Although a home computer remains the most common way young people connect to networked spaces, around half of kids with cell phones[5] can use those phones to surf the Net (44 percent)[6] and text message their friends (56 percent). So, for many youth, access to networked communications is no longer limited to landlocked PCs. In addition, the line between networked spaces and real world spaces is blurred by the surprising number of kids who have their own Webcams (22 percent) and cell phone cameras (17 percent). The common practice of posting pictures

of themselves on MSN profiles, personal Web pages, Weblogs and social networking sites also demonstrates how permeable the line between young people's private lives and the Internet has become.

This blending of virtual and real spaces is accompanied by a similar convergence of networked and traditional media. By Grade 8, more than three-quarters of young people download or listen to music online, and one-third of them use the Net to get access to television shows and movies. The resulting mediascape provides kids with multiple opportunities to communicate, express themselves and entertain themselves, with little interruption as they move back and forth between the real world and virtual spaces.

Kids' interest in integrating the Net into their social lives begins at a surprisingly early age. The typical Grade 4 student, if given an hour or two to use the Net, prefers to play online games,[7] but gaming is soon superseded by talking to friends. By Grade 6, girls prefer instant messaging over any other online activity; by Grade 8, boys' interest in gaming is matched by their interest in instant mes-

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[4]   Manley, J. (1999), *Canada and the Internet revolution: Connecting Canadians.* Washington: The Trilateral Commission <http://www.trilateral.org/annmtgs/trialog/trlgtxts/t53/man.htm>.

[5]   Forty-five percent of children have access to a family cell phone, and an additional 23 percent have their own cell phones.

[6]   We did not collect data about the number of young people who make use of this Internet access feature, which may be prohibitively expensive. The point is that ways to access the Net are expanding.

[7]   Seventy-six percent of boys and 54 percent of girls would choose to play games if they had an hour or two to spend on the Net.

saging. From Grade 9 on, instant messaging is the preferred online activity for both girls (80-83 percent) and boys (54-61 percent), and about 80 percent of kids instant message and listen to music on a daily basis.

Getting access to this online world is easier for older children, who are more likely to have their own computer, MP3 player, cell phone and Webcam. This fact is particularly important to note because children who have their own Internet-connected computer typically spend twice as much time online on an average school day as kids who use family equipment do. But a significant percentage of younger kids (20 percent in Grade 4) have their own Internet-connected computer. The number of kids with their own devices[8] continues to grow until it starts to level off by grades 8 or 9 – reaching critical mass, so to speak, at exactly the age when using the Net to talk with friends and listen to music has hit the mainstream.

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[8]  Including online computers, MP3 players and Webcams. The exception is cell phones; the number of kids with their own cell phones continues to grow as kids go through high school.

# 3. Online Space is Social Space – How Young People Use the Net to Stay Connected to Friends and Explore Social Roles

Young Canadians are now among the most wired in the world. But contrary to the earlier stereotype of the isolated and awkward computer nerd, to-day's wired kid is a social kid. A growing number of young people report that they use the Net with other people most of the time,[9] and by Grade 8, the average youth is spending over an hour a day of their online time talking to friends. Kids who spend more time online each day also feel more confident about their ability to make friends, tell jokes and make people laugh.[10]

I saw my grandmother on MSN messenger.
I hadn't seen her in 10 years – thanks to
MSN I did.

Grade 10 boy, Ontario

However, young people use their social skills online primarily to participate in and extend their real-world social networks. School, sports and par-ties continue to be their primary source of new friends, with the Internet placing a distant fourth.

And, typically, a friend they meet online is a friend of a family member or a friend of a friend in the real world. Many kids report that they prefer in-stant messaging over chat rooms precisely because they can control who approaches them; since they have to add a new person to their instant messag-ing contact list before they can communicate with them, "You know who you're talking to on MSN-IM."[11]

We had friends who knew each other, so we
could hang out and connect. The Internet was
like an icebreaker to get to know the other
person's likes and dislikes.

Grade 11 girl, Ontario

It is particularly enlightening to note that the young people we talked to in the focus groups all indicated that having a long contact list on MSN is a social status marker.

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[9]  In 2001, more than half (54 percent) of kids went online by themselves most of the time (MNet, 2001b). In 2005, only one-third (33 percent) of kids surfed alone.

[10]  Very light users rate their skills in making friends and telling jokes/making people laugh as a six on a scale of one to 10.  In contrast, heavy users rate their skills as a seven.

[11]  Although young people can control who is on their contact list, that does not necessarily mean that they do not talk to people they don't know.

However, the online environment can also expose kids to bullying and other negative social interaction. Although young people are still most likely to be bullied at school, a significant portion of them report being bullied over the Internet (nine percent) or on a cell phone (two percent). Moreover, the incidence of bullying reported by kids is highest in the younger grades, where the number who use instant messaging to communicate with friends grows from 28 percent in Grade 4 to 73 percent in Grade 7. This finding raises interesting questions about the impact of bullying when it leaves the schoolyard and comes into young people's private spaces, via MSN or cell phone.

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When I was younger, we used to really bad mouth someone (online) and insult them and generally drive them crazy if we didn't like them. It was fun.

16-year-old girl, Toronto

In school… you don't want anyone to think of you as a "gossip" or someone who says things about other people. Everyone wants to be "nice." You don't have to be nice if you don't want to online.

13 year old girl, Edmonton

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Still, the majority of kids' online social interactions are positive ones. When the survey respondents were asked to describe a memorable Internet experience, the largest single category of experiences (15 percent) involved connecting with friends or making new friends. Over eighty percent of those experiences were reported to be good ones.[12] Our survey identified four factors that play a primary role in determining whether an online experience is good or bad. Not surprisingly, kids report that a good experience is typically funny and exciting, and makes them feel good about themselves. But they also say it involves an activity that would meet with their parents' approval. A lack of parental approval correlates with a bad online experience.

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I feel that I should be more in control of my son's Internet use. But he knows way more than I do about the computer and about the Internet.

Mother, Toronto

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The parents we talked to in our focus groups worry that they are unable to control their children's Internet activities or the type of content their children are confronted with online. However, the kids tell us that their parents' expectations help to shape and determine successful Internet experiences.

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12   Six percent were reported to be bad, and 13 percent were reported as neutral.

The social nature of the Internet is also evidenced by the ways in which kids will assume online identities to try out new social roles. Almost 60 percent of kids pretend to be someone else online at some point, and half of them do so because they want to see what it would be like to be older, to talk to older kids or to flirt with other people. The young people we talked to in the focus groups told us the Net gave them the freedom to try on different personalities and to explore their sexuality away from the supervision of parents or teachers. As one 13-year-old boy in Toronto put it, "I like to pretend to be an older boy looking for an older girl, or an older girl looking for an older boy, or an older girl looking for an older girl."

Exploring sexual and other roles outside the family environment is a natural part of growing up.[13] From the kids' point of view, the Net allows them to do so in a safe environment, with relatively few consequences. But the safety of these interactions is built upon the assumption that kids will never have to actually confront the people they are interacting with online.

Over the past four years, policymakers have focussed on the need to protect children from adult stalkers who troll chat rooms. However, understanding the extent of this risk is an essential part of setting good public policy and providing appropriate parental guidance to children. The young people we talked to in the focus groups were very aware of news stories about online stalking. They also knew the rules. As one girl in Toronto put it, "No personal information, no porn, no chat." Our survey results indicate that a growing number of homes have rules about meeting an online acquaintance in the real world – 75 percent in 2005, compared with 54 percent in 2001 – and that the presence of a rule does affect behaviour, especially among younger children. Moreover, a large majority of kids (79 percent overall) have never met an online acquaintance face to face. Of those kids who have done so, 72 percent report that it was a good experience.

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They weren't really what they said they looked like. They didn't act the way they "acted" on MSN or email.

Grade 9 girl, Saskatchewan

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The remaining meetings (29 percent) were "bad" for various reasons. In two-thirds of cases, the young person did not enjoy the experience because the person they met was "fat" or "ugly" or a "moron," or the young person simply didn't like them.[14] It is noteworthy that the kids we talked to in the focus groups all expressed indignation that they could be "lied to" on the Net, even though most of them admitted that they had assumed false online identities in the past.

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[13] Bukatko, Danuta (1995), *Child Development: A Thematic Approach,* Second Edition, Boston, Houghton Mifflin.

[14] These experiences included cases coded in the following manner: person's appearance was not as claimed; person wasn't the age claimed to be; person was fat, ugly; person was freak, weird, crazy; person was asshole/mean; person was annoying; person was moron/stupid/idiot; and did not like, interests did not match.

A small proportion of bad experiences involved unwanted sexual interaction or vulgar sexual language (three percent of all meetings) or getting into fights (two percent of all meetings).

> He was a jerk who wanted me for sex.
>
> Grade 10 girl, Saskatchewan

> The person I met had a bad attitude and she tried to get someone to beat me up.
>
> Grade 11 boy, Newfoundland

Sexual interaction is not, by itself, a marker for a bad experience. Indeed, four percent of teens who reported that they had had a good real-world experience with an online acquaintance said it was good because they had had sex. But it is interesting that the likelihood that a young person will be sexually harassed in the real world doubles if that person has intentionally visited adult chat rooms, gambling sites or sites that contain pornography, hate speech, violence or gore in the past year. Furthermore, kids who live in homes that have no rules about meeting online acquaintances or visiting sites with offensive content are more likely to be sexually harassed than kids who have rules.

> Adults just don't get it. We're surrounded by porn everywhere we go. It's everywhere – in the movies we watch, the magazines we read, the music videos we see.
>
> 13-year-old boy, Toronto

This finding indicates that there are interventions that may help protect children from harassment and offensive content. But successful interventions must take young people's social experiences into account. The kids we talked to in the focus groups indicated that adults tend to overreact to online pornography and fail to recognize the pervasiveness of sexualized images in all forms of media. Like the majority of kids in the survey,[15] they believe younger kids should be protected from offensive content, but rather than relying on technical fixes or blanket prohibitions, they want better information about content, so they can make informed choices about the online spaces they visit. They also worry about the consequences of having tracking software that records their online movements. Some are apprehensive that they will not be able to prove their innocence to teachers or parents when unwanted pornography pops up on the screen and that they might even lose computer privileges because of it.

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[15] Seventy-eight to 83 percent of kids in Grades 7 to 11 thought that children two years their junior should be protected from hate sites, violence or gore sites, online porn and bullying and harassment. Girls and younger children were more likely to feel that kids should be protected.

> Pop-ups with pornography opened up on my screen. My mother saw them and thought that I was looking at pornography.
>
> Grade 7 girl, Quebec

The young people's comments raise questions about the ways in which adults react to and attempt to regulate kids' online social environment. It is important to remember that, although the online environment may expose children to offensive content and risky situations, the majority of the online experiences that survey respondents reported as memorable were good (56 percent) or neutral (17 percent). Most of the bad experiences they complained about had to do with technological problems, like computer crashes, viruses, annoying pop-up windows and accidentally landing on a porn site or other undesirable place.

In addition, privacy-invasive solutions may not help much. The young people in our focus groups told us that they value their online privacy, especially their privacy from parents and teachers. They like the Net precisely because it gives them an opportunity to explore the adult world without supervision. This preference is in keeping with their need to test their wings outside the family. A majority of kids (57 percent) also use the Net to explore topics that interest them on an average school day, and a significant portion use it to express themselves on their own Web sites (28 percent) or in online diaries and Weblogs (15 percent).

> There is more privacy [on the Net]; you can talk about private stuff.
>
> 13-year-old girl, Edmonton

> When you are on MSN no one else can hear you. At school everyone can hear you.
>
> 13-year-old boy, Edmonton

To provide young people with the tools they need to wisely navigate the online world, it is essential that adults understand that the Net is part of their children's social environment. It is one of the places where kids connect with their friends, explore social roles, learn more about things that interest them and express themselves. To get a better understanding of that environment, we now turn to look at the sites they identify as favourites.

# 4. Hanging Out – Kids' Favourite Web Sites

Children who completed the survey were asked to list three favourite sites, other than search engines, MSN-IM or email sites.[16]

The resulting list of over 2,800 sites is perhaps most impressive for its variety. More than 2,200 of the sites were selected by only one or two children. This finding seems to indicate that popular culture experiences have been fragmented online and that many kids, especially older ones, pursue individual interests in spaces away from their peers. However, this apparent diversity is contextualized by a number of factors.

First, younger kids, especially, tend to gravitate to the same sites. For example, the top sites for kids in Grades 4 to 7 – Neopets for girls and Addicting Games for boys – were identified as favourites by 25-35 percent of the kids in those grades. A similar trend, although less marked, can be seen with older kids. The top choice for both boys and girls in Grades 8 to 11 – Addicting Games – was selected by 15-20 percent of respondents.

Throughout the grades, there are gender differences. For example, older girls tend to prefer social network and music sites, while boys gravitate towards sports and game sites. But at every age,

girls and boys share a number of favourites, including Addicting Games, Miniclip and Jeuxvideo.

Kids in Quebec often (but not always) select sites that are different from the choices of their peers in the rest of the country, but the overall pattern remains consistent. In other words, when their choices do differ, the types of sites they select are similar. For example, YTV, an English-language television station, is the number six choice of younger girls outside of Quebec, and VRAK TV, the French-language equivalent, is number four for girls of the same age inside the province.[17] Popular sites that are available in both French and English, like Neopets, also attract children on both sides of the provincial border. Neopets is the favourite site for girls in Grades 4 to 7 both inside and outside Quebec, and makes the top 10 list for boys in Grades 4 to 7 and girls in Grades 8 to 11 across the country. Accordingly, kids still tend to share an interest in visiting a relatively small number of sites.

Second, an analysis of the top 500 selections[18] on the favourites list indicates that kids typically like to hang out on gaming and streaming/multimedia sites. Each of these types of sites accounts for one-fifth (20 percent each, or 40 percent in total)

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[16]  There is no doubt that these sites are popular, but we eliminated them so we could get a better understanding of the kinds of online content that draws kids to the Net.

[17]  MNet (2005).

[18]  The analysis included all the sites that were selected as favourites by three or more children. The sites totaled 533, but only 506 sites were classified. Twelve sites were not available (either under construction, no longer available, empty of content or written in Asian characters), and 15 sites were listed twice under different names. Sites that could be classified in more than one category were classified according to the most dominant characteristics of the site.

## Table 1. "List your three favourite Internet sites": Grades 4 - 7
*YCWW II, 2005*

| Site | Percent of respondents | Site | Percent of respondents |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Grades 4-7 girls outside Quebec** | | **Grades 4-7 girls in Quebec** | |
| Neopets | 25.5 | Neopets | 35.3 |
| Addicting Games | 21.4 | Miniclip | 22.3 |
| Miniclip | 16.4 | Radio-Canada.ca | 18.0 |
| Family Channel | 11.3 | VRAK TV | 16.8 |
| Funnyjunk | 5.3 | Bonus | 14.3 |
| YTV | 4.8 | Tfou | 8.5 |
| Barbie | 4.4 | Cartoonnetwork | 7.5 |
| Candystand | 4.4 | Hilaryduff | 7.2 |
| Habbohotel | 4.3 | Musiqueplus | 7.2 |
| Myscene | 4.2 | Myscene | 7.0 |
| | | | |
| **Grades 4-7 boys outside Quebec** | | **Grades 4-7 boys in Quebec** | |
| Addicting Games | 29.6 | Miniclip | 25.3 |
| Miniclip | 28.6 | Bonus | 15.1 |
| Runescape | 12.0 | Newgrounds | 13.8 |
| YTV | 8.9 | T45ol (French language Flashplayer site ) | 11.8 |
| Flashplayer | 6.8 | Neopets | 10.4 |
| Funnyjunk | 6.3 | Cartoonnetwork | 7.8 |
| Candystand | 6.1 | Chimboz | 6.4 |
| Neopets | 5.0 | Mofunzone | 6.6 |
| Cartoonnetwork | 4.7 | Runescape | 6.6 |
| Coffeebreakarcade | 3.8 | eBaumsworld | 5.6 |

Note: In Quebec, elementary education spans Grades 1 to 6 and secondary education spans levels 1 to 5.

Grade 7 = Secondary 1
Grade 8 = Secondary 2
Grade 9 = Secondary 3
Grade 10 = Secondary 4
Grade 11 = Secondary 5

| Table 2. "List your three favourite Internet sites": Grades 8 - 11 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| YCWW II, 2005 | | | |
| **Site** | **Percent of respondents** | **Site** | **Percent of respondents** |
| **Grades 8-11 girls outside Quebec** | | **Grades 8-11 girls in Quebec** | |
| Addicting Games | 14.7 | Doyoulookgood | 15.5 |
| eBaumsworld | 7.5 | Launch | 10.8 |
| Neopets | 7.4 | Miniclip | 10.3 |
| Miniclip | 6.1 | Musiqueplus | 8.8 |
| Nexopia | 6.0 | Reggaetonlyrics | 6.3 |
| Launch | 5.3 | VRAK TV | 6.2 |
| Livejournal | 4.8 | Neopets | 5.1 |
| Muchmusic | 4.6 | Radio-Canada.ca | 4.7 |
| Piczo | 3.9 | Prizee | 3.4 |
| Seventeen | 3.8 | RDS.ca | 3.2 |
| | | | |
| **Grades 8-11 boys outside Quebec** | | **Grades 8-11 boys in Quebec** | |
| Addicting Games | 20.0 | Newgrounds | 19.2 |
| eBaumsworld | 12.4 | Miniclip | 17.0 |
| Miniclip | 11.5 | Jeuxvideo | 16.7 |
| Newgrounds | 8.7 | Launch | 5.5 |
| eBay | 5.6 | Runescape | 4.6 |
| NHL | 5.1 | eBay | 3.9 |
| NBA | 3.8 | eBaumsworld | 3.3 |
| Gamefaqs | 3.6 | Gamespot | 2.8 |
| NFL | 3.5 | Doyoulookgood | 2.3 |
| Homestarrunner | 3.3 | RDS.ca | 2.4 |

Note: In Quebec, elementary education spans Grades 1 to 6 and secondary education spans levels 1 to 5.

Grade 7 = Secondary 1
Grade 8 = Secondary 2
Grade 9 = Secondary 3
Grade 10 = Secondary 4
Grade 11 = Secondary 5

of the top 500. The bulk of the remaining three-fifths breaks down into special interest sites (18 percent), shopping sites (14 percent)[19] and TV channels (8 percent ).

Remarkably, only one percent of favourites consists of sites that have been specifically created for children[20] or families. The low interest in kid-friendly content is consistent with young people's desire to use the Net to explore adult interactions and interests. However, it is noteworthy that chat rooms and online dating sites account for only three percent of the top 500.[21]

Third, a significant number of kids agree on what the most popular sites are. The top 50 sites represent approximately one-half of all choices. And all of these sites (50 out of 50) are commercial sites[22] that have been designed to sell product, reinforce branding or advertise to youth.

## 4.1 The Commercialization of Kids' Online Spaces

Kids' favourite online spaces are overwhelmingly structured by commercial imperatives. These sites have the money to build sophisticated and engaging Web environments, and they use their resources to play upon children's developmental interests in communication in order to attract traffic. For example, a Kotex advertisement posted on

Seventeen (number 47 on the list of favourite Web sites) shows a savvy about online kid culture:

> *Kotex Fun & Games that Fit Your Phone – Download Gemdrop today brought to you by Kotex.* **Your friends are there for you** *– shouldn't you be there for them? Let them know about this awesome* **FREE** *download, click here!*

Almost all (94 percent) of the top 50 sites include marketing material. Although advertising is ubiquitous, marketing messages are also often embedded in content. For example, every game on the popular site Candystand incorporates images of various Lifesaver products. Neopets' virtual village, Neopia Central, has a Disney Theatre where kids can watch Disney movie clips or play games based on popular Disney movie characters.

The prevalence of these types of marketing practices is particularly noteworthy because over three-quarters of kids who play product-centred games think that these games are not "mainly advertisements" but "just games." Awareness of the commercial nature of these games rises with age (from 19 percent of kids in Grade 4 to 31 percent of kids in Grade 11), but the large majority of kids do not critically question the presence of branded products in their virtual playgrounds.

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[19] Although only two percent of kids said they would choose to shop if they had an hour or two to spend on the Net, 15-40 percent of kids shop on an average school day.

[20] This excludes game sites and play communities that specifically target children.

[21] The remaining sites on the list are made up of general content sites (five percent), sports and news sites (six percent), blogging sites (four percent) and others.

[22] Sites were categorized based on the definition of "commercial activity" set out in the *Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act* (S.C. 2000, c. 5).

## 4.2 The Collection of Kids' Personal Information

Kids' interest in online discussion and their willingness to talk about themselves also guarantee that these sites provide marketers with a constant stream of market-research information. Ninety percent of the top 50 sites have registration procedures in which kids are asked to identify themselves, typically by first and last name, age, gender and email address. More than half of kids indicate that they do provide their real name and address or email address to register for a game site (51 percent) or to sign up for a free email account (67 percent). Ninety four percent of the top 50 sites collect additional personal information from kids.

Neopets is a good example. Young people playing on the site create virtual pets to play with, and then fill out marketing surveys to earn enough Neopoints to purchase virtual food and toys for their pets. The surveys typically ask for personal information, including the child's name, age, gender and postal code, and then ask them to identify their product preferences, habits, hobbies, likes and dislikes.

Neopets, like 48 other sites in the top 50 list, has a privacy policy in which the site owners explain what personal information they collect and how they use it. Although only six percent of kids in Grades 7 to 11 always read privacy policies, 45 percent do read them sometimes. However, a reading ease assessment we conducted of the top 50 sites indicated that the privacy policies on the top 50 sites are written in university-level language[23] and are accordingly very difficult for children to read and understand. This is perhaps borne out by the fact that over half (53 percent) of kids in Grade 7 incorrectly believe that if a Web site has a privacy policy, they can be sure that the site will not share the personal information it collects with others. Although the percentage of kids who recognize this assertion as false rises with age, one-third (34 percent) of kids in Grade 11 continue to believe their personal information is safe.

## 4.3 Sexual and Violent Content

Around one-third of the top 50 sites incorporate material that is violent (28 percent) or highly sexualized (32 percent). Kids in Grades 8 and 9 appear to include these sites on their list of favourites most frequently. For example, eBaumsworld, an edgy and often highly sexualized humour site, ranks third on the list of favourites for this age group. Newgrounds, a multimedia site that has movies like *The Puberty Pals* ("Paulie the Penis teaches you the ins and outs of puberty! Not for kids!") in its "general audience" section and very violent and sexually explicit films in its "Mature" section, ranks fourth. However, both sites are high on the list of favourites among younger kids; eBaumsworld is number 10 and Newgrounds is number 12 for kids in Grades 6 and 7. Piczo, an often sexually explicit site where kids can post pictures of themselves, also shows up in both Grades 6 and 7 (where it ranks 14th) and Grades 8 and 9 (where it ranks 15th).

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[23] Based on a Flesch reading ease test. The policies scored 36.3239, placing them in the "Difficult College Level" category (30-49). A score of less than 30 is "Very Difficult Post Graduate."

Social networking sites like Nexopia and Doyoulookgood are among the most popular sites, especially for Grade 8-11 girls. On Doyoulookgood, people post their pictures on the site, to be rated by visitors. Visitors can also search the site for people by age, starting at 13. The site will retrieve both a picture and an online profile, which contains the person's name, weight (a choice of thin, fit, muscled, average, a few extra pounds and fat), marital status (a choice of single, couple, married, divorced and open to suggestion), city and hobbies. For example, 17-year-old sexmachine lives in Montreal and "is open to suggestion." Visitors to his page are invited to write to him, but are warned, "You have to be a member to write to sexmachine… Click here!").

On the flip side, most kids (91 percent) do not seek out adult chat sites on purpose. In like vein, less than one-fifth of kids intentionally visited a pornographic site (16 percent) or a violence or gore site (18 percent) in the current school year. Boys, however, are more than three times more likely to intentionally visit offensive sites[24] than girls are and, in Grades 9 to 11, a majority of boys (55-62 percent) have sought out these sites on purpose, compared with only 20 percent of girls. Students in Quebec (45 percent) are also more likely to do so than students in the rest of Canada (31 percent).

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[24]   Offensive sites include porn sites, violence or gore sites, gambling sites, adult chat rooms and hate sites.

# 5. Rules and Parental Involvement Make a Difference

It is essential that adults responsible for guiding children in the new online environment come to understand and appreciate both what the Net means to their kids and how commercial and other imperatives have shaped the online spaces they inhabit. The good news is that parental involvement has increased since 2001 and that rules in the home have a positive effect on young people's behaviour. Rules about sites that kids are not supposed to visit or about giving out personal information online do make a difference, especially for younger children. Similarly, a rule about meeting online acquaintances in the real world reduces the likelihood that a young person will do so by one-half (from 34 percent to 16 percent). Although kids are more likely to break a rule as they get older, the very fact that the rule is in place continues to affect their behaviour positively. The presence of household rules also correlates with an increase in the amount of time parents spend supervising kids' online activities.

However, the number of rules drops off with age. Kids in Grades 8 and 9 have approximately one-third fewer rules governing their online activities than younger kids do, precisely at a time when they are most likely to make friends online and visit offensive sites. In addition, boys are less regulated than girls are, even though boys are more likely to intentionally seek out porn, violence and gore.

But perhaps most telling is the fact that very few kids are discussing their online activities with their parents, and the amount of discussion decreases as kids get older. Given the rich role the Internet plays in young people's lives, it is essential that parents keep in touch with their children's online activities and help them to deal with the privacy invasions and violent and sexualized content they encounter.

# 6. Empowering Young People through Education

The good news is that young people are actively interested in learning more about their online environment. The kids we spoke to in our focus groups felt strongly that what they need from adults is more information about the kinds of content they find online, so they can make informed choices about what they choose to see. Two-thirds of survey respondents were interested in learning how to tell if online information is true (68 percent) and how to protect their online privacy (66 percent). The interest is highest among the children in Grades 4 to 6 (75 percent). This is a particularly important time to learn these skills because kids in these grades are playing on commercial game sites that actively seek to collect their personal information, and, by Grade 6, they are exploring edgier Web sites like eBaumsworld and Newgrounds that appeal to teens.[25]

There are some indications that there is room for improvement in the way this education is delivered in the schools. Although the Net is the most popular source of information for school assignments – students in Grades 10 and 11 prefer to use the Net over the library by a factor of 10 to 1 (91 percent to 9 percent) – almost half of young people say that the Net makes no difference to the quality of their school work. And a significant portion of teens in Grades 10 and 11 (36 percent) are still interested in learning more about how to find information on the Net.

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[25]  See Appendix 3, "Profile of Kids in Grades 6-7."

# 7. Looking Forward

Up to now, online "stranger danger" has captured the most attention in the press, but there are a number of equally compelling issues that need to be brought into the public debate. Most importantly, adults need to recognize how kids have integrated the Net into mainstream activities. Young people now move seamlessly from the real world to online spaces as they participate in and extend their connections to their real-world communities. They also use the Net creatively to explore their interests, try on new social roles and express themselves.

A key finding of our research is that parents' expectations help shape successful online experiences. Kids also tell us that they are interested in learning more about things like online privacy and how to authenticate online content. Especially as kids use the Net to explore their sexuality and learn more about the adult world, parents and teachers have a significant role to play in helping them learn how to understand the consequences of their online actions and to critically examine the content they are exposed to. Adults can also play a crucial role in helping them to deconstruct the images of violence and sex they encounter online and to come to understand the ways in which commercial interests shape the online environment.

Young children especially would benefit from learning how to distinguish commercial messages embedded in online playgrounds. Education on privacy should also be part of the curriculum. In the earlier grades, such education can help kids understand how market research structures their online play. Older kids need the skills to protect their privacy, particularly as they explore social networking sites. Grades 6 and 7 are key points for intervention, since kids in these grades are just beginning to explore the social possibilities they find on the Net. By Grades 8 and 9, a critical mass of young people have access and are out there. They need to have the skills to understand the media images they encounter, especially sexualized and violent content.

Technical fixes, like filters and software, that track the sites kids visit, cannot replace education and parental involvement. Furthermore, these devices may violate kids' need to have an appropriate degree of privacy so they can begin to stretch their wings outside the home. Instead of relying on technology, parents and teachers need to talk to young people about their online experiences and provide them with guidance that takes into account just how important the Net is to their social relationships. Adults also need to become educated about the kinds of content that are commonly found on the sites kids frequent and about what kids do online, so they can help young people learn how to select material that supports their growth.

School administrators and librarians need to provide support for teachers, so they can become educated about the online environment. As Industry Canada reports, "Only 46 percent of school principals viewed that the majority of their teachers were adequately prepared to engage their students effectively in the use of [information and

communications technologies] to enhance their learning."[26] Teachers should also be encouraged to take advantage of young people's familiarity with the online world and to give them assignments that make better use of their online abilities.

One of the central messages we heard from the young people in our focus groups was just how much pornography has been integrated into their media environment. More research is needed to gain a better understanding of how this content affects young people. We also need to develop ways to provide them with more information about content, so they can make informed choices about the media they consume.

Online bullying is another area that requires further research. How does anonymity influence young people's online behaviour? Is the impact of bullying magnified by the fact that it is not longer restricted to the school yard, but can enter a young person's home via their computer? How can adults intervene to help kids learn to use online communications in a respectful manner?

Finally, research is needed to better understand the ways in which young people use the online world to explore their own identity and the role that anonymity plays in that process.

Parents and teachers cannot do this alone. Corporations using the Net to attract young people should be encouraged to revisit existing codes regarding marketing to children and should seek to design online environments that respect children's developmental needs. Government and industry must both provide financial support for media education programs and continuing research into children's online activities.

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[26] Industry Canada, SchoolNet (2004), *Connectivity and Learning in Canada's Schools*, Ottawa <http://www.statcan.ca/bsolc/english/bsolc?catno=56F0004MIE2004011>.

# Appendix 1. Correspondence Between Age and Grade

| Grade outside Quebec | Grade in Quebec | Age | Assumed predominate age |
|---|---|---|---|
| 4 | 4 | 9-10 | 10 |
| 5 | 5 | 10-11 | 11 |
| 6 | 6 | 11-12 | 12 |
| 7 | Secondary 1 | 12-13 | 13 |
| 8 | Secondary 2 | 13-14 | 14 |
| 9 | Secondary 3 | 14-15 | 15 |
| 10 | Secondary 4 | 15-16 | 16 |
| 11 | Secondary 5 | 16-17 | 17 |

# Appendix 2. Profile of Kids in Grades 4-5

A significant number of kids in Grades 4-5 have their own access to the Net, and they make good use of it.

- Just under one-quarter (24 percent) of kids in this age group have their own computer with an Internet connection, and half of those computers (13 percent) have a Webcam attached.

- About one-third (31 percent) have their own MP3 player.

On an average school day, most kids this age who are on the Net are playing games (88 percent) and doing homework (57 percent). A surprising number are also making use of the Net for self-expression and learning.

- Over half (51 percent) turn to the Internet to explore personal interests on an average school day.

- One-quarter (24 percent) have their own Web site where they can express themselves, and one-tenth (13 percent) write an online diary or Weblog.

A significant number are also already participating in activities that are common with teens.

- 36 percent chat with friends on instant messaging.

- 45 percent download or listen to music online.

Girls are twice as likely as boys to turn to instant messaging if they have an hour or two to spend on the Net, but both girls and boys express an interest in Web sites frequented by teens. The five favourite Web sites for this age group are:

1.     Miniclip
2.     Neopets
3.     Addicting Games
4.     YTV
5.     Family Channel

- Miniclip and Addicting Games are general audience gaming sites that are popular with older kids. Both sites make the top five list for all age groups.

- Television also drives kids in this age group to the Net, although less so than in 2001, when the top three sites were TV sites.

Kids this age are also drawn to commercial sites that embed branded content into funky, high-end playgrounds.

- Neopets is extremely popular, especially with girls. On this site, kids create virtual pets, and then use Neopoints to purchase pet food and toys. Kids earn Neopoints by filling out detailed market research surveys, and the site embeds branded content in its games and activities.

- Neopets is not alone in its branded content. Just under half (45 percent) of the top 20 sites for this age group feature branded content, including products by Disney, Barbie and Lifesavers candy.

The commercialization of kids' playgrounds is problematic because kids this age are unaware of it.

- 81 percent of the kids in this age group who play product-centred games say these games are "just games," not advertisements.

# Appendix 3. Profile of Kids in Grades 6-7

On an average week day, kids in Grades 6-7, like their younger counterparts, use the Net to play games (82 percent) and do homework (75 percent) . However, their interest in communication begins to take up more of their online time and energy.

- On an average school day, they spend 47 minutes a day instant messaging, compared with 26 minutes a day in Grade 4.

- 14 percent of memorable online experiences reported by this age group involve friends, compared with just 8 percent in Grades 4-5.

They also rely on the Net to pursue personal interests and express themselves.

- Over half (54 percent) surf the Net to learn more about things that interest them personally.

- One-third (30 percent) have their own Web site, and one-tenth (12 percent) write an online diary or Weblog.

The top five sites selected as favourites by this age group are:

1. Addicting Games
2. Miniclip
3. Neopets
4. Runescape
5. Candystand

Kids this age all tend to hang out on the same Web sites. As a group they, like their younger counterparts in Grades 4-5, are more conventional in their choices, and fewer kids strike out on their own.

- Around one-quarter list Addicting Games as one of their three favourite sites.

- Two-thirds (68 percent) have at least one favourite on the top 20 list.

However, the top 20 sites identified by this age group include a growing number of edgier Web sites that are typically frequented by teens. For example:

- Habbohotel (the number seven site) is an interactive play environment in which users visit different rooms in the hotel and chat with other people. Conversations typically revolve around finding a date and frequently include sexually explicit talk.

- eBaumsworld (number 10) is a multi-media site known for its attitude-laden, sexually-explicit humour and gross or disturbing images.

- Newgrounds (number 12) is a game site with adult content.

Boys tend to be more interested than girls are in this kind of edgy content.

- In the past school year, 32 percent of boys in Grade 7 had intentionally visited sites containing hate, gore, gambling, porn or adult chat, compared with eight percent of girls.

- Boys are more likely to land on these sites by accident than on purpose. This finding may indicate that the sites they visit are more likely to be linked to offensive content.

In spite of their interest, most boys (84 percent) agree with girls (94 percent) that younger kids should be protected from things like online porn, gore and hate.

# Appendix 4. Profile of Kids in Grades 8-9

Grades 8 and 9 are pivotal years in the online lives of young people. First of all, at this age the number of kids who have their own equipment is reaching critical mass.

- 43 percent of kids this age have their own computer connected to the Internet.

- 47 percent have their own MP3 player.

- 25 percent have their own Webcam.

These percentages are particularly noteworthy because kids who have their own computer spend almost twice as much time online as those who don't have their own computer.

The daily blend of instant messaging, online music and homework that so defines the online lives of older teenagers is already present in Grades 8-9.

- Around three-quarters of kids this age use instant messaging (77 percent), download music (78 percent), do homework (79 percent) and play online games (72 percent) on an average school day.

- Although the gender gap still exists at this age, it's definitely narrowing – especially with respect to instant messaging and online music. The exception is online gaming. Both boys and girls are less interested in online games than younger children are, but the percentage of boys in Grades 8-9 who continue to play games on an average school day levels off at 83, compared with 60 percent of girls.

Just when kids are beginning to conduct more of their social lives online, the number of house rules governing online behaviour starts to drop off. Parents are also less likely to spend time supervising their kids online or talking to them about their online activities.

However, rules continue to make a difference. Although more kids break the rules as they get older, kids in Grades 8-9 are twice as likely to go to sites that have inappropriate content when there is no house rule against it.

The top five Web sites favoured by this age group are:

1. Addicting Games
2. Miniclip
3. eBaumsworld
4. Newgrounds
5. Neopets

Edgier sites, like eBaumsworld and Newgrounds, have moved right up into the spotlight.

In addition, a growing number of social networking and dating sites start to populate the list of favourites. The content on these sites is often sexually explicit and can encourage a form of exhibitionism.

- Nexopia (number nine) is a site on which people 14 years and older complete profiles, post pictures of themselves, and then link to the profiles of friends.

- Doyoulookgood is the number one site for Grade 8-11 girls in Quebec. As with Nexopia and other social networking sites, Doyoulookgood enables kids 13 years of age and older to post pictures in their profiles and to network with friends. However, many profiles feature young girls in seductive poses, with suggestive headings. Doyoulookgood also asks visitors to "rate" the pictures on a scale of 1 to 10.

Branded sites, like Neopets (number five) and Candystand (number eight), remain popular with kids in this age group. But more kids (25 percent) recognize the sales pitch than those in earlier grades.

Kids in this age group are also beginning to venture off the beaten trail. The favourite sites of close to half (48 percent) don't make the top 20 list, indicating that kids are increasingly using the Net to explore sites that interest them as individuals.

# Appendix 5. Profile of Kids in Grades 10-11

Kids in Grades 10 and 11 use the Net as a seamless extension of their social and school life. The predominant pattern for both boys and girls is to keep in touch with friends through instant messaging, to download or listen to music, and to do school work – usually all at the same time!

Many have their own electronic equipment to "stay connected."

- Almost half have their own computer with an Internet connection (49 percent) and cell phone (41 percent).

- One-third have their own Webcam.

- 84 percent use instant messaging on an average school day, for an average of 69 minutes a day.[1]

Teens this age also rely on the Net to explore their own interests, learn about the world and do school work. On a typical school day:

- Over half (64 percent) use the Net to work on a topic of personal interest.

- Just under half (45 percent) access news, weather and sports information. Three-quarters (76 percent) do school work on the Net.

The diversity of their online interests is underlined by the fact that, for 60 percent of kids, their favourite Web sites are not in the top 20 list.

A significant number also create online spaces to express themselves.

- One-quarter (26 percent) have their own Web site.

- One-fifth (18 percent) express their thoughts and record their daily lives in an online diary or Weblog.

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[1] The total amount of time spent online can be less than the sum of minutes spent on each activity because kids typically do a variety of things concurrently.

Their favourite five Web sites are:

1. Addicting Games
2. eBaumsworld
3. eBay
4. Newgrounds
5. Miniclip

Kids in this age group are interested in online games – eight of the top 20 sites are gaming sites – although more boys (80 percent) play games on a daily basis than girls (46 percent) do. Girls much prefer instant messaging their friends (82 percent) over playing games (three percent), although 60 percent of boys also choose to instant message if they have an hour or two to spend online.

Social networking sites like Nexopia (number 24 on the list of favourites) provide another outlet to connect with friends. Kids can post pictures and tell a bit about themselves in online profiles, and then search through the site to find like-minded people. However, these sites often contain provocative and sexualized images and text, and encourage kids to participate in exhibitionist behaviours. A similar site Doyoulook-good – which asks visitors to rate the people who post profiles – is the number one site for Grade 8-11 girls in Quebec.

Some kids in this age group will also seek out sites that contain gore, pornography, hate, gambling or online chat, although boys (59 percent) are three times more likely to do so than girls (21 percent) are.

The sites teens this age hang out on are characterized by seamless marketing and by the aggressive collection of their personal information. However, one-third of this age group have learned to identify the commercial intent embedded in product-centred games, and two-thirds understand correctly that the presence of a privacy policy on a site does not mean the site will not share their personal information with others.

# Appendix 6.  List of Top 50 Favourite Sites

1. addictinggames <www.addictinggames.com>
2. miniclip <www.miniclip.com>
3. neopets <www.neopets.com>
4. ebaumsworld <www.ebaumsworld.com>
5. newgrounds <www.newgrounds.com>
6. runescape <www.runescape.com>
7. funnyjunk <www.funnyjunk.com>
8. candystand <www.candystand.com>
9. ytv <www.ytv.com>
10. launch <music.yahoo.com>
11. family <www.family.ca>
12. ebay <www.ebay.ca>
13. bonus <www.bonus.com>
14. coffeebreakarcade <www.coffeebreakarcade.com>
15. habbohotel <www.habbohotel.ca>
16. msn <www.msn.com>
17. flashplayer <www.flashplayer.com>
18. cartoonnetwork <www.cartoonnetwork.com>
19. shockwave <www.shockwave.com/sw/home>
20. muchmusic <www.muchmusic.com>
21. nhl <www.nhl.com>
22. freearcade <www.freearcade.com>
23. mofunzone <www.mofunzone.com>
24. nexopia <www.nexopia.com>
25. homestarrunner <www.homestarrunner.com>
26. piczo <www.piczo.com>
27. nba <www.nba.com>
28. teletoon <www.teletoon.com>
29. dollzmania <www.dollzmania.com>
30. myscene <www.myscene.com>
31. barbie <www.barbie.com>
32. jeuxvideo <www.jeuxvideo.com>
33. radio-canada <www.radio-canada.ca>
34. cheatplanet <www.cheatplanet.com>
35. gamefaqs <www.gamefaqs.com>
36. mxtabs <www.mxtabs.net>
37. freewebs <members.freewebs.com>
38. funbrain <www.funbrain.com>
39. hi5 <www.hi5.com>
40. livejournal <www.livejournal.com>
41. nfl <www.nfl.com>
42. lego <www.lego.com>
43. kazaa <www.kazaa.com>
44. hilaryduff <www.hilaryduff.com>
45. nick <www.nick.com>
46. seventeen <www.seventeen.com>
47. disney <www.disney.com>
48. flowgo <www.flowgo.com>
49. gamespot <www.gamespot.com>
50. vrak.tv <www.vrak.tv>