YOUNG CANADIANS IN A WIRELESS WORLD, PHASE IV

TALKING TO YOUTH AND PARENTS ABOUT ONLINE RESILIENCY

MediaSmarts

Young Canadians in a Wireless World, Phase IV: Talking to Youth and Parents about Online Resiliency

This report can be downloaded from: http://mediasmarts.ca/research-policy

Cite as: Steeves, Valerie, Samantha McAleese, Kara Brisson-Boivin. (2020). "Young Canadians in a Wireless World, Phase IV: Talking to Youth and Parents about Online Resiliency." MediaSmarts. Ottawa.

Written for MediaSmarts by:
Valerie Steeves, Ph.D.
Samantha McAleese, ABD
Kara Brisson-Boivin, Ph.D.

MediaSmarts
205 Catherine Street, Suite 100
Ottawa, ON Canada K2P 1C3
T: 613-224-7721 F: 613-761-9024
Toll-free line: 1-800-896-3342
info@mediasmarts.ca
mediasmarts.ca
@mediasmarts

This research was made possible by the financial contributions from the Canadian Internet Registration Authority (CIRA).

Contents

Young Canadians In A Wireless World

Young Canadians in a Wired World (YCWW) is Canada's longest running, and most comprehensive research study on young people's attitudes and behaviours regarding the internet, surveying over 20,000 parents, teachers, and students since 1999. The findings from YCWW have been used to set benchmarks for research on children's use of digital media and have informed policy setting on the digital economy, privacy, online safety, cyberbullying, ethical online use, and digital literacy and well-being among other topics.

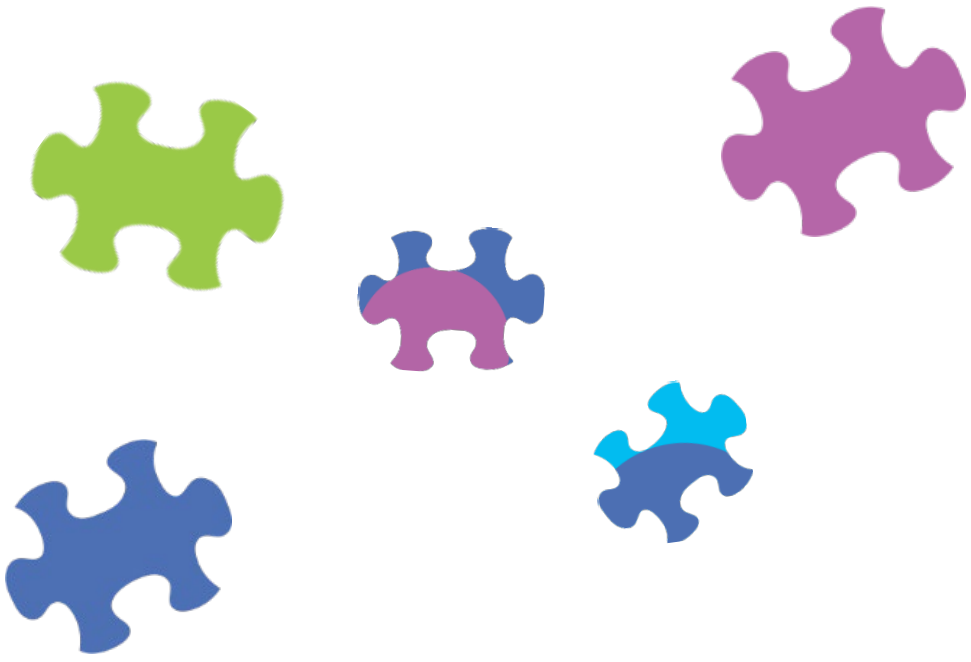
What follows is a brief summary of the previous three phases of YCWW along with an introduction to Phase IV that begins with this qualitative research report and will continue in 2020 with a nation-wide classroom survey.

Phase I (2000-2001) of YCWW involved 1,081 telephone interviews with parents across Canada in addition to 12 focus groups with children ages 9-16 and parents in Montreal and Toronto. The quantitative component of Phase 1 involved 5,682 self administered paper-based surveys conducted in French and English classrooms in 77 selected schools across ten Canadian provinces. At the time, parents were excited about the prospects of having their children use new technologies to help them learn and prepare for their future of work; they tended to exercise a benign neglect online, trusting their children to come to them if they ran into problems. Youth participants felt that online media were completely private because adults didn't have the skills to find them there and they enjoyed a wide range of creative uses such as identity play and exploring the adult world. They also tended to trust corporations, calling them "friends".

In *Phase II (2004-2005)*, we conducted 12 focus groups with children ages 11-17 and parents in Edmonton, Montreal, and Toronto. Additionally, 5,272 self administered quantitative paper-based surveys were conducted in French and English classrooms in 77 selected schools across Canada with students in grades 4 to 11. We were pleased that 302 of the 319 original classrooms from Phase I were revisited for the quantitative surveys, allowing us to validate important trends. Although youth participants still enjoyed online activities, they were becoming aware of how often they were being monitored. In response, they developed several strategies to keep their online lives private. Adults, on the other hand, were beginning to conclude that young people were largely "wasting their time" playing games and chatting (precisely the things that drew youth online to begin with).

Phase III (2011-2014) involved 10 one-hour key informant interviews with elementary and secondary teachers representing each of five regions: the North, the West, Ontario, Quebec, and the Atlantic. In addition to these interviews, we conducted 12 focus groups with children ages 11-17 and parents in Calgary, Ottawa, and Toronto. The quantitative component of Phase III involved 5,436 surveys conducted in school boards and schools in all 10 provinces and all three territories. In this phase, adults were beginning to feel overwhelmed by the reported dangers their children faced online, especially around cyberbullying. Youth participants indicated that cyberbullying was much less worrisome than adults feared; however, they felt that the protective surveillance they were placed under in response was stultifying and equated it to being "spied on" by family members and teachers. They also argued that this kind of surveillance made it much more difficult for them to receive help from trusted adults when needed. Youth were also much less comfortable with the corporations that owned the sites and apps they used and rejected the regulatory model that click-through consent meant others were able to collect and use their data. For example, 95% of the students we surveyed said that the corporations that own the social media sites they use should not be allowed to see what they post there.

Phase IV of YCWW begins with this qualitative report that outlines findings from focus groups held in Toronto, Halifax, and Ottawa and will continue with a quantitative survey in 2020. Phase IV also begins with a name change to the project – Young Canadians in a *Wireless* World. This change in language speaks to shifts in digital technology and to the online world, (since 1999) from a 'wired' to 'wireless' world that presents new opportunities and challenges for youth, parents, educators, policymakers, and the technological sector. We explore many of these challenges in this report which aims to expand our understanding of young people's resilience in a wireless, networked world.



Introduction

MediaSmarts is committed to ensuring that young people in Canada get the support they need to benefit from digital devices and technology. One path to that goal is to design and develop digital literacy initiatives to help young people build resiliency so they can adapt to the changing, and sometimes stressful and unpleasant, circumstances they encounter online. From this perspective, parents and teachers can play an important role by supporting young people as they learn how to bounce back from online adversity.

Resiliency, as a corrective for online challenges, has come to characterize much of the parenting, educational, and technological resources for understanding digital technology in the lives of young people. Research in this area presents a tension between *risks* and *opportunities* associated with digital technology, and the responsibility for managing this tension is often placed on parents, teachers, and youth themselves. To effectively navigate the difficulties inherent in the online world, youth are expected to be more resilient. In other words, it is expected that they can 'bounce back' from hardships encountered in online spaces. Young people who demonstrate resilience are said to have good self-esteem, to take initiative, to have a strong moral compass, to have a healthy attachment to and trust in family and friends, and to take meaningful roles in their lives[1]. These protective factors are assumed to be enough to combat the stresses and challenges of childhood and young adulthood[2], but is it enough in the complex and ever-evolving online environment?

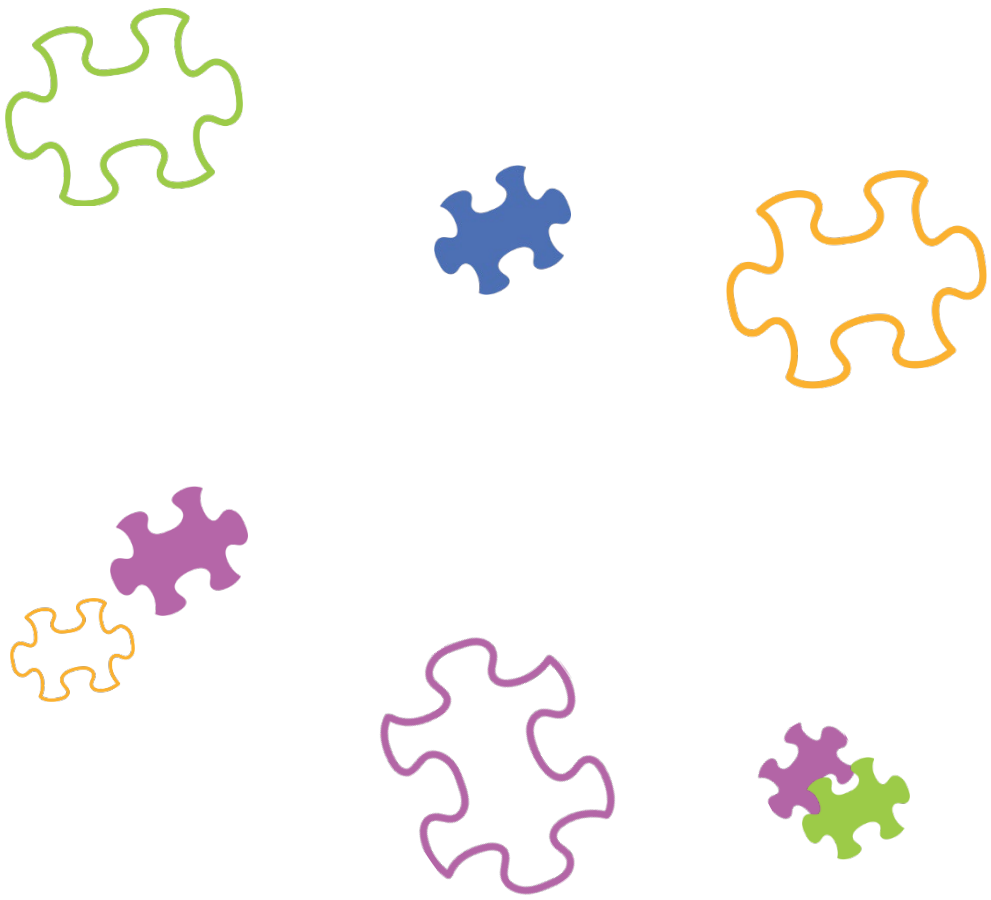
To get a sense of whether the resiliency approach resonates with youth in Canada and/or their parents, we conducted a series of focus groups to explore the following questions:

- What kind of social, environmental, and technological factors enable young people to thrive in the networked spaces they inhabit? Is resiliency one of these factors?
- What changes are needed so young people can fully participate in networked spaces?

[1] Maclean, K. (2003). Resilience: What it is and how children and young people can be helped to develop it. Online Journal of the International *Child and Youth Care Network*. Retrieved from: https://www.cyc-net.org/cyc-online/cycol-0803-resilience.html

[2] Hoffman, D. M. (2010). Risky investments: Parenting and the production of the 'resilient child'. Health, Risk & Society, 12(4): 385-394.

The results of these discussions are surprising, and remind us once again of how important it is to listen to young people who are uniquely positioned to let adults know *what* the online world looks like and *how* we can help them make the most of it. This is particularly important since a focus on resiliency as a solution to online challenges often places the onus on youth and ignores the important social, environmental, and technological factors that are at play in their lives. By considering these structural factors and thinking beyond individual resiliency to collective resiliency, we can develop additional resources and strategies for tackling online adversity and contribute to a more holistic understanding of how to foster digital well-being amongst youth.



Key Terms

Digital Devices:	TVs, computers, laptops, tablets, mobile/cell phones, smartphones, gaming consoles, smart TVs, e-readers, internet connected toys, voice-activated virtual devices (Google Home, Amazon Echo), etc.
Digital Technology:	Any networked devices, the internet, and digital media.
Digital Literacy:	An outgrowth of media literacy that incorporates the networked qualities of digital media, digital literacy is a combination of technological capacities, intellectual competencies, and ethical, social and behavioural practices. MediaSmarts' approach to digital literacy rests upon three building blocks: the skills and ability to USE digital tools and applications, the capacity to critically UNDERSTAND digital media tools and content, and the knowledge and expertise to CREATE and COMMUNICATE with digital technology.
Digital Well-Being:	How we integrate and make the best uses of digital technology in our lives in a way that is meaningful, healthy, and adds value.
Online Adversity:	Difficult conditions and experiences in the online world that cause distress amongst users and participants of online spaces and platforms.
Resiliency:	An individual's ability to respond to, or recover from, changing and sometimes stressful or adverse environments or circumstances. In the online context, this is most frequently expressed as the need for a young person to effectively self-regulate their media use to increase their resilience when it comes to potentially harmful or inappropriate content or experiences.
Collective Resiliency:	The ability of a community or group of people to collectively respond to or recover from changing and sometimes stressful or adverse environments. In the online context, this can be expressed as a young person's ability to: participate in safe and inclusive online communities, draw strength and support from the people around them, foster trust, and engage in meaningful dialogue.

Setting the Stage:
From Individual to Collective Resiliency

As mentioned previously, the term resiliency appears frequently in much of the parenting, educational, and technological resources for understanding digital technology in the lives of young people. These resources, and the underlying literature that supports them, tell us that for young people to 'bounce back' from online adversity they must build up their own reservoir of self-esteem and other individual traits to strengthen and protect themselves. In the online context, resilience is most frequently expressed as the ability for a young person to effectively self-regulate their use of digital technology and to avoid any potentially harmful or inappropriate content. [3] This focus on individualism within the resiliency framework places a lot of responsibility on youth while ignoring important systemic factors (particularly social, environmental, and technological factors) that might interfere with a young person's ability to either build or deploy resiliency.

In a recent MediaSmarts' study, *The Digital Well-Being of Canadian Families*[4], parents told us that while they want to provide their children with as many opportunities and online benefits as possible, they also feel a social pressure to appear stricter. In other words, while parents want to provide the support and trust necessary for youth to build resiliency there is a legitimate and understandable fear (stemming from a variety of online and offline sources) that prevents them from doing so. Just as resiliency places the onus on youth to 'bounce back', it similarly places the onus on parents to piece together the digital literacy puzzle in a climate ripe with fears of online toxicity, fatigue in managing young people's media use, and the possibility of being publicly scrutinized for their possible parenting 'failures'.

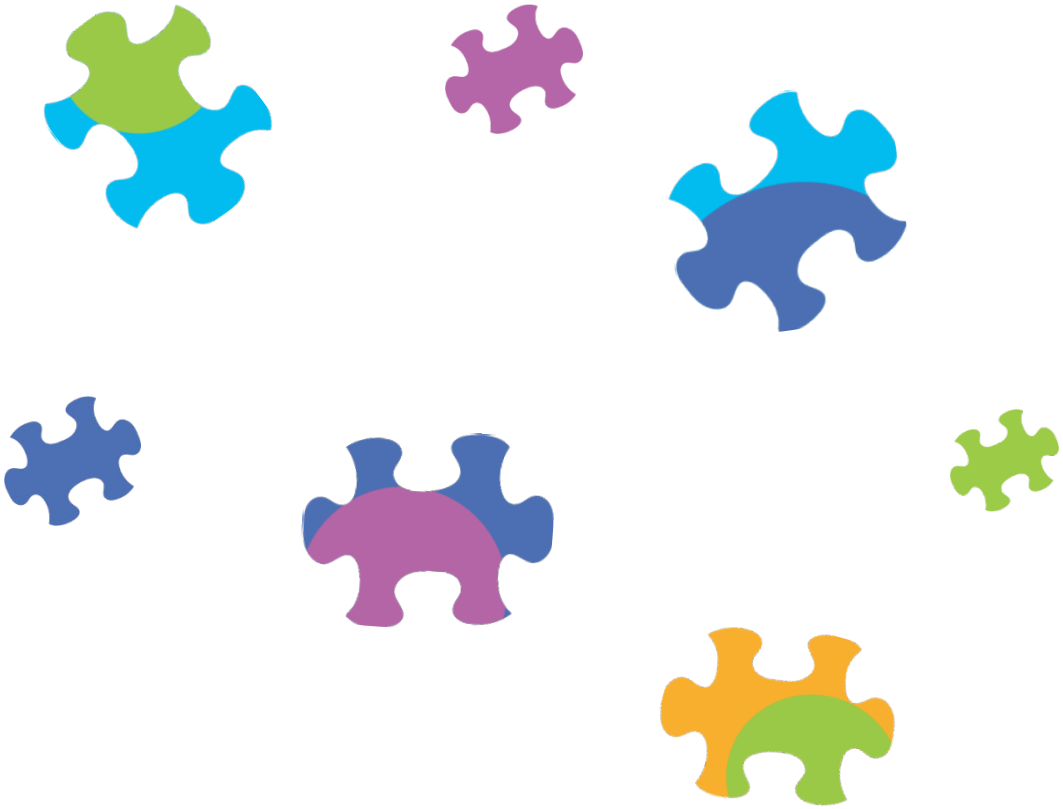
In this report, by highlighting the discussions we had with youth and their parents, we want to expand upon the understanding of resiliency and resilience as it appears within educational, psychological, and pedagogical development circles. In addition to the set of protective factors (self-esteem, self-regulation) commonly outlined in these resources, we want to draw attention to a more communal or collective form of resilience that better acknowledges structural barriers to digital well-being and contributes to a more holistic understanding of how to foster it amongst youth.

---

[3] Przybylski, A., Mishkin A., Shotbolt, V., and Linington, S. (2014). A Shared Responsibility: Building Children's Online Resilience. *Parent Zone*. Retrieved from: https://parentzone.org.uk/sites/default/files/VM%20Resilience%20Report.pdf

[4] Brisson-Boivin, K. (2018). "The Digital Well-Being of Canadian Families." MediaSmarts. Ottawa.

Community resilience (a term typically used when referring to survivors of a disaster, emergency, or crisis) recognizes that when people are provided with information, resources, and agency they are better equipped to work collectively to overcome adversity. [5] Cooperation is a key element of this collective form of resiliency[6] and stems from a shared social identity and sense of trust that emerges amongst the survivors of a crisis[7]. Overall, the understanding that "crowds can be sources of resilience"[8] allows us to move beyond an individualized model of resiliency towards a model that recognizes the benefits for youth of coming together as active, rather than passive, actors in online spaces especially when presented with new risks and challenges.



[5] Drury et al. (2014). Recognising and Understanding Collective Resilience in Crowds of Survivors, London, UK. Retrieved from: http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/52105/1/7935_collectiveresilienceincrowdsofsurvi.pdf
[6] Aguirre, B. E. (2005). Commentary on 'Understanding mass panic and other collective responses to threat and disaster': Emergency evacuations, panic, and social psychology. Psychiatry, 68: 121–129.
[7] Drury, J., Cocking, C., Reicher, S., Burton, A., Schofield, D., Hardwick, A., Graham, D., & Langston, P. (2009). Cooperation versus competition in a mass emergency evacuation: A new laboratory simulation and a new theoretical model. Behavior Research Methods, 41: 957-970.
[8] Drury et al. (2014). Recognising and Understanding Collective Resilience in Crowds of Survivors, London, UK. Retrieved from: http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/52105/1/7935_collectiveresilienceincrowdsofsurvi.pdf

Research Method

In 2019, we conducted 12 focus group discussions with 34 young people ages 11 to 17, and eight parents with children ages 11 to 17, in Ottawa, Toronto, and Halifax. Participants were recruited with the help of local community organizations such as Girl Guides Canada and YWCA/YMCA Canada. [9]

The focus groups (which ran for approximately 90 minutes each) helped us get a kid's-eye-view of what is working for young people online and what needs to be changed or improved so that they get the most out of their online experiences. In other words, what do young people feel they need to thrive in an online world? The focus groups with parents mirrored the framework set out in the discussions with youth with an emphasis on how parents see their kids' engagement and participation online.

With participant permission, the focus group discussions were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. All identifying information was removed from the transcripts to safeguard participant anonymity. For the same reason, participants[10] are identified only by pseudonym and age in this report.

After analyzing the transcripts, we highlighted the following themes:

- How participants perceive or experience youth online resiliency.
- The social codes or norms parents use to manage their or their children's online communications.
- The changes parents and young people would like to see to help youth thrive in the online world.

Additionally, we noted situations in which participants developed strategies to respond to the online challenges and problems they encountered to examine whether those strategies reflect feelings of independence, competency, or resilience. In this way, we identified how these strategies were similar to or different from those strategies suggested by their parents and teachers.

[9] This project received ethics approval from the University of Ottawa's Office of Research Ethics and Integrity. Ethics File Number: S-03-19-3439.
[10] See Appendix A for more information about participants.

Factors to Thrive: Helping Young Canadians Get the Most Out of Their Online Interactions

Youth participants all pointed to a variety of factors that help them get the most out of their online interactions. These factors, however, were generally linked to constraints that limit their ability to use technologies in ways that make sense to them. This left participants with a certain ambivalence about digital devices; as much as they relied on them for schoolwork and socializing with their peers, for example, they also had concerns about how these devices were reshaping their lives and how they see the world.

Social Factors

The most important social factor supporting participants' tech use was the fact that "all my friends" are on certain apps, which made it easy for them to keep in constant touch with peers. However, the types of social interactions youth described were relatively shallow. Participants did not use devices for the kinds of deep conversations or identity play we saw in 2004 or 2012; instead they used them for simpler tasks, like sending memes and jokes, scheduling events and planning parties—spurring interactions that would happen mainly offline. This instrumental communication both simplified their lives (by helping them coordinate their various activities) and created a sense of connection with friends (through the sharing of jokes and popular culture).

"Especially since it's summer now [Instagram and texting is] how we make our plans and how we like catch up with each other" **(Megan, 16)**

"I like to use like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat…all those. Ah, they're just fun! Like I get to connect with my friends and stuff" **(Anish, 17)**

At the same time, participants worried that spending "too much time" on their devices took away from face-to-face time with the people closest to them. This may reflect exposure to worries among parents and in the media about excess screen time[11], but beyond concerns about time spent using digital devices participants also felt that too much time on social media reduced their opportunities for socializing. This apparent contradiction makes sense when you consider that they tended to approach social media as an opportunity to passively check out content that friends or celebrities had posted, rather than to engage in meaningful conversation.

***"I know a lot of people get addicted** to like almost everything, so like I don't want to become one of those people who, I guess, gets addicted to their phone and don't want to do anything else" (Keeshia, 14)*

The desire to socialize was also an important factor facilitating online game play. Many participants enjoyed playing with friends, either side-by-side in the same room or at a distance using game chat functions. However, they also felt that online games could be "distracting" and "a waste of time", especially at school where other people's game play could throw the whole class off track.

[11] Brisson-Boivin, K. (2018). "The Digital Well-Being of Canadian Families." MediaSmarts. Ottawa.

Menah (14): A lot of people if they have the computers in front of them without the teacher's supervision, they will do things that we're not supposed to do… Distracting from work and then distracting other people from work

Facilitator: Like what kind of things?

Penny (14): Games

Menah: Not always games, like sometimes games.

Penny: Not always games, but I've definitely seen that.

All youth participants shared a curiosity about popular culture and this curiosity drove much of their tech use. Cynthia, a parent with an 11-year old daughter, put it this way: "[my daughter is] social, ha[s] sort of this fear or not knowing who the top singers are, or whatever the latest symbol is … cool and what that means … And so, a fear of not knowing … [and a need of] being ahead of the game," explaining her daughter's interest in online media, especially YouTube and Netflix. However, none of the youth participants indicated any involvement in active fan culture[12]; instead they positioned themselves as passive consumers of mainstream media products and the celebrity communications (e.g. Twitter feeds) that accompany them.

For some youth participants, curiosity also encouraged them to use technology to explore their own interests and expand their view of the world by learning about both local and global social issues. For example, William's 12-year old daughter was surfing for information about goats for a school project when she came across a feral cat association. Given the number of feral cats she saw in her hometown, she organized her friends to raise money to support the association. This example of local online organizing can be linked to larger global organizing efforts, driven largely by youth, around the climate crisis[13].

However, both the young people and the parents we talked to expressed frustration that this kind of online engagement, or advocacy, was limited by the multitude of online "conspiracies" and "craziness" that people encounter as they navigate the abundance of information available to them in online spaces. For instance, William's daughter had also told her father that there was a waterfall in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. It was only when he had her take him to the website making the claim, and helped her debunk it, that she realized the information was actually false: "So she thought about it

[12] Posting fan fiction, creating fan videos or fan based social media accounts, and actively following (and posting on) celebrity twitter feeds are examples of fan culture.

[13] "Fridays For Future", as one example, is a youth-led, grassroots initiative that aims to draw attention to the global climate crisis.

and then realized that what she was watching was just a bunch of crazy stuff. But she kind of believed it in, in watching it" (William, father).

Environmental Factors

The main enabling environment that participants talked about was school.[14] Easy access to online information (including videos) in the classroom was universally seen as an aid when it came to conducting research and completing assignments. But at the same time, many participants complained that their schools made it difficult to access educational content, especially by blocking YouTube and not allowing them to use any personal devices.

"Well we're not allowed—we're not supposed to bring phones to the school at all or anything with technologies" (Myah, 12)

"At my old school, we were not allowed to have technology, like any of our own devices or no YouTube—none—none of that" (Francine, 11)

Similarly, software like Gmail and Google Classroom made it easier for students to work collaboratively and communicate with their teachers. However, these same apps were also associated with concerns about surveillance. Myah (aged 12) described the teacher monitoring the platform as "scary" because it was hard to control the message when she was writing for two audiences, i.e. the classmate she was collaborating with and the teacher who might be surreptitiously reading. Many participants playfully pushed back against this surveillance – Francine (aged 11) related how her friends would address every email message to its intended recipient and then add "and Hi to everyone else!"

[14] This excludes any participants who went to schools that intentionally banned the use of technology and/or internet in the classroom.

to let the teachers know they knew the adults were listening. However, it was a serious issue for all participants, and the "creepiness" associated with it reduced their trust in both the technology and their teachers.

"Yeah, it's kind of weird to like creep on kids" (Hayden, 11)

Other enabling environmental factors in school, like using earbuds to block out ambient noise in the classroom to increase concentration, were similarly juxtaposed against drawbacks, such as the distractions caused by easy access to iPods and phones (especially if they could access social media). Even school intranets were both a benefit and a constraint; as much as intranets made it easier to know what they had to do for homework, many participants also felt overwhelmed by the volume of the communication they received, as well as the number of tasks they were remotely given to do.

Participants also complained that the emphasis on tech in the classroom meant that they sometimes felt "forced" to use a device when it was not the best tool for the job. For example, 11-year-old Miranda talked about wanting to do a writing assignment with pen and paper because she "really felt like writing … and it's probably more educational than staying online and staring at a screen". However, her teacher insisted she use a laptop.

Aalim (aged 12) expressed similar frustrations about being required to do homework on a computer "because sometimes when I'm at night it kind of like hurts my eyes because it's dark out and everything and I've been starring at it for a long time [so] I'd rather do it on paper." He also found it easier to learn from "hard books that are real, not eBooks" and to do math on paper, because reading books and calculating on paper made it easier for him to remember things.

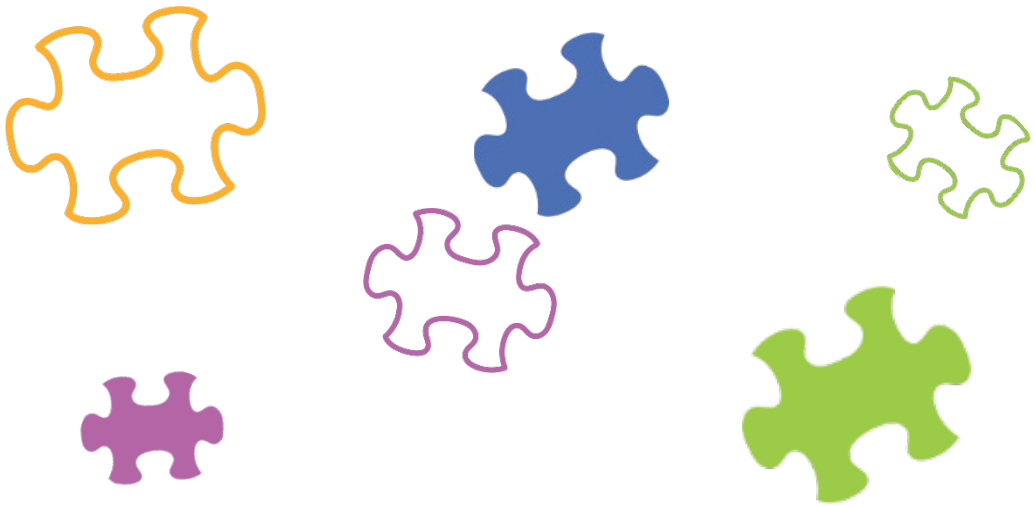
So, although the presence of tech in the classroom facilitated some uses, it also sometimes reconstructed the learning environment in ways that did not work for participants. Edgar (aged 13) lamented this when he expressed his concern that the emphasis on devices was reducing the amount of face-to-face interactions he had with his teachers: "I think it's easier to do math when I'm like in the class without using any devices because I get a human explanation rather than just words." Interestingly, this suggests that the one environmental factor that has the most potential to support learning in the networked school is the ability for personal interactions in the classroom.

Technological Factors

Wi-Fi was a particularly important technological enabler, because it meant that young people could easily keep in touch without having to pay for data. But most of the discussion around tech enablers revolved around monitoring software.

The youngest participants (ages 11-12) appreciated kid-friendly filters, blockers, and parental monitoring software because they let users know what is "inappropriate". Miranda (aged 12) explained that "You kind of learn it [what is appropriate and inappropriate] through how you get older because a lot of kids will start being inappropriate and saying things like that and…They'll get in a lot of trouble." Software that alerted adults to bad language and poor behaviour made it easier for younger participants to "keep out of trouble" by clearly delineating the line of acceptability. At the same time, even the youngest participants were adept at getting around these kinds of controls when they wanted to (particularly through VPNs).

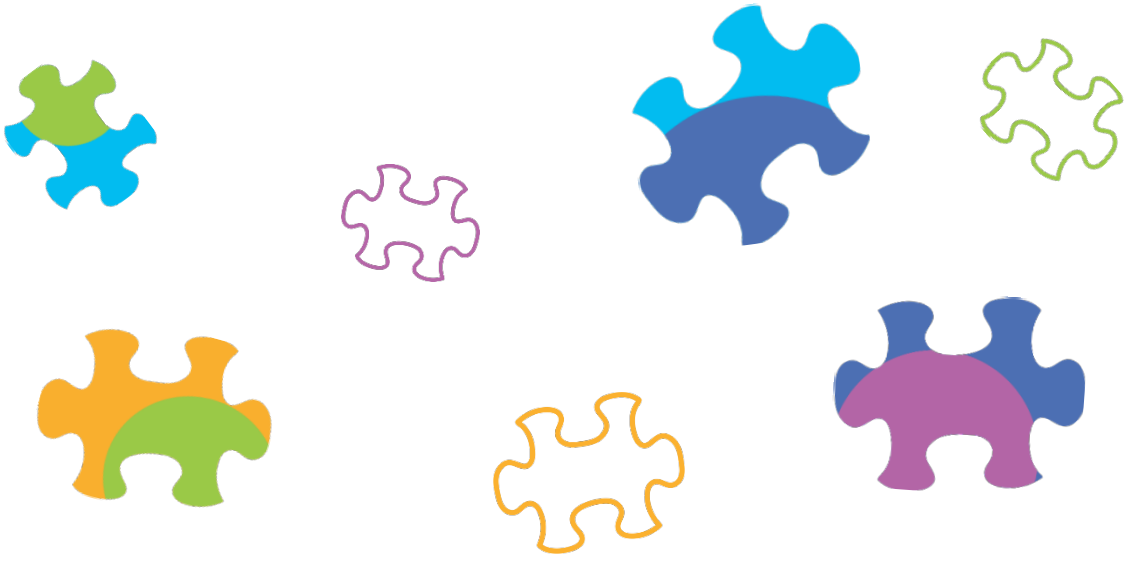
The teens we spoke with had a more ambivalent relationship with filters, blockers and monitoring. Although they were described as "annoying" and unnecessary, they could be helpful, not because they blocked content but because they provided an opportunity to self-regulate. Penny (aged 13) put it this way: "It's probably a good thing … not that like I would look up anything bad, but … it keeps me off my, off my iPad late at night because then [chuckle] [mom] can see it." Edgar (aged 13) had a similar experience at school: "I feel that it's going to be better because people won't be tempted to do stuff that they would regularly do at home." This kind of self-regulation was seen as part of being a good classmate/family member. Megan (aged 16) summarized: "It's kind of like a respect thing. Like, you know you just sort of like you dress like nice[r] at school than you would … like at home. Like, if you want to look at sketchy sites, you should probably do them at home rather than school." Blockers helped to make those social lines clear.



Summary

Participants' experiences underline the importance of social, environmental and technological factors that enable them to effectively use networked technologies for their own purposes. But they also indicated that those factors are often mitigated by competing concerns.

- **Social Factors:** A shared desire to socialize with peers and a sense of curiosity (especially regarding popular culture) was juxtaposed against fears of being too connected and missing out on face-to-face interactions. The preponderance of poor content also made it difficult for youth to use technology to learn, because networked spaces are too often flooded with conspiracy theories and false information which they were not prepared to evaluate.
- **Environmental Factors:** Schools were providing opportunities for participants to use tech to advance their learning, and the skills they acquired translated to their personal lives. But schools also enforced strict controls over students, and sometimes required that they use a device when other forms of learning were more effective. Surveillance in the classroom was particularly problematic as it both made it more difficult for young people to achieve their goals and it eroded the trust they had in the adults who were there to help them learn.
- **Technological Factors:** Filters, blockers, and monitoring software helped delineate the line between appropriate and inappropriate online behaviour and served as a reminder for young people as they seek to self-regulate. At the same time, all participants were able to circumvent those types of controls and were motivated to do so when they blocked access to content or apps they needed or wanted to use.



Taking Stock of Resiliency

The nuanced and complex picture the participants painted of their online lives suggests that they are resilient digital citizens – they adapted to changing and sometimes stressful circumstances online[15], and they were able to self-regulate to avoid content or interactions they felt were inappropriate[16]. However, it is important to problematize this reliance on individual resilience as a protective factor as it encourages us to download the work of digital literacy onto youth while looking past various social, environmental, and technological constraints that are often beyond their control.

Resiliency at School

Participants largely accepted the use of restrictive controls, such as filters and surveillance, in the classroom. They argued that school technology belongs to the school and the school therefore has the right to control how it is used and lamented the "immaturity" of their peers who violate the rules and act "inappropriately". This comment was typical:

> ***Well, I think it's because of for the security of it and they want to make sure that the kids are not going on bad websites and, um, also like playing games in class when they're not supposed to and getting hacked or getting a virus. Ah, there's like kids … they'll just look up virus.com. Like they just get it and they get a virus on their computer because they think it's cool and they're like sketchy websites*** (Aalim, aged 12)

Participants also indicated that following the rules came with its own benefits: "quiet" students were more likely to be given permission to listen to music or surf online as a reward for their compliance, whereas "loud" students were likely to lose access to technology.

Rules therefore structured participants' online activities at school, especially for the 11-12-year-olds who avoided taking an active interest in online culture in order to "stay out of trouble". Even the teens tended to restrict their online activities to private communication and lurking, to avoid "accidentally get[ting] yourself in trouble by clicking wrong things" (Megan, aged 16) and triggering a negative response, such as having your phone confiscated.

---

[15] Masten, A. (2001). Ordinary magic: Resilience processes in development. *American Psychologist*, *56*(3): 227–238.
[16] Przybylski, A., Mishkin A., Shotbolt, V., and Linington, S. (2014). A Shared Responsibility: Building Children's Online Resilience. Parent Zone. Retrieved from: https://parentzone.org.uk/sites/default/files/VM%20Resilience%20Report.pdf

Resiliency at Home

Although the parents we talked to drew on a range of parenting styles, they also tended to default to authoritarian methods of control, even though they all sought to be as supportive of their children as possible. This echoes what we found in our study *The Digital Well-Being of Canadian Families* in which 43% of parents in our sample fell into the authoritarian style of parenting (with a focus on setting and enforcing rules around use of digital technology) compared to 31% who fell into to authoritative style (which strikes a balance between setting limits while also offering supports and resources when youth encounter challenges online.[17] In our conversations with parents in the current study, their primary reason for defaulting to more control over digital technology, or being a 'digital limiter'[18], was their conviction that their children lacked the maturity to deal with the issues they would inevitably encounter online without parental intervention.

For example, William kept a close eye on his daughter's use of devices at home because:

> ***I don't know if she's capable of … limiting her amount of time doing something, so—and so I don't let her—I don't let her get to that point. Um, so I'm like okay, that's enough time on that, time to put it away. Maybe she would learn if you just let her do it, but I just feel like she would just keep doing something. So, it's partially about, you know, like you know, at that age just self-awareness, self-control. Yeah. And then it goes a bit over to self-esteem and sort of, um, confidence and things like that, too, that I, I sort of referee her online world just to—yeah, from a distance—but just to make sure that none of that sort of—none of that negative stuff [like body image messages] slips in (emphasis added).***

William's solution was to create a variety of technical fences that limited the functionality of his daughter's devices. For example, he only gave her an old flip phone without a SIM card because that made it much more difficult for her to text, and he had refused to give her permission to download Google Hangouts because it would make it too easy for her to talk to her friends.

Other parents relied on similar technological fences, such as refusing to share their Apple ID with their children so they could not download apps without permission, or installing monitoring software that let them know exactly what their children were

---

[17] Brisson-Boivin, K. (2018). "The Digital Well-Being of Canadian Families." MediaSmarts. Ottawa.

[18] "Digital limiters use primarily restrictive means to manage their child's digital technology use and err on the side of minimizing their child's use of technology" (ibid).

doing on apps like Google Hangouts. Fatima argued that this kind of control enabled her to "trust" her children:

> ***I do trust my kids, um, to a certain point and what I find is if I—because I'm so aware and I'm constantly, you know, I'm very aware of what they're doing and we have so many rules [chuckles], you know, timers and this and that. Um, I, I—if I notice something that I see that they're going into an area and they're checking, I would—I usually talk to them.***

However, many parents found it difficult to trust their children because the dangers of the internet were simply overwhelming. This exchange with Karen was typical:

> ***Facilitator: Do you trust your child to make good decisions?***
>
> ***Karen: Not 100 per cent.***
>
> ***Facilitator: What holds you back on that trust?***
>
> ***Karen: Um, I don't know. I'm kind of scared of the whole internet thing and as I said, I think my kids are still kinda young for all that … and not really mature enough to understand a lot stuff that's on the internet.***

Nadia tried to exert control by removing her son's devices:

> ***He's just so hooked up on his laptop… much of the time, I hide it [group laughter] for a couple, for a couple of days when I'm angry [chuckle] at the situation. I just take it away …***

but the technology was so much a part of his daily life that opting out was incredibly difficult:

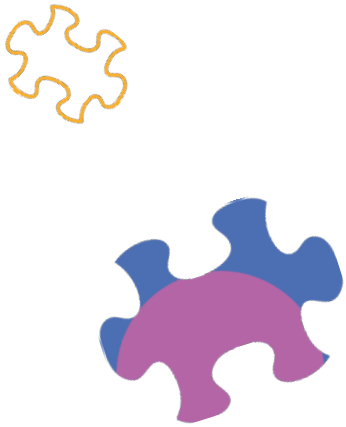
> ***… But then they have homework. They have Google Classroom and I tell him if you have homework, call me and find me at work and come do your homework at work [chuckle]. But it's kind of impossible, so I end up giving it back to him.***

Only one parent we talked to did not try to control either the environment or their children's actions. Darlene had clear expectations that her children would act responsibly online, but she exercised a degree of benign neglect and trusted them to come to her when a problem came up. For example, when her teenaged daughter recently had an online disagreement with a classmate, her daughter talked to her about it and they worked out a solution together:

> ***Yeah, she tells me. I have a very open relationship with my children. I tell them it doesn't matter what it is. If it's even my mother or my father, come and talk to me about it. Don't be afraid of anyone does anything that you're not comfortable with, don't be afraid to come and talk to me. So, they'll come, and they'll talk all these things (Darlene).***

Interestingly, Darlene's children were among the very few young people in our sample that used online technology creatively for their own purposes. Two of her teenaged daughters learned how to bake by watching cooking shows on YouTube; they then started an online business to sell their baked goods to people in their community. Darlene's role as a 'digital mentor'[19] is an important example of how trust, information, open dialogue, and empowerment are important elements of fostering collective resilience and enhancing digital well-being.

Darlene, however, was an outlier. The other parents we spoke to felt that taking a supportive role in the background was too "dangerous" given the issues their children would face online. Although managing their children's online lives was a constant and time-intensive burden, they did not feel they could give up control without putting their children at risk. This fear mitigated against seeing resiliency as a viable option for their children, because the costs of failure were perceived to be too high. In other words, parents are not always willing to sit back and wait for their children to figure things out on their own out of fear for what their kids might experience or encounter in unfamiliar online spaces and platforms.



[19] "Digital mentors take an active role in their child's use of digital technology and are most likely to talk with their child about how to use digital technology responsibly" (ibid).

Young People's Perspectives on Resiliency

Although the young people we talked to understand their parents' and teachers' fears about the online world, the controls they are placed under made it difficult to navigate these digital spaces in the ways they want to. This, in turn, shut down their ability to use technology for more creative things, such as self-expression or community engagement. It also took away from a sense of trust between young people and adults, making it more difficult for participants to make mistakes and learn from them. Resiliency as an enabling strategy was therefore limited by the unwillingness of the adults in their lives to remain in the background. This balance between control and support is a tough one to manage, and what we heard clearly from participants is that the key element to striking this balance is *trust*.

"It's like, I'm your kid. You should have a little bit of faith in me… Trust" (Tejal, 16).

The biggest barrier to resiliency was a lack of privacy. As Penny (aged 14) put it, young people cannot use tech for their own purposes because "there is no hiding" so "I'm always terrified that I'm going to like, say something wrong or somebody's going to take it the wrong way." Miranda (aged 11) reported that "I don't write very personal things online… because I know that a lot of people could see it." Riley (aged 12) and Xander (aged 12) did not post anything "you don't want your [future] employer to know", even though they felt that it was unfair to be held to account for things they said as a child. Francine (aged 11) restricted photos on her Instagram to her cats; she also told her friends and family, "Don't you dare tag me in [photos]. My Instagram account has no needing of anyone knowing who I am. No one shall know who I am," in effect removing herself from the online world despite the fact she used social media and other apps.

This desire to remain opaque – to be online but to be unseen – was also motivated by the need to avoid corporate monitoring[20]. For example, Menah (aged 14) stopped using

[20] Corporate monitoring encompasses all efforts by companies or employers to monitor and track all online or computer-based activities and tasks. This might involve tracking communications (e-mail, text, messaging services), browser history, or social media posts.

Wattpad[21] to express herself because "I don't want [the] people that like own it, to know what I want … I definitely don't want like a bunch of strangers knowing it, so yeah." Payal (aged 17), Tejal (aged 16) and Grant (aged 15) agreed that sharing anything personal on Instagram "makes no sense" because "if you hit share, then like it's everywhere already" (Tejal, 16). Sachi (aged 15) assumed that "everything nowadays, every electronic camera—It always has someone behind it listening and recording and gathering everything that's happening", so the smartest thing to do is to never say anything personal. Megan (aged 16) agreed, arguing that "I try to stay as professional as possible" to avoid corporate "stalkery". Many of the young people we spoke with expressed, albeit often inadvertently, a keen sense of how technology works and how their personal uses of technology contributed to their data profile and would be used for corporate gain, all of which hindered more than supported their personal goals when it came to technology.[22]

However, they could only retreat so much. Since networked technologies were the infrastructure upon which their daily lives were scaffolded, they were required to "have a positive digital footprint" (Megan, aged 16) in order to gain access to employment and romantic relationships. Youth also argued that adult fears about strangers made it incredibly hard for them to leave the house, forcing them to rely on tech to hang out with their friends. But even so, they restricted their technology use to private and passive access to information and mainstream entertainment because it was the only way to avoid the risk of being judged harshly for a misspoken word or negligent click.

Certainly, participants lamented that routine corporate monitoring was even allowed online and did what they could to avoid it. For example, during a discussion about Google Classroom and how assignments and communications are tracked by the company, Sarah (aged 14) told us that she does not post pictures of herself and she "[uses] a different name online." Others used similar strategies, such as creating separate email accounts, to retain some anonymity in these spaces. However, as individuals, they were limited in what they could do to avoid the pervasiveness of corporate monitoring both inside and outside of the classroom.

This Catch 22 – that no matter how resilient they were, they could not opt out of systemic surveillance that made them feel uncomfortable using tech for their own

---

[21] Wattpad is an online platform that brings together readers and writers to build community and share stories. The website includes tips and resources, encourages collaboration, and helps writers amplify their stories. More information available here: https://www.wattpad.com/

[22] This marks a shift from our earlier studies that indicated young Canadians are most concerned about monitoring by parents and peers. However, it is consistent with the finding in our 2015 survey that 95 percent of respondents did not think social media companies should be allowed to see what they post on social media sites. Accordingly, this distrust is rooted in longstanding concerns about corporate monitoring, which was identified as "creepy" as early as 2013; our most recent participants are simply more aware of the extent to which corporate monitoring occurs.

creative purposes – was exemplified in young people's discussions of devices that use voice-activated tech, like Siri and Alexa. As much as they enjoyed the easy access to information and music that these devices provided, they found the voices "annoying". They accordingly reasserted a sense of control over the devices by "making fun of" the technology, asking it questions that would generate nonsensical answers and laughing at it. For example, Penny (aged 14) told us how she likes the "Easter eggs" available on her devices, including "Siri beat boxing" and other "funny" functions. However, they recognized that this mastery was limited, because they were unable to stop the devices from recording what they were saying or collecting their data.

"Most of that stuff I ask Siri is like the Easter eggs that you can [find]. Like there's some funny ones in there… like Siri beat boxing would be like 'boots and cats and boots and cats'… and it's really funny." (Penny, 14)

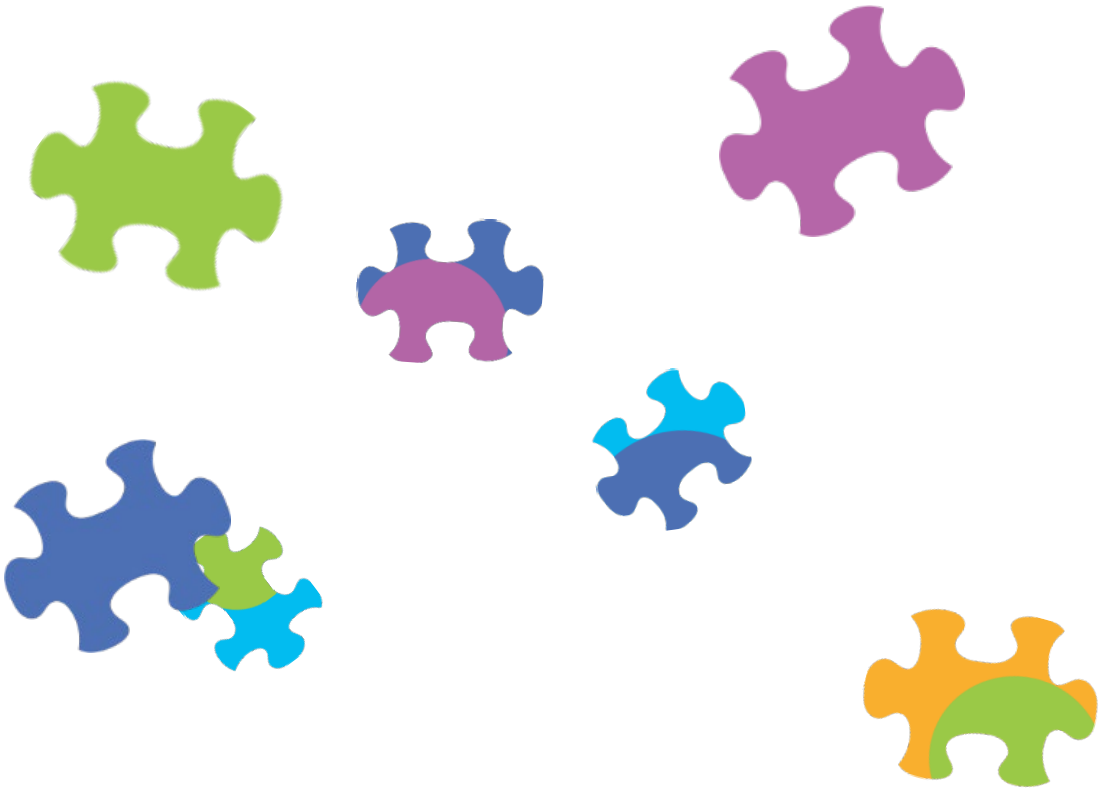
Furthermore, many of the youth and parents we talked to were surprised to learn from facilitators that corporations owned their data and they were shocked by *how much* data is regularly collected through day-to-day interactions with digital devices and online platforms—suggesting a lack of education about the options or settings available to them to increase their privacy and secure their personal information. Hayden (aged 11) even pulled out his phone during the focus group to turn Siri off after learning about the app's capacity to record texts and conversations. Others expressed frustration and anger with the profit generated by personal information and data, describing it as "a violation." This was expressed both by youth:

"They're almost selling information to other companies just for the extra profit…Which I almost find robbery because that is a violation of the law because you're not supposed to sell people's information. I think that's illegal. Period." (Brian, 12).

and by parents who were informed by facilitators of how algorithms work and how data is collected and used by online companies and platforms:

> ***Fatima:*** ***So, the companies have all that information? And how long do they keep it? All the chats between millions of people, they keep the data forever and ever and ever?***
>
> ***Fatima:*** ***Wow.***
>
> ***Darlene:*** ***Right.***
>
> ***Fatima:*** ***That is terrifying.***
>
> ***Nadia:*** ***Nice. Nice mess.***

Our findings suggest that individual resilience on its own is not enough to navigate, resist, and bounce back from online adversity. Youth, parents and teachers continue to need resources that better inform them about the commercial model that drives the devices they use, so they can more effectively engage with the social, environmental, and technological factors that we have explored in this report. In other words, a collective form of resilience that builds connection, trust, and fosters a shared responsibility for digital well-being is required to adapt to the always-already changing, and increasingly uncertain and stressful, online environment.



Moving Forward

Just as all participants demonstrated some level of individual resiliency, they also unanimously saw digital well-being as a joint responsibility of young people (who are responsible for their own actions) and parents and teachers (who are responsible for guiding young people and ensuring that the online environment is a healthy one)—thereby demonstrating elements of collective resiliency.

To help meet that responsibility and enhance collective resilience, youth participants argued that young people should have a voice in online design and regulation, because the policies created by adults have a direct impact on the quality of their lives and opportunities. Amrita (aged 15) put it this way:

… a lot of these apps were marketed to us, so I think it would be only fair if we get to have a say in like how they're made … companies … should talk more about our privacy because I think a lot of times they just give us like the terms and conditions and it's like really long so no one's going to read it, so I feel like it should be more like shorter and more compressed so we can see what we're really signing to.

Sachi (aged 15) suggested that older teens would be particularly helpful, as:

their perspective on social media and all that, they … understand it more than what like 23 or 40 or whoever's running them and looking at them and controlling them … because they have a better perspective on it and they sort of understand it more than the people who are older and sort of have a hard time.

Xander (aged 12) agreed that youth representation was necessary because "Adults have a lot of stereotypes against kids". Melody (aged 14) felt that these stereotypes could be counteracted by a teen "with experience online that has been through stuff, like somebody who knows about the ups and downs and the pros and cons … Someone with like years of experience that's been online—a wise person".

Participants also articulated several options for reform. When we asked, "If there was one thing adults could do to make all this stuff better for kids, can anybody think what it is?" they responded in the following ways:

- More privacy (Donny, aged 11)
- Not people listening and following you—And being able to look up a picture and get it and then find a whole bunch out about you (Thyme, aged 12)
- Less inappropriate stuff (Hayden, aged 11)
- More trust in what you do (Riley, aged 12)

- A platform … in which that children … our age could, you know, talk without adults intervening, cuz sometimes when … adults are on a game and you just kind of want to hang out, it's kind of creepy (Francine, aged 11)
- Giving teachers more freedom to choose how to use technology in the classroom (Megan, aged 16)

Building on the responses gathered within this report, in Phase IV of *Young Canadians in a Wireless World* MediaSmarts will continue to explore and expand upon the collective resiliency framework focusing on the following:

- Digital literacy supports for parents and educators
- Use of technology in the classroom
- Public education and transparency initiatives around privacy, consent, and data collection and use
- Opportunities for young people across Canada to share their experiences with technology and platform developers
- Development of youth-friendly/only spaces in the online world
- Research into young people's online experiences so that we can deepen our understanding of their perspectives which are often missing from research (and policies) on digital devices and technology[23]

We recognize that much of the responsibility for guiding children and youth in navigating the online world is put on parents and, to a certain extent, teachers. Given that things change very quickly in this space, we need to build up a community of support so that we can better share and disseminate important and relevant information and resources about how to promote and maintain digital well-being both inside and outside of the classroom. A good first step would be to work with youth, parents, and teachers to develop a common understanding of digital well-being as well as best practices for supporting digital well-being amongst children and youth. Doing so will help decrease the uncertainties around the risks and opportunities associated with digital technology, especially as it is used in the classroom.

Resiliency is still an important part of the digital literacy puzzle, and participants benefited from having the skills to adapt to the stresses of online life, but to meet our joint responsibility for digital well-being we need to foster a more collective form of resiliency grounded in trust, information, and youth empowerment.

[23] The youth we spoke to had a lot to share about the online world and how technology impacts their lives and well-being. Hearing about how youth use and navigate these always-already changing (and increasingly pervasive) apps, devices, and platforms should remain a priority for those with decision-making power in the education, policy, and technological sectors.

Appendix A

Youth participants by city, pseudonym, age, and gender

City	Pseudonym	Age	Gender
Ottawa	Francine	11	Girl
	Miranda	11	Girl
	Myah	12	Girl
	Sarah	14	Girl
	Cassandra	14	Girl
	Megan	16	Girl
	Emma	16	Girl
Toronto	Aalim	12	Boy
	Brian	12	Boy
	Kelsey	13	Girl
	Edgar	13	Boy
	Melody	14	Girl
	Keeshia	14	Girl
	Amrita	15	Girl
	Sawa	16	Girl
	Ruhi	16	Boy
	Yashar	16	Boy
	Suni	17	Girl
	Anish	17	Boy
	Badria	17	Girl
	Dalek	17	Boy
Halifax	Hayden	11	Girl
	Donny	11	Boy
	Thyme	12	Girl
	Xander	12	Boy
	Riley	12	Boy
	Menah	14	Girl
	Penny	14	Girl
	Sachi	15	Girl
	Mehran	15	Girl
	Grant	15	Boy
	Josh	16	Boy
	Tejal	16	Girl
	Payal	17	Girl

Parent participants by city, pseudonym, gender, and number of children

City	Pseudonym	Gender	Number of Children
Ottawa	Cynthia	Mother	3
Toronto	Nadia	Mother	1
	Fatima	Mother	2
	Jodi	Mother	3
	Darlene	Mother	12
Halifax	William	Father	2
	Karen	Mother	2
	Sam	Father	3