

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

This project was initiated and funded by Industry Canada, in partnership with Health Canada and Human Resources Development Canada. The survey, which took place during the first two weeks of March 2000, was carried out by Environics Research Group.

The survey investigates patterns of Internet use in Canadian families and parental attitudes and perceptions about the nature, safety and value of children's online activities. It also seeks parents' opinions on measures that could be taken to make children's online experiences safe and worthwhile.

Households in the ten provinces of Canada were sampled. One thousand and eighty-one randomly selected parents with children aged 6-16 years who have a personal computer (PC) at home were questioned by phone.

OVERVIEW

Overall, Canadian parents are optimistic about their children's use of the Internet. Eighty per cent of parents think that the Internet is "the way of the future." They are aware of the benefits of this new medium and recognize that because this new technology is still in its formative stages, they can influence the way children will use it.

A great majority of parents (94 per cent) say educating children about safe, responsible Internet use is a top priority. Another 91 per cent mention the importance of educating parents about strategies for managing the Internet. Fifty-five per cent of parents believe that users have to take responsibility for family Internet use, while 44 per cent think that Internet content needs to be controlled.

Canadian parents clearly understand they have a responsibility to not only supervise and manage their children's online activities, but to teach their children how to be safe, wise and responsible Internet users. However, this is a job that Canadian parents feel they can't do alone. Many parents suggested a collaborative approach towards managing the Internet, involving public libraries, schools, Internet service providers (ISPs), community institutions, government and police.

One in ten parents specifically identify the interactive nature of the Internet as a benefit, and 14 per cent cite its interactivity as a concern. These low percentages indicate that most parents think of the Internet as a static source of information rather than a dynamic communication tool with both positive and negative implications for children.

Canadian parents say that their kids use the Internet primarily for educational activities and research. However, U.S. studies show that there are significant discrepancies between what parents think their kids are doing online, and what their kids are actually doing online.

Canadian education, library and industry stakeholders have recommended that immediate follow-up studies be conducted with children and teens so that Canadians can be informed about the specific nature and risks of their children's online activities.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Canadian families with computers are very active Internet users.

The majority of parents in this group are Internet users and consider themselves to be Internet-aware. More than seven in ten parents have Internet access in the home, and more than eight in ten say they have used the Internet. Among these, seven in ten say that they have been using the Internet for over a year, and sixty-five per cent consider themselves to be intermediate, advanced or expert users.

Parents use the Internet for a variety of purposes. They report that the most common uses are for conducting research (50 per cent); general browsing (32 per cent); e-mail (32 per cent); and work-related activities (26 per cent). The percentages for parents' recreational and personal usage of the Internet is much lower.

Of those parents that don't have Internet access at home, 39 per cent report that they plan to get access in the next six months. Cost/value is the main barrier (40 per cent) towards home access, while 19 per cent report that they simply have "no interest" in getting online.

According to parents, Canadian children use the Internet primarily for educational activities, but also for "fun and games."

Eighty-six per cent of the children use the Internet. The difference between usage rates between boys (84 per cent) and girls (86 per cent) is negligible; though girls tend to use the Internet more than boys for communication, while boys favour entertainment and playing games. Children primarily access the Internet from home (81 per cent) and also from: school (66 per cent); a friend's home (35 per cent); a public library (19 per cent); parent's workplace (9 per cent); or a community access point (five per cent).

Sixty-three per cent of parents say that they are "very familiar" with their child's use of the Internet, 25 per cent say they are "somewhat familiar," and 12 per cent say they are "not very familiar" or "not at all familiar" with their child's use of the Internet.

When parents were asked, "As far as you know, what does your child use the Internet for?" the following open-ended responses were recorded: schoolwork (65 per cent); search for information (31 per cent); playing games (29 per cent); instant messaging (28 per cent); chatrooms (28 per cent); email (18 per cent); meeting new friends (15 per cent); personal Web page (six per cent); downloading music (six per cent).

A discrepancy between these findings and recent U.S. studies of children's online habits would suggest that parents need to become more familiar with their children's online habits, and with the interactive nature of the Internet in general.

Parents perceive that there are great benefits to their child being on the Internet.

When asked their opinion about the greatest benefit of their child being on the Internet, 66 per cent of parents cite educational advantages; 20 per cent convenience; 11 per cent entertainment benefits; ten per cent social benefits (including "socializing with friends and family" and "exposure to the world/new people"); and ten per cent computer literacy competence.

Despite the benefits, parents reveal significant concern about Internet content they deem "inappropriate."

Asked about their greatest concern regarding their child being on the Internet, 51 per cent of parents state that "inappropriate content" (including pornography, violence and hate propaganda) is their main concern. Eighteen per cent of parents mention "interaction and safety issues" as being a concern, and 13 per cent have "other" concerns. Twenty-three per cent of parents have "no concern" about their child being on the Internet.

In general, parents think that their child's Internet use is under control. Seventy-five per cent report that the family PC is located in a common area of the home, and sixty-eight per cent think that children usually do searches with an adult. Fifty-five per cent of parents think their children always ask permission before submitting information or participating in Web activities. Sixty-one per cent of parents think that children know what to do if they encounter an uncomfortable online situation. Forty-six per cent think their children have learned to protect their privacy while online.

Seventy per cent of parents say that they have set rules for Internet use. Most parents said that they would not allow their children to submit personal information to a Web site, including their photograph (95 per cent); phone number (94 per cent); postal address (92 per cent); name (84 per cent); birth date (78 per cent); personal e-mail address (67 per cent); or sex (56 per cent).

Many parents say they monitor their child's Internet use at home. Sixty-seven per cent report that they check bookmarks or browser history. Seventeen per cent use blocking software, and 16 per cent use monitoring software.

While confident about home Internet use, parents want online safety addressed in schools and libraries.

Eighty-six per cent of parents think it is very important that schools improve the online safety of children using school computers. Eleven per cent think this is somewhat important. The following options were considered "very effective" at protecting children while they are online at school: blocking software on computers (75 per cent); supervising students (75 per cent); Internet education (65 per cent); workstations in public areas (61 per cent); instituting acceptable use policies (54 per cent); and posting Internet use rules (42 per cent).

Seventy-two per cent of parents reported that they think it is very important for libraries to improve the online safety of children using library computers. Twenty-one per cent think this is somewhat important. The following options for improving online safety in libraries were considered “very effective”: blocking software on library computers (78 per cent); supervising children when they are in the library (70 per cent); putting Internet stations in a public place in the library (54 per cent); providing Internet education for children (54 per cent) and adults (52 per cent); instituting acceptable use policies (43 per cent); and posting signs about Internet rules (40 per cent).

Overall, parents see controlling Internet content as a responsibility to be shared by ISPs, Internet users, independent organizations, government, and Web site producers.

Parents were asked who, if anyone, should be responsible for managing or supervising Internet content. (Multiple responses were permitted.) Thirty-six per cent of parents say that it is the job of ISPs to manage or supervise Internet content, while 34 per cent say that it is the responsibility of Internet users. Thirty-two per cent think that government has a role to play, while 28 per cent would give the responsibility to an independent organization and 23 per cent to Web site producers. Five per cent think the Internet should be neither managed nor supervised.

Respondents rated the following suggestions for reducing the amount of offensive or inappropriate content as “very effective”: teaching kids to be “Net safe” (65 per cent); providing Internet education for parents (54 per cent); using a family-friendly ISP (52 per cent); setting up a hotline for reporting illegal content (52 per cent); establishing a mandatory industry code of conduct (47 per cent); and developing an industry content rating system (40 per cent).

Eighty-seven per cent of parents surveyed report that they have never complained about “inappropriate” content they or their family found on the Internet. Of those parents, 52 per cent did not know who to complain to.

An overwhelming majority of parents (89 per cent) think online advertising aimed at children should be regulated.

There were few significant regional discrepancies in the survey responses. However, the responses of Quebecois parents would suggest that parents there have slightly different views towards the Internet. Overall, residents of Quebec were less likely to have set rules for Internet use, and were more likely to have confidence in their children’s abilities to regulate their own Internet use. They were also slightly more likely to suggest that the government should take primary responsibility for Internet education, and regulating online advertising aimed at children.