

A Parent's Report Card:
The Pew Report on Parents, Teens and Digital Monitoring

Yesterday, the Pew Research Center published a report entitled “Parents, Teens and Digital Monitoring”. This survey assessed how parents are managing their parental roles around their child's use of digital media. I prefer to call it a parental report card.

How do Parent's Monitor Behavior?

The abundance of monitoring apps and filtering software might make you think that there are a lot of parents using these monitoring options. The survey determined that 39% of parents used some type of parental control to filter or monitor their teen's online activity. A more hands on approach appears to be more common, with 69% of parents checking their teens' social media profile. Parents of younger teens are more active in monitoring or policing their child's behavior. This finding is consistent with other published research.

In total, 84% of parents are monitoring their teen's behavior in some fashion. This leaves 16% of online teens using the web, social media and apps completely unmonitored.

Social Media

Social media use is an integral part of teen life. Parents know this. Even though 60% of parents do monitor their child's social media use, considerably less are active social media participants with their children. Though the report tells us that 72% of parents use Facebook themselves, only 44% of those parents are friends with their teen. Only 9% of parents follow their child on twitter (other social media sites were not specifically quantified).

I find myself somewhat concerned about this finding. Several years ago I worked with an amazingly bright teenage girl whose level of anxiety and depression closely correlated with what was going on socially on twitter. Were people doing things without her? Were they bullying or mocking her? Was she followed or unfollowed? As this goes on in other social media forums (i.e. Instagram), parents need to be more aware and proactive.

Talking to Teens

As I am a staunch advocate for frequent discussions with children about sexuality and online content, I was very interested to see how many parents were talking to their teens about acceptable online content. I was a bit disappointed with the numbers.

The survey asked parents how frequently they talked to their teen about the following things: behavior in school, home or social lives; what to share online; content they should be viewing online; content to consume via TV, books, music, magazines or other media; and online behavior toward others. These discussions were categorized as never, rarely, occasionally, and frequently.

The good news is that upwards of 95% of parents have had the discussion about online content at least one time. However, once is not enough. Only 39% of parents frequently talked to their teen about online content and 40% frequently talked about what to share online. Parents appear to talk to teens 13-14 years old more frequently (49%) but that number drops dramatically (32%) for older teens.

COME ON PARENTS! You can do better than that!

The survey also indicated that moms do more of the talking than dads. Teens need these discussions with both parents together (if possible) or separately. There are some topics that a teen might be more comfortable discussing with a same (or different) gender parent. Let's step up your game Dads.

Demographic variables appear to have some influence on how frequently a parent talks to a teen about online content. The parents who most frequently talk to their teens about the online world tend to be less affluent (making less than 30 thousand a year), and less educated (high school diploma or less). The highest educated and most affluent parents talk to their teen the least.

Digital Immigrant vs. Digital Native Parents

The survey clearly showed that younger parents (under 45) are more engaged in their child's digital world. They monitor more, check websites more, talk more, have access to their children's passwords and monitor their child's social networking more. This result also coincides with newer research. As digital natives start to have families, they bring their level of tech savvy to their parenting.

In the end, parents are not doing a BAD job managing their child's digital world. They are not doing a great job either. There is much room for improvement.