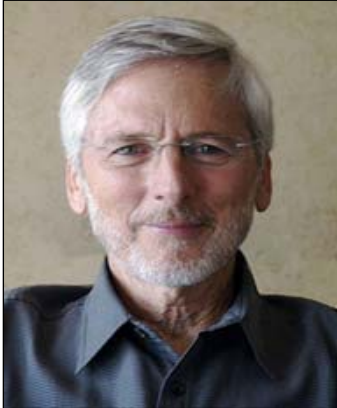


## Teens and Internet Communication:

### What's Normal and What's A Problem?

Leon Pyle, PhD



**D**o you worry about your teen spending so much time on the Internet? Perhaps a little objective information will help you decide if there is a problem or if it's just normal teen behavior.

Eighty-nine percent of teens use the Internet at least once per week, and 61% use it daily. Most of the time spent on the Internet is used instant messaging (IM) and emailing friends they know from school and other real life locations and activities.

The Internet seems like such an impersonal way to communicate that it's difficult for many of us as parents to understand why our sons and daughters spend so much time using it - and we've conveniently forgotten how our parents yelled at us to "Get off the phone! Don't you have anything better to do?"

The answer to that rhetorical question is the same now as it was 20 or 30 years ago - teens do not have anything more important (in their minds) to do than to chat with friends. And the Internet has become their primary method of communication.

Studies show that most teens who use the Internet to communicate are practicing social skills with real friends. In fact, research has shown that teens actually improve their social skills and that they learn to discuss topics more intimately and more openly on the Internet than they would in face-to-face conversations.

Like life, however, Internet use is a mixed bag. Teens who communicate frequently with friends in the virtual world report that they feel "closer" to their friends as a result. At the same time, teen email and IM is less personal and typically goes into less depth because of the brevity of the communication. So, more intimate topics may be discussed, while at the same time it feels less personal. How's a parent to understand that!

In addition, researchers report that teens do learn communication skills from Internet communication because they have to ask more direct questions of each other - there are no other clues to depend on, such as body language, from which one might interpret meaning. Questions that would seem rude to ask in face-to-face conversations become routine on line.

There is also risk associated with Internet communication. Because teens feel

more comfortable bringing up intimate topics on line than they would in person, they inevitably feel closer to the person with whom they're communicating. When the teen sees the friend again, he or she may feel more connected than is really the case, increasing the likelihood of moving too fast or having false expectations about the relationship.

As parents, it's important to have open, non-judgmental conversations with your teens about their Internet communication. They will most likely tell you that you're butting into their business, or that of course they know what you're saying and it doesn't need to be said, etc., but hold firm in the knowledge that they need to hear you, whether they admit it or not.

It's often helpful to preface conversations with teens with a statement such as, "I know you probably don't need to hear this, but I need to say it. It's my job as a parent." Teens can respect the fact that you're "doing your job," and it makes listening a little easier. But then you need to say what you want to say in 3 or 4 sentences. Really, when talking about your teen's behavior, say it 4 sentences max or you will be tuned out! Then just listen. (For more on communicating with your teen, see [Communication Tips & Strategies](#)).

For the small percentage of teens who "meet" others online first, then in person, the false sense of intimacy is more likely to lead to trouble that they are not prepared to handle. What is even more important, teen Internet users who create online relationships (have not met the other person first in real life) are usually looking for an escape from what to them is a troubling environment (which may be home, or school, or both).

As in most areas of life, trouble begets trouble. So, if you believe your teen is part of the small percentage who is looking for friendships on line, rather than talking with others who are already in their social network, you should think about what's really troubling your son or daughter. A troubled teen does not always indicate inappropriate parenting, but it is a signal that you need to find out more about how your teen is feeling and why.

Studies show that teens who use the computer to seek friendships are often suffering from [depression](#) or high levels of [anxiety](#), including [social phobia](#) (also called [social anxiety disorder](#)). While you may need to restrict your teen's computer use, that in itself will not resolve an underlying mental health problem. If you are worried about your teen's inappropriate Internet use and open, honest conversation doesn't work to bring about change, you may need to seek therapeutic help (see [Choosing A Therapist For Your Teen](#)). Cyber-bullying can also be a real problem, especially for teens with low self-esteem, and is another sign of the need to seek help.

On the other hand, if your home-life stress level is low, and your teen clearly is not depressed, or overly anxious, or suffering from another mental health disorder, you can probably relax a bit about the computer. If it's being overused, and homework or other activities are being neglected, you are still in charge of your family and you have

every right to set some limits - but make the limits ones you can and are willing to enforce (for more on this, see [Agreements and Boundaries](#)).

Many of the findings reported above were extracted from the November 2007, issue of *Monitor On Psychology*, a publication of the American Psychological Association, which is referenced below.

## References

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