Teens, Kindness and Cruelty on Social Network Sites

How American teens navigate the new world of “digital citizenship”

Executive Summary

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Social media use has become so pervasive in the lives of American teens that having a presence on a social network site is almost synonymous with being online. Fully 95% of all teens ages 12-17 are now online and 80% of those online teens are users of social media sites. Many log on daily to their social network pages and these have become spaces where much of the social activity of teen life is echoed and amplified—in both good and bad ways.

We focused our attention in this research on social network sites because we wanted to understand the types of experiences teens are having there and how they are addressing negative behavior when they see it or experience it. As they navigate challenging social interactions online, who is influencing their sense of what it means to be a good or bad “digital citizen”? How often do they intervene to stand up for others? How often do they join in the mean behavior?

In our survey, we follow teens’ experiences of online cruelty—either personally felt or observed—from incident to resolution. We asked them about how they reacted to the experience and how they saw others react. We asked them about whether they have received and where they sought advice—both general advice about online safety and responsibility and specific advice on how to handle a witnessed experience of online cruelty on a social network site.

We also probed the environment around teens’ online experiences by examining their privacy controls and practices, as well as the level of regulation of their online environment by their parents. We further sought insight into more serious experiences that teens have in their lives, including bullying both on- and offline and the exchange of sexually charged digital images.

What follows are the main findings from a report conducted by the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project in partnership with the Family Online Safety Institute and supported by Cable in the Classroom. The data discussed in this report are the result of a three-part, multi-modal study that included interviews with experts, seven focus groups with middle and high school students, and a nationally representative random-digit-dial telephone survey of teens and parents. The survey was fielded April 19 through July 14, 2011, and was administered by landline and cell phone, in English and Spanish, to 799 teens ages 12-17 and a parent or guardian. Black and Latino families were oversampled. The margin of error for the full sample is ±5 percentage points. The margin of error for the 623 teen social network site users is ±6 percentage points.

The majority of social media-using teens say their peers are mostly kind to one another on social network sites. Their views are less positive than those of social media-using adults.

Most American teens who use social media say that in their experience, people their age are mostly kind to one another on social network sites. Overall, 69% of social media-using teens, Kindness and Cruelty on Social Network Sites

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1 In this report, when we use the term “social media users” we mean people who use a social network site and/or Twitter. When we use the term “social network site users” we are referring only to those who answered yes to the question, “Do you ever use an online social networking site like MySpace or Facebook?” Twitter use was determined from a separate question that may have been asked before or after the social network use question. There are separate references throughout the report to “social media users,” who are a combination of respondents who answered yes to either using social network sites or using Twitter. However, it should be noted that there is almost complete overlap among Twitter users and users of another social network site, so for practical purposes, social network users and social media users are nearly identical in this report.

2 For more details about the impact of oversampling on this study, please visit: http://www.people-press.org/methodology/sampling/oversamples

3 For more details about how the study was conducted, please see the Methodology section at the end of this report.
teens think that peers are mostly kind to each other on social network sites. Another 20% say that peers are mostly unkind, while 11% volunteered that “it depends.” At the same time, in a similar question asked of adults 18 and older, 85% of social media-using adults reported that people are mostly kind to one another on social network sites, while just 5% felt that people are mostly unkind

88% of social media-using teens have witnessed other people be mean or cruel on social network sites.

Among social media users, 88% of teens have seen someone be mean or cruel to another person on a social network site. Asked, “When you’re on a social networking site, how often do you see people being mean or cruel?,” teens who use social network sites say the following about how frequently they witnessed such behavior:

• 12% say they witnessed cruel behavior “frequently.”
• 29% say they saw meanness on social network sites “sometimes.”
• 47% say they saw such behavior “only once in a while.”

Overall, adults are less likely to say they have seen meanness on social media; 69% of adult social media users say they have seen people being mean and cruel to others on social network sites.

• 7% of adult social media users witness meanness or cruelty “frequently” on the sites.
• 18% say they saw meanness on social network sites “sometimes.”
• 44% say they saw such behavior “only once in a while.”

15% of social media-using teens say they have been the target of online meanness.

Some 15% of teen social media users have experienced such harassment themselves in the past 12 months, while 85% of them have not.

Adult social media users are just as likely to say that someone has been mean or cruel to them on social network sites in the last year. Some 13% of social media-using adults 18 and older report that someone had been mean or cruel to them on a social network in the last 12 months.

Among the social network site-using teens who have experienced cruelty or mean behavior on social network sites, there are no statistically significant differences by age, gender, race, or socio-economic status. In other words, those who experience mean or cruel behavior are equally as likely to be older teens or younger teens; girls or boys; and youth from higher-income families or those from lower-income families.

More teens report positive personal outcomes than negative ones from interactions on social network sites: 78% report at least one good outcome and 41% report at least one negative outcome.

We asked social media-using teens about a series of experiences and interactions they may have had with other people on social network sites. Overall, these teens are much more likely to report positive experiences; 78% say they had at least one positive outcome from their interactions on social network sites.

• 65% of social media-using teens have had an experience on a social network site that made them feel good about themselves.
• 58% of social media-using teens have felt closer to another person because of an experience on a social network site.

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4 Adult data in this report come from Pew Internet's August 2011 Tracking Survey among adults 18 and older, n=2260. For this analysis, the question asked of adults was slightly different than the one asked of teens: “Overall, in your experience, are people mostly kind or mostly unkind to one another on social networking sites?”
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Still, a substantial number of teens report specific negative outcomes from experiences on social network sites: 41% of teens who use social media say they have experienced at least one of the negative outcomes we asked about:

- 25% of social media teens have had an experience on a social network site that resulted in a face-to-face argument or confrontation with someone.
- 22% have had an experience that ended their friendship with someone.
- 13% have had an experience that caused a problem with their parents.
- 13% have felt nervous about going to school the next day.
- 8% have gotten into a physical fight with someone else because of something that happened on a social network site.
- 6% have gotten in trouble at school because of an experience on a social network site.

19% of teens have been bullied in the past year in some form – either in person, online, by text, or by phone.

Overall, 19% of all teens report that they have been bullied in the last 12 months in at least one of the four scenarios about which we asked. Half of bullied teens say they were bullied in multiple ways.

- 12% of all teens report being bullied in person in the last 12 months.
- 9% of all teens have been bullied via text message in the last 12 months.
- 8% say they have experienced some form of online bullying, such as through email, a social network site or instant messaging.
- 7% say they have been bullied by voice calls over the phone.
- Girls are much more likely than boys to report they had been bullied in various ways, except in-person bullying, which happened to boys and girls in roughly equal proportion.

How do people respond to mean behavior online? Teens say they most often see people ignoring cruelty, but a substantial number have witnessed others standing up for victims.

Social media-using teens who have witnessed online cruelty say that people most often appear to ignore the situation, with a slightly smaller number of teens saying they also see others defending someone and telling others to stop their cruel behavior.

- 95% of social media-using teens who have witnessed cruel behavior on the sites say they have seen others ignoring the mean behavior; 55% witness this frequently.
- 84% have seen people defend the person being harassed, with 27% seeing this frequently.
- 84% have seen others tell someone to stop; 20% report seeing this frequently.

A majority of teens say their own reaction has been to ignore mean behavior when they see it on social media.

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5 The bullying question was worded as follows: “In the past 12 months, have you been bullied___? In person? By phone call – that is, on a landline or cell? By text message? Online [such as through email, a social networking site or instant messaging]?”
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When asked about their own behavior, social media-using teens are most likely to say they ignore the behavior themselves, though others defend the victim and tell people to stop.

- 90% of social media-using teens who have witnessed online cruelty say they have ignored mean behavior on social media, and more than a third (35%) have done this frequently.
- 80% say they have defended the victim; 25% have done so frequently.
- 79% have told the other person to stop being mean and cruel; 20% have done so frequently.

Two-thirds of teens who have witnessed online cruelty have also witnessed others joining in – and 21% say they have also joined in the harassment.

Despite the high likelihood of teens seeing bystanders responding positively by standing up for or defending the attacked individual, they are also likely to witness others joining in the mean behavior.

- 67% of social media-using teens have witnessed others joining in the harassment they have seen. Teens are more likely to say they see joining in “once in a while” (24%) or “sometimes” (23%), than they are to report seeing it frequently (19%).
- 21% of social media-using teens who have witnessed online cruelty say they have joined in. Most of these teens (12%) say they have joined in the mean behavior only “once in a while,” 7% say “sometimes” and 2% say they have done it “frequently.”

Teens rely most heavily on parents and peers for advice about online behavior and coping with challenging experiences.

For general advice and influence, parents are still the top source for teen internet and cell phone users. However, teens receive advice from a wide array of sources.

- 86% of online and cell phone-using teens say they have received general advice about how to use the internet responsibly and safely from their parents.
- 70% of online and cell-using teens say they have gotten advice about internet safety from teachers or another adult at school.
- 45% have received advice from friends or classmates, 45% have received general advice from an older relative, and 46% have received internet safety advice from a brother, sister, or cousin.
- 58% of teen internet and cell phone users say their parents have been the biggest influence on what they think is appropriate or inappropriate when using the internet or a cell phone.
- 18% of teens say their friends have been their biggest influence on appropriate internet or cell phone behavior.
- 18% say “no one” has influenced them.

We also asked teens who had specifically witnessed or experienced online cruelty whether they sought out advice on how to cope with or respond to that experience, and who they went to for such information. Some 36% of teen social media users who have witnessed online cruelty seek advice on how to cope, and nearly all say the advice is mostly good.

- 51% of girls who have witnessed cruelty online have sought advice, as have 20% of boys.
92% of those who asked for advice say that the advice they received was “helpful.”

53% of the teens who have witnessed online cruelty and then sought advice for how to handle it have reached out to a friend or peer, while 36% sought advice from parents.

Younger teen girls ages 12-13 are much more likely to rely on friends and peers than older girls.

Most of these exchanges happening on social network sites are not taking place in full public view, as the majority of teens take various steps to manage their privacy online.

The vast majority of teens say they have private social network site profiles that are visible only to “friends.”

62% of teens who have a social media profile say the profile they use most often is set to be private so that only their friends can see the content they post.

19% say their profile is partially private so that friends of friends or their networks can see some version of their profile.

17% say their profile is set to public so that everyone can see it.

This distribution is consistent regardless of how often a teen uses social network sites – in other words, there are no differences in this privacy behavior between teens who are heavy social network site users and those who are lighter users. However, the teens who have fully public profiles are more likely than teens who limit access to have had a bad experience on those sites (23% vs. 12%).

55% of all online teens say they have decided not to post content that might reflect poorly on them in the future.

Beyond social media sites, teens are at least occasionally thinking about the impact of their digital footprints online, and how the content associated with their names may affect their reputation. More than half of all online teens (55%) say they have decided not to post something online because they were concerned that it might reflect badly on them in the future.

Teen social network site users are almost twice as likely as non-social network site-using online teens (60% vs. 34%) to say they have withheld content after considering the potential ramifications.

Older teen internet users (ages 14-17) are more likely than younger teens (ages 12-13) to say they have reconsidered posting content online after thinking about the possibility of negative implications (59% vs. 46%).

The oldest group of online teens—who are likely to be preparing for or in the midst of college and job applications—report the highest levels of this kind of digital withholding; 67% of online 17-year-olds say they have withheld content that might damage their reputation.

A notable number of teens also engage in online practices that may have the potential to compromise their safety online.

Close to half of online teens have said they were older than they are in order to access a website or online service, and a third have shared a password.

44% of online teens admit to lying about their age so they could access a website or sign up for an online account. Social network site-using teens are twice as
likely as non-users to say they misrepresent their age online in order to gain access to websites and online services (49% vs. 26%).

- 30% of online teens reports sharing one of their passwords with a friend, boyfriend, or girlfriend.
- 47% of online girls 14-17 say they have shared their passwords, compared with 27% of boys the same age.

Most parents of teens talk with their child or use non-technical measures to manage their teens’ online experiences.

The vast majority of parents have had conversations with their teens about safe and risky online practices.

- 94% of parents of online teens say they have talked with their teen about what kinds of things should and should not be shared online.
- 93% have talked with their child about ways to use the internet and cell phones safely.
- 87% have suggested ways to behave toward other people online.
- 87% of parents have talked with their child about what he or she does on the internet.

About half of parents use parental controls to manage their child’s online experience.

- 54% of parents of internet users report using parental controls or other means of blocking, filtering, or monitoring their child’s online activities.
- 34% of parents say they have used parental controls to restrict their child’s use of a cell phone.

39% of all parents of teens have connected to their child on a social network site, but that does not necessarily prevent online trouble for the teen.

We find that even when parents friend their children on social network sites, it does not necessarily head off problems on those sites. Fully 87% of parents of teens are online and 67% of those online parents use social network sites. And of those social network site-using parents (who have children who also use social network sites), 80% have friended or connected with their child via social media. That translates into 45% of all online parents of teens and 39% of all parents of teenagers who are “friends” with their children on social media sites.

- Parents who have friended their child on social network sites are more likely to report using parental controls.
- Teens who are social media friends with their parents are also more likely to report that they had a problem with their parents because of an experience on social media.

The majority of parents also say they have taken various steps to manage and monitor their child’s online activities.

- 80% of parents who use social media and who also have a child who uses social media have friended their child on social media.  
  7 Asked only of parents who used social media and had a child who uses social media – not asked of teens

- 77% of parents of internet users have checked which websites their child visited, up from 65% of parents who did this in 2006.

- 66% of parents have checked to see what information was available online about their child.  
  8 Asked only of parents who used the internet – not asked of teens

- 61% of teens report that their parents have checked their social network site profile.  
  9 Asked only of teens who use social network sites or twitter.

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