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# *Executive Summary*

## *Who Needs Parental Controls?*

### *A Survey of Awareness, Attitudes, And Use of Online Parental Controls*

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# *Executive Summary*

## *Who Needs Parental Controls?*

### *A Survey of Awareness, Attitudes, And Use of Online Parental Controls*

**Submitted To: The Family Online Safety Institute**

**By Hart Research Associates**  
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*In July 2011, Hart Research Associates undertook a quantitative research project to explore parents' views of online safety on behalf of the Family Online Safety Institute. The research consisted of a nationwide telephone survey among 702 parents of children ages eight to 17 who access the Internet. The research's objective is to better understand parents' knowledge and attitudes toward online safety, and their self-reported use of parental control technologies or other tools for monitoring children's online activity across various platforms. Interviewing was conducted from July 8 to 16, 2011, with a margin of error of  $\pm 3.7$  percentage points. This memo outlines key findings from the survey.*

## Key Findings

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- 1. Parents generally feel their children are safe online, but parents with younger children are more confident in their child's online safety than are those with older children. Top concerns about online safety relate to children's personal safety online.**
  - Online safety is not a heightened concern among parents, with a large majority (86%) reporting they feel their child is very (42%) or somewhat safe (44%) online. Just 13% of parents say their child is very (3%) or somewhat (10%) unsafe when it comes to their online activities.
  - The proportion of parents who feel their child is "very safe" decreases the older the child and the more time he or she spends online. Among parents of children ages 14 to 17, 38% feel their child is "very safe" online, versus 52% among parents of children ages eight to 10 who feel the same. More than half of parents of light Internet users (one to four hours/week) feel "very safe" when their child is online, while confidence is lower (33% feel child is very safe) among parents of children who spend 10 or more hours online per week.
  - When it comes to various online activities, parents express the most concern about their children viewing sexually explicit content online (70% very/somewhat concerned). Communicating with a stranger online (61%) and visiting Web sites with inappropriate content (61%) also are top concerns expressed by parents, all of which relate to the personal safety of a child.
  - Parents say that they rely most on the news media (38%), other parents (37%), and schools or teachers (29%) for information about how to best protect their child's safety and privacy online.
- 2. The computer is the most ubiquitous means by which children go online, but half of parents say their children access the Internet using other platforms.**
  - Nearly all (96%) parents surveyed say their children access the Internet using a computer, laptop, or netbook.
  - Half (51%) report their child uses something in addition to a computer to access the Internet, versus 49% whose children only use a computer. When it comes to children's usage of other devices to go online, 30% use a gaming console, 27% use a handheld device, and 21% use a smartphone.
  - Nearly half (48%) of parents say their children use two or more technologies, and 24% of parents say their child uses three or more devices to access the Internet.

**3. Parents feel more knowledgeable about ways to protect their children's safety and privacy online using a computer than they do when it comes to protecting their safety while using newer Internet platforms—such as smartphones and handheld devices.**

- Three in four (75%) parents feel very (44%) or fairly (31%) knowledgeable about protecting their child's online safety and privacy when he or she is using a computer.
- Among parents whose children use a gaming console to go online (30% of sample), nearly two-thirds (62%) say they are very or fairly knowledgeable about safety protections. More than half (55%) of parents whose children use a smartphone or handheld device (48% of sample) express this level of knowledge.

**4. Virtually all parents (96%) say they have talked to their children about their behavior and the risks and benefits of being online, and just over half of parents say they have used parental controls for Internet use.**

- Fifty-three percent (53%) of parents say they have used tools or software to monitor or limit their children's Internet activity. Use of parental controls is higher among mothers (57%), parents under age 40 (59%), parents who completed postgraduate work/degree (62%), and parents who use social media (60%).
- A large majority (87%) of parents report awareness of at least one of the five types of Internet parental controls tested.
- Parental controls offered by software companies such as Norton, McAfee, and Microsoft are most widely known, with two-thirds (67%) of parents reporting awareness. Programs and tools offered by Internet service providers such as phone and cable companies also are widely known (60% report awareness). Awareness of tools from search engines (48%), video game companies (37%), and wireless phone companies (35%) is lower.

**5. Among parents who do not use parental controls, the most oft-cited reason is that parents feel they are unnecessary.**

- Among parents who have not used parental controls (46% of sample), most report online safety tools and programs are not necessary, either because of rules and limits already in place (60%), and/or because they trust their child to be safe (30%). Parents are notably less likely to attribute their non-use of these tools to a lack of understanding of how to use them (14%), a lack of awareness of them (8%), concern about their cost (7%), or doubts about their effectiveness (6%).
- Just 27% of parents say they chose not to use parental controls because of a lack of knowledge or concern about cost. Mothers (35%), parents age 50 and over (33%), parents with a high school education or less (37%), and yearly incomes at or below \$50,000 (32%) are more likely to say knowledge or cost prevented them from using parental controls to monitor their child's Internet usage.

**6. Parents report monitoring their children's Internet usage in a variety of ways. Of all 18 methods queried, setting rules or limits for online behavior were most common. Large proportions of parents also report blocking or actively monitoring their child's Internet usage across various platforms.**

- Nearly all (93%) parents say they have set rules or limits in one or more ways to safeguard their children online. Among parents whose children use the computer to access the Internet (96% of sample), 79% report setting rules that allow their children to use the computer only in common areas of the house. Three in four (75%) parents set rules about the amount of time children can spend online or the time of day children can be online (74%).
- When asked about six specific parental control technologies, a large majority (65%) of parents report using one or more of them, including those provided by computer operating systems, online search engines, Internet service providers, videogame consoles, or smartphones. The use of parental control technologies for smartphones is least common. Among the 21% of parents whose children use a smartphone to access the Internet, one in four says they have set up smartphone parental controls, and 16% have downloaded a parental control app. One-third of parents whose children access the Internet using a video game console (30% of the sample) have used parental controls on this platform.
- Large proportions (61%) of parents say they have blocked their children's Internet usage, or actively monitored (i.e., reviewed browser history, read text messages, etc.) their Internet activity (85%) in one or more of the ways queried.

**7. Few parents find it difficult to exercise guidance and supervision over their children's use of various media. Overall, movies are deemed easier to monitor than a child's online activity, particularly when the child is accessing the Internet on a smartphone or handheld device.**

- Parents are most confident in their ability to monitor the movies their children watch: 92% say it is very or fairly easy to supervise this activity, while just 5% say it is difficult. Difficulty is only slightly greater when it comes to monitoring video games (11%), TV programs (10%), amount of time spent online (14%), and Web sites the child visits using a computer (17%).
- Alternately, parents whose children access the Internet using a smartphone or handheld device (48% of total sample) find it more difficult to monitor their child's online activity on these devices: 63% of parents say that it is easy to monitor, while 33% of these parents find it difficult to supervise their child's usage.
- The older the child and the more time he/she spends online, the less likely parents are to think it is "very easy" to supervise their online activities.