

## **Generational Cybersecurity: Helping Parents Understand Teens' Online Risks**

Fokam, Dejolie Christelle <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Hostos Community College (CUNY)  
[dejoliechristelle@gmail.com](mailto:dejoliechristelle@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

This study uses parallel surveys of parents and adolescents to examine intergenerational understanding of teens' online activities and risks. Thirty anonymous responses (majority teens) were analyzed descriptively. While 71% of parents reported being very or somewhat confident about their teen's online life, only 4% of teens said they always share their online activities with parents; 57% turn to friends first when problems arise. Nearly half (48%) of teens reported experiencing cyberbullying or harassment. Both groups expressed strong interest in learning together (teens: 87% yes/maybe; parents: 86% yes/maybe). Findings highlight gaps in knowledge and communication that can be addressed through family-based education and structured workshops. We conclude with practical recommendations for parent-teen joint learning, privacy-respectful dialogue, and basic technical safeguards.

*Keywords:* cybersecurity, adolescents, parents, online safety, digital literacy, intergenerational communication

### **Resumen**

Este estudio utiliza encuestas paralelas a padres y adolescentes para examinar la comprensión intergeneracional de las actividades y los riesgos en línea de los jóvenes. Se analizaron 30

respuestas anónimas (en su mayoría adolescentes) con estadísticas descriptivas. Aunque el 71% de los padres informó estar muy o algo confiado respecto a la vida en línea de sus hijos, solo el 4% de los adolescentes afirmó compartir siempre sus actividades digitales con sus padres; el 57% acude primero a amigos ante un problema. Casi la mitad (48%) reportó haber experimentado ciberacoso o acoso en línea. Ambos grupos mostraron interés en aprender juntos (adolescentes: 87% sí/tal vez; padres: 86% sí/tal vez). Los resultados revelan brechas de conocimiento y comunicación que pueden abordarse con educación familiar y talleres estructurados. Concluimos con recomendaciones prácticas para el aprendizaje conjunto, el diálogo que respete la privacidad y salvaguardias técnicas básicas.

*Palabras claves:* ciberseguridad, adolescentes, padres, seguridad en línea, alfabetización digital, comunicación intergeneracional

## **Introduction**

Earning trust and safety online is increasingly challenging for families because teens' digital lives evolve faster than parents can track. Prior work shows many parents do not recognize the platforms teens use most (Yardi & Bruckman, 2012), and roughly one-quarter of minors encounter online sexual solicitations (CyberInsureOne, n.d.). Parents often set rules but less frequently deploy parental controls or pursue safety training (Popovici, 2025). Meanwhile, younger users' technical fluency does not necessarily translate to accurate risk appraisal, and older adults' caution can be undercut by limited familiarity with new apps (Wongmahesak et al., 2025). This study compares parent and teen perspectives to (a) map knowledge gaps, (b) surface communication bottlenecks, and (c) proposes family-centered safety practices.

## **Literature Overview**

### ***Parental awareness vs. platform granularity***

Parents commonly rely on general conversations and time rules rather than platform-specific knowledge (Popovici, 2025; Yardi & Bruckman, 2012).

### ***Generational digital literacy dynamics***

Digital skill asymmetries shape perceived credibility and willingness to disclose (Wongmahesak et al., 2025).

### ***Risk landscape for teens***

Cyberbullying, sexual solicitation, scams, and privacy leaks remain prevalent (CyberInsureOne, n.d.).

## **Research Questions**

1. What do parents know about teens' social media and internet use?
2. How do parental perceptions align with teens' reported behaviors?
3. How can parents and teens learn together to adopt safer online habits?
4. What barriers limit open discussion of online safety?

## **Method**

### **Design and participants**

We fielded an anonymous, convenience-sample online survey with parallel instruments for teens (13–19) and parents/guardians. We obtained  $N = 30$  responses (majority teens).

### **Measures**

Items captured confidence/awareness, safety actions, communication patterns, and experiences (e.g., cyberbullying).

## Procedure and analysis

The survey link was shared via email, messaging, and social media. We computed descriptive statistics and compared parallel items across groups.

## Results

### Teens

- Communication with parents: 4% always, 26% often, 48% sometimes, 22% never share online activities.
- Help-seeking: 57% go to friends first; 35% to parents.
- Privacy and involvement: 57% feel parents respect privacy; 39% “sometimes.”
- Tech mentoring upward: 96% have helped a parent learn an app/site.
- Safety experiences: 48% report cyberbullying/harassment.
- Joint learning: 87% yes/maybe to learning safety with parents.

### Parents

- Confidence: 71% very/somewhat confident about teen's online life.
- Actions: 71% talk about safety; 57% ask for passwords; 43% set time limits; 29% use parental controls; 43% review activity monthly or more.
- Awareness/learning: 86% believe teens know the risks; 57% track trends at least occasionally; 86% yes/maybe to a family safety workshop.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive summary of key items by group (percent responding)*

Domain	Teen Highlight	Parent Highlight
Share activities always	4%	—

Go to friends first for help	57%	—
Experienced cyberbullying	48%	—
Parents respect privacy (yes)	57%	—
Very/Somewhat confident in understanding teen online life	—	71%
Talks about safety	—	71%
Uses parental controls	—	29%
Would attend a family workshop (yes/maybe)	87%	86%

## Discussion

RQ1—Parental knowledge: Parents report moderate confidence yet rely more on conversation than on platform-specific literacy or controls—consistent with earlier findings that many cannot identify teens’ primary apps (Yardi & Bruckman, 2012).

RQ2—Alignment: Teens’ disclosures are sparse (only 4% always share), and peers are preferred first responders (57%). The intergenerational fluency gap (Wongmahesak et al., 2025) likely reduces parents’ perceived utility in crises.

RQ3—Joint learning: High interest on both sides ( $\approx$ 87% teens; 86% parents) signals a ready path for family workshops, co-learning modules, and school-facilitated sessions.

RQ4—Barriers: Privacy/autonomy needs, fear of overreaction, and parents’ limited platform granularity constrain dialogue; sensitive topics (e.g., harassment) can be awkward for teens to raise.

### **Limitations**

Small, convenience sample (N = 30; teen-heavy), self-report bias, and lack of inferential testing limit generalizability. Future work should expand sampling, include qualitative interviews, and assess intervention impact.

### **Recommendations for Future Practice**

1. Family Safety Check-ins (15 minutes, monthly): Structured agenda covering one new app/feature, one recent risk story, and one shared action (e.g., privacy setting).
2. Co-Learning Micro-Workshops: Teen teaches a feature; parent models a safety habit (passwords, reporting tools, phishing tells).
3. Privacy-Respecting Agreements: Define what is monitored vs. not monitored; use negotiated “break-glass” rules for high-risk events.
4. Baseline Technical Safeguards: Strong, unique passwords + MFA; device-level content restrictions; platform-native safety tools; quarterly privacy reviews.
5. School/Community Partnerships: Host parent–teen sessions led by counselors/IT staff; distribute one-page checklists in multiple languages.

### **Conclusion**

Parents and teens care about safety but often talk past each other. Building shared literacy, normalizing brief safety check-ins, and adopting light-touch controls can narrow the gap without undermining adolescent autonomy. Programs that pair joint learning with clear privacy norms are especially promising.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Survey Instrument**

#### **Parent survey**

- Confidence in understanding teen apps/websites (Very/Somewhat/Not/I don't know).
- Actions taken (time limits, talked about safety, parental controls, shared passwords, none).
- Frequency of reviewing teen online activity (Daily/Weekly/Monthly/Never).
- Belief that teen is aware of online risks (Yes/No/Not sure).
- Willingness to attend a family online-safety workshop (Yes/No/Maybe).
- Frequency of updating knowledge about new apps/trends  
(Regularly/Occasionally/Rarely/Never).
- Comfort discussing sensitive topics (Yes/No/Sometimes).
- Use of monitoring software (Yes/No).
- Learning sources (Internet articles/Workshops or classes/Friends or family/Do not actively learn).
- Biggest perceived risk (Cyberbullying/Exposure to inappropriate content/Scams or fraud/Stranger danger/Privacy breaches).

#### **Teen survey**

- Frequency of talking to parents about online activities (Always/Often/Sometimes/Never).
- First support for online problems (Parent/Friend/Teacher/Nobody).
- Perceived parental respect for privacy (Yes/No/Sometimes).
- Helped parents learn an app/website (Yes/No).
- Willingness to learn safety together (Yes/No/Maybe).



- Frequency of changing privacy settings (Often/Sometimes/Rarely/Never).
- Experienced cyberbullying/harassment (Yes/No).
- Reads safety/privacy information for new apps/sites (Always/Sometimes/Rarely/Never).
- Feels safe sharing online experiences with parents (Yes/No/Sometimes).
- Most trusted helper (Parents/Friends/Teachers or school staff/Online help).