



Issue Brief #2: Libraries Help Keep Teens Safe Online

Introduction

Appropriate use of the World Wide Web and social technologies by teens is of great interest and often concern to adults. These technologies provide adolescents with opportunities to interact with others, of all ages, in a variety of ways and presents new opportunities for learning, communicating and creating. However, the complexity of the online environment can be difficult for teens to grasp on their own and may lead them to make bad choices, from sexting, to bullying, to providing too much personal information, and for misuse of the online resources that are available. It is imperative, then, that all teens have access to resources and trained experts to help them gain digital literacy skills that will lead them to making smart choices online.

Librarians are uniquely positioned to support teens in their quest for learning how to use social technologies responsibly and ethically. Libraries provide teens with access to high speed Internet, digital technologies and informal and formal learning opportunities so that they can gain skills and knowledge in a wide variety of areas, including digital literacy skills and safe and smart use of technology.

Teens and Libraries

Today's teens are power library users. Census data shows that in 2010 there were over 42 million young people aged 10 -19 (comprising 13.6% of the population) in the US. In 2010, half of the nation's 14 - 18 year olds reported visiting a library to use a computer. ¹The *Opportunity for All* study reported that youth ages 14-24 make up 25% of all library users, which makes them the largest group in study, and that youth were drawn to libraries to use computers, receive help with homework, socialize, and participate in programming. ² Similarly, school libraries are available to about 62% of youth enrolled in public schools and youth turn to their school libraries for recreational reading, learning support, and technology access. ³

Libraries are also key in bridging the digital divides that exist, including access to appropriate technologies, high speed Internet and to individuals who are experts at using them. While millions of Americans now have Internet access, many of them--especially minorities—rely on Internet access via their phones. The problem is that “smartphone access is not a substitute for wired. The vast majority of jobs require online applications, but it is hard to type up a résumé on a hand-held device; it is hard to get a college degree from a remote location using wireless. Few people would start a business using only a wireless connection.”⁴

Besides using the library for Internet access, teens do value their libraries as a place to find information and learn to use information and technology successfully. Recent studies found that “90% of students recognized that the school library helped boost their confidence as proficient information seekers and

¹ United States Census. (2010). Age and sex composition. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-03.pdf>

² Becker, S., Crandall, M. D., Fisher, K.E., Blakewood, R., Kinney, B. & Russell-Sauvé, C. (2011). *Opportunity for all: How library policies and practices impact public Internet access* (IMLS-2011-RES-01). Institute of Museum and Library Services. Washington, D.C.

³ National Center for Education Statistics [NCES]. (2011). *Digest of education statistics 2010*. Washington, DC: United States Department of Education.

⁴ Crawford, Susan P. "The New Digital Divide." *New York Times* [New York] 03 12 2011, n. pg. Web. 8 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/04/opinion/sunday/internet-access-and-the-new-divide.html?pagewanted=all>>.

users; 91.8% of the students appreciated the school library's help in sorting and analyzing information and gaining media literacy."⁵ In addition to the acquisition of digital fluency and technical skills, a growing body of literature further suggests that online spaces help youth develop language and writing skills, as well as social and collaborative skills.⁶

While the Children's Internet Protection Act has unintentionally hindered some libraries in their provision of technology access to teens, many libraries do offer access to social sites for teens and in this way provide learning opportunities about these sites and how to handle a variety of situations that might arise.

The 2011 edition of the Young Adult Library Service Association's (YALSA) *Teens and Social Media in Schools and Public Libraries: A Toolkit for Librarians and Library Workers*⁷ highlights a variety of activities taking place in school and public libraries that support the needs of adolescents to learn safe online practices. These include:

- Students studying a specific period in history create a fake Facebook wall as a way to write content from the perspective of a historical figure. While working on their wall, students have the chance to talk about how to post on Facebook safely and intelligently. They develop research and writing skills while writing from the perspective of a historical figure.⁸
- A public librarian teaching teens to create videos. In the process, teens learn media literacy skills while gaining insight into video creation and publishing. The teens post their videos on YouTube and have the opportunity to talk about how to be safe while in the YouTube environment⁹
- An author creates a blog or Twitter account as a way to reflect on the reading and writing experience. Teens who enjoy the author's work keep up on what the author is writing and thinking through the blog. The author's blog is used as a research source and as a way to communicate with the author about books, reading, and writing.¹⁰

Libraries provide year round resources and opportunities for teens to learn, communicate and create. A unique annual initiative also shines a light on the critical role libraries play in helping teens gain critical digital literacy skills. Each year, as a part of Teen Tech Week™, libraries around the United States sponsor events that promote smart and safe technology use by teens. In 2007 YALSA launched Teen Tech Week,¹¹ an annual event with the purpose of providing opportunities for librarians and educators to:

- Highlight the positive uses of technology by teens
- Help teens learn how to use technology well and gain needed digital literacy skills

⁵ http://www.ala.org/yalsa/sites/ala.org.yalsa/files/content/professionaltools/Handouts/districtdays_web.pdf

⁶ Gasser, et al. Harvard University. Berkman Center for the Internet & Society. *Youth and Digital Media: From Credibility to Information Quality*. Cambridge: Harvard University, 2012. Web. <<http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/publications>>.

⁷ Young Adult Library Services Association. *Teens and Social Media in Schools and Public Libraries: A Toolkit for Librarians and Library Workers*. February, 2011.

http://www.ala.org/yalsa/sites/ala.org.yalsa/files/content/professionaltools/Handouts/sn_toolkit11.pdf

⁸ Byrne, Richard. *My Fake Wall: Create a Fake Facebook Wall*. Free Technology for Teachers. January 30, 2011. <http://tinyurl.com/fakefbwall>

⁹ Pima County Public Library. *Create It Think It Make It Do It*. <http://www.library.pima.gov/about/news/?id=3828>

¹⁰ Oliver, Lauren. *Lauren Oliver Twitter Feed*. <https://twitter.com/OliverBooks>.

¹¹ Young Adult Library Services Association. FAQ - Teen Tech Week. <http://teentechweek.ning.com/page/faq>

- Inform adults about how to successfully support teens in their use and understanding of digital technologies

Each year, as a part of Teen Tech Week, libraries around the United States sponsor events that promote smart and safe technology use by teens.

Today's librarians continually monitor and educate themselves about the online social environments that teens use. They use their knowledge and expertise to develop programs, services, and educational opportunities to help teens successfully navigate the Internet and social media.

Teens and Social Sites

In November 2011, the Pew Internet and American Life project released a report on teen "kindness and cruelty" on social network sites. The report overview begins:

"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."¹²

Teens' extensive use of social media for networking and communication presents a host of challenges when it comes to privacy and safety. Because they are still developing personal identities and values, teens may make poor decisions about their online lives. Librarians have made it their mission to ensure that adolescents stay safe online and can succeed with using today's social technologies in school, in life, and in the work place.

Since the first days of consumer use of the Internet, adults have been concerned about the impact of networked technologies on young people. In the late 1990s the United States Congress passed a series of laws, such as the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act and the Children's Internet Protection Act, aimed to mitigate the potential safety hazards for young people when online. While these laws seek to protect children, they do not provide for the education youth need to become problem-solvers and to think critically about their decisions when involved in online activities. This is a serious concern because the "relevant skills, or the lack thereof, will significantly shape the ability to navigate cyberspace throughout a user's life."¹³

In an April 2009 presentation at the Penn State *Symposium for Teaching and Learning with Technology*, educator and researcher danah boyd observed:

"It's critical to realize that just because young folks pick up a technology before you do doesn't inherently mean that they understand it better than you do. Or that they have a way of putting it into context....Educators have a critical role when it comes to helping youth navigate social media. You can help them understand how to make sense of what they're seeing. We can call this 'media literacy' or 'digital literacy' or simply learning to live in a modern society. Youth need to

¹² Lenhart, Amanda, et al *Teens Kindness and Cruelty on Social Network Sites*. Pew Internet And American Life Project, November 2011. <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Teens-and-social-media/Summary/Findings.aspx>

¹³ Gasser, et. al. 6.

know more than just how to use the tools - they need to understand the structures around them.”
14

Educating teens to be safe online is challenging to adults because these environments are new to many of them, and because the issues are varied and complicated. Librarians educate themselves about these issues in order to discuss them knowledgeably with teens.

Conclusion

Social technologies, online media, and all manner of web-based information are now fixtures of contemporary life, and are only expected to grow in importance and variety. Teenagers will persist in using these new tools for social, educational, and work place tasks. As new technologies appear, librarians are uniquely positioned to integrate them into informal and formal learning experiences for teens. Through this integration teens have high-quality opportunities to gain digital literacy and problem solving skills that allow them to make smart decisions about being safe and private online.

Resources

boyd, danah. apophenia: making connections where none previously existed.
<http://www.zephoria.org/thoughts/>.

Internet Safety Technical Taskforce. (2008). *Enhancing Child Safety & Online Technologies*. Cambridge, Mass.: Berkman Center for Internet & Society
http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.law.harvard.edu/files/ISTTF_Final_Report.pdf

Ito, Mizuko, et al. (2010). *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Johnson, L., Adams, S., and Cummins, M. (2012).
The NMC Horizon Report: 2012 Higher Education Edition. Austin, Texas:
The New Media Consortium. <http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/HR2012.pdf>

Lenhart, Amanda, et al. (2011). *Teens, Kindness and Cruelty on Social Network Sites*. Pew Internet and American Life Project. <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Teens-and-social-media.aspx>

Young Adult Library Services Association. *Teen Tech Week*. www.ala.org/teentechweek

Youth Safety on a Living Internet: Report of the Online Safety and Technology Working Group. (2010)
http://www.ntia.doc.gov/legacy/reports/2010/OSTWG_Final_Report_060410.pdf

Further Information

YALSA
50 E. Huron St.
Chicago, IL 60611
yalsa@ala.org
312.280.4390
www.ala.org/yalsa

March, 2012

¹⁴ boyd, danah. *Living and Learning with Social Media*. Penn State Symposium on Teaching and Learning with Technology. April 18, 2009. <http://www.danah.org/papers/talks/PennState2009.html>