

# Who Needs Parental Controls?

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

Findings From A National Survey Among Parents

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**Findings From A National Survey Among Parents  
Submitted To: The Family Online Safety Institute**

**By Hart Research Associates  
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## **Methodology**

*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. To simplify survey administration, parents were asked to think about their child who had the most recent birthday in answering the survey's questions. The objective of the research 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 report details the key findings identified through the research.*

## Overview

This survey explored parents' attitudes about, feelings toward, and self-reported behaviors related to their child's online safety and the use of parental control technologies. The research indicates that opportunities exist to help parents monitor their children's online activities and protect their safety in today's highly connected environment.

In today's media-heavy landscape, children's access to the Internet is not limited to a computer alone. Instead, parents report that children use gaming consoles, handheld and portable gaming devices such as an iPod Touch or Game Boy, smartphones, and tablet computers to go online. Children also are spending a significant amount of time online, with two in five parents reporting their child spends an average of 10 or more hours per week on the Internet. Social media Web sites also contribute to a new media landscape. More than half of parents say that their child uses social media networks such as Facebook to stay connected and share information.

Despite the changing environment and the multitude of monitoring devices available to parents, they generally feel that their child is safe online and believe they are knowledgeable about how to protect their child's safety and privacy on a computer. Certain online activities pose a greater concern to parents, including children viewing sexually explicit information or pictures, or communicating with strangers online, but nearly all report that they have had a conversation with their child about how to be safe online and have rules or limits in place in their household to help keep their child safe online. More than half of the parents surveyed also report using parental control technologies to monitor their child's online activities.

Mobile devices present the greatest opportunity to educate parents about the parental control technologies available, including smartphone controls and downloadable apps. The survey reveals that parents feel least knowledgeable about how to protect their children on mobile devices, and therefore usage of parental control technologies on mobile devices is relatively low.

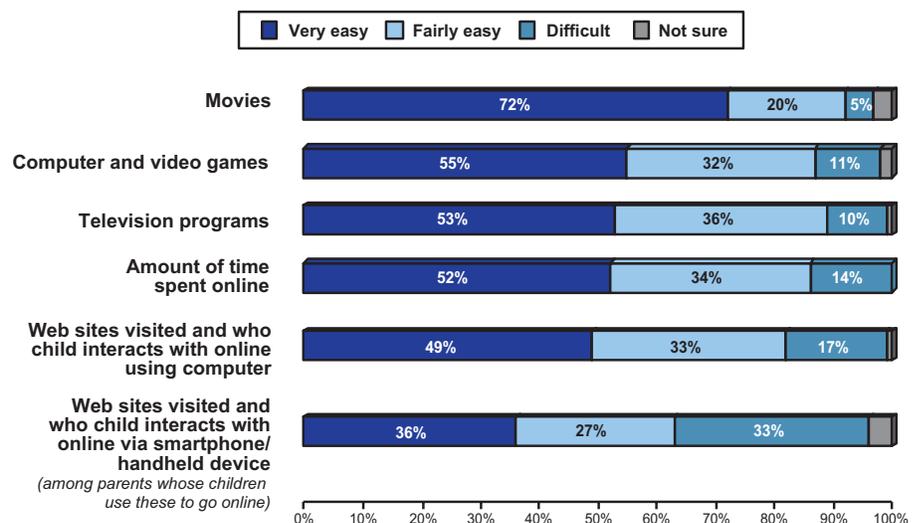
## Key Findings

1. Few parents find it difficult to exercise guidance and supervision over their child’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 child watches: 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, 82% of parents say that it is easy to monitor their child’s Web site visits.
- 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. One-third (33%) of these parents find it difficult to supervise their child’s usage on a smartphone or handheld device, while 63% say it is very easy or fairly easy.

### Few parents find it difficult to monitor children's use of various media, but they feel some are easier to monitor than others.

*How easy or difficult is it for you to exercise the kind of guidance and supervision you would like over your children’s activity in each area?*



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.

- The older the child and the more time they spend online, the less likely parents are to think it is “very easy” to supervise their online activities.
- More than half (55%) of parents with younger children (under age 14) say it is very easy to monitor the Web sites their child visits. Parents of older children (age 14 and over) are less likely to say it is very easy to monitor this behavior (41%). Among parents whose children access the Internet using smartphones, concerns over monitoring online behavior also increase with the child’s age. Nearly half (49%) of parents with older children say it is very (23%) or fairly (26%) difficult to exercise guidance over their child’s online activities on a smartphone or handheld device, versus 15% of parents who say it is difficult to do so with younger children.
- The more time a child spends online, the less easy it is for parents to monitor their child’s online activities. Among parents whose child is online 10 hours or more per week, a third (36%) say that monitoring online behavior on Web sites is very easy. Parents of light Internet users (online one to four hours per week) are less concerned, with 65% saying monitoring their child’s online behavior is very easy.

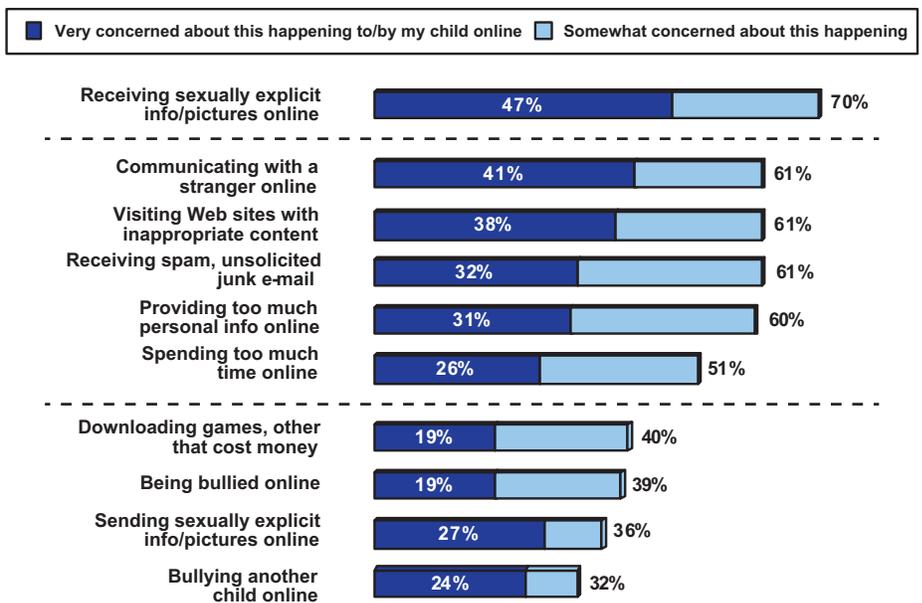
## **2. Parents generally feel their children are safe online, but confidence declines the older the child and the more time he or she spends online.**

- Online safety is not a heightened concern among parents, with a large majority (86%) reporting that 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.
- Among parents of 14- to 17-year-olds, 38% feel their child is “very safe” online, compared with 52% of parents of eight- to 10-year-olds. Just 35% of parents with 14- to 17-year-old daughters feel they are “very safe” spending time online, compared with 40% of parents with boys the same age. More than half (53%) of parents of light Internet users feel their child is “very safe”, while confidence decreases among parents of children who spend 10 or more hours online per week (33% feel child is “very safe”).

**3. Top concerns about children’s online safety relate to personal safety online, and significant concern also is expressed about spam and their child spending too much time online.**

- Of the the 10 online activities queried in the survey, parents’ greatest worry relates to personal safety. Parents are most concerned about their child viewing sexually explicit content online (70% very/somewhat concerned). Alternately, half as many (36%) are concerned that their child could send sexually explicit pictures or information over the Internet. Communicating with a stranger online (61%) and visiting Web sites with inappropriate content (61%) also are top concerns.
- As shown in the following graph, many parents also are concerned about their children receiving spam or unsolicited e-mails (61%), providing too much personal information online (60%), and spending too much time online (51%).
- The risk of downloading games that cost money is of lesser concern for parents (40%). Parents are only slightly more concerned about their child being bullied online (39%) than about their child bullying another via the Internet (32%).

**Parents express concern about various online activities.**



**4. Parents rely on a variety of sources for information on how best to protect their children online.**

- Most seek out information through the general news media (38%), other parents (37%), and schools or teachers (29%).
- Sources of information vary by parents' education level. Parents with a four-year college degree (41%) or postgraduate education (46%) are more likely to find information on online safety through the news media than are parents with a high school education or less (32%). Parents with a high school education or less rely most on other parents (44%).
- Parenting magazines (17%) and social media (16%), such as Facebook and Twitter, are resources for some parents, with parents under 40 most likely to rely on social media (21%). Personal experience (5%), online researching (5%), and relatives, family, and friends (4%) are the least cited means of learning about tools to protect their child's online safety.

**5. While the computer remains the most ubiquitous means by which children go online, half of parents say their child accesses the Internet using other platforms.**

- The computer remains the most common means by which children access the Internet. Nearly all parents surveyed (96%) say their child accesses the Internet using a computer, laptop, or netbook.
- But use of the Internet today is not limited to any one device, which is an increasing challenge for parents when it comes to keeping children safe online. More than half (51%) of the parents surveyed report that their child uses something in addition to a computer to access the Internet, whereas 49% report that their child uses only a computer. Parents of 14- to 17-year-olds (54%), those whose children spend 10 or more hours per week online (60%), and those with household incomes greater than \$75,000 (61%) are most likely to report that their child uses devices other than a computer to access the Internet.
- When it comes to children's usage of other devices to go online, 30% use a gaming console, including 38% of boys and 22% of girls.
- More than a quarter (27%) of parents say their child uses a handheld device, such as an iPod Touch or portable gaming device (e.g., Game Boy, PSP) to go online.
- The use of a smartphone to access the Internet is reported among 21% of parents, with parents of 14- to 17-year-olds (29%) the most likely to say their child goes online this way.
- When it comes to a child's mobile access, half (53%) of parents report that their child has their own cell phone, including either a smartphone (14%) or a regular cell phone (39%), while 11% say their child has access to a parent's smartphone. More than three-quarters (77%) of 14- to 17-year-olds have their own cell phone (51%) or smartphone (26%).

- Just 7% of parents say their child accesses the Internet using a tablet computer.
- Many parents also report that their child accesses the Internet using multiple platforms. Nearly half (48%) of parents say their child uses two or more technologies to access the Internet, and 24% of parents say their child uses three or more devices to go online.

**6. Parents feel more knowledgeable about ways to protect their child’s safety and privacy online using a computer, while newer Internet platforms—such as smartphones and handheld devices—present a greater challenge.**

- 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.
- While parents report lower levels of knowledge when it comes to monitoring their children’s usage on gaming consoles and mobile devices, more than half of parents feel knowledgeable. Among parents with a child who uses a gaming console to go online (30% of sample), 62% say they are very or fairly knowledgeable about safety protections. Just over half (55%) of parents whose child uses a smartphone or handheld device (48% of sample) express this level of knowledge.

**7. Virtually all parents say they have talked to their child about their behavior and the risks and benefits of being online, and just over half of parents say they have used parental control tools and programs for Internet use.**

- Nearly all parents surveyed (96%) say they have had a conversation with their child about what to do and not to do online. In addition, a slight majority (53%) of parents say they have used parental control technologies offered by software companies, Internet service providers, wireless phone companies, search engines, or video game companies to assist them in monitoring their child’s Internet usage.
- Mothers (57%), parents under age 40 (59%), parents who completed postgraduate work/degree (62%), and those who use social media (60%) report the greatest use of parental control tools.
- Regardless of their usage, awareness of parental control tools and programs is quite high, with 87% of parents reporting awareness of at least one parental control. Those offered by software companies such as Norton, McAfee, and Microsoft are most widely known, with two-thirds (67%) of parents reporting awareness. Awareness of programs and tools offered by Internet service providers also is high (60% report awareness).
- Less than half of parents report knowing about tools offered by Internet search engines, such as Google, Yahoo, and Bing (48%), or video game companies like Microsoft, Sony, and Nintendo (37%). Among parents whose child uses video game systems to access the Internet, awareness of parental controls built into these systems is only slightly higher than average, at 44%.

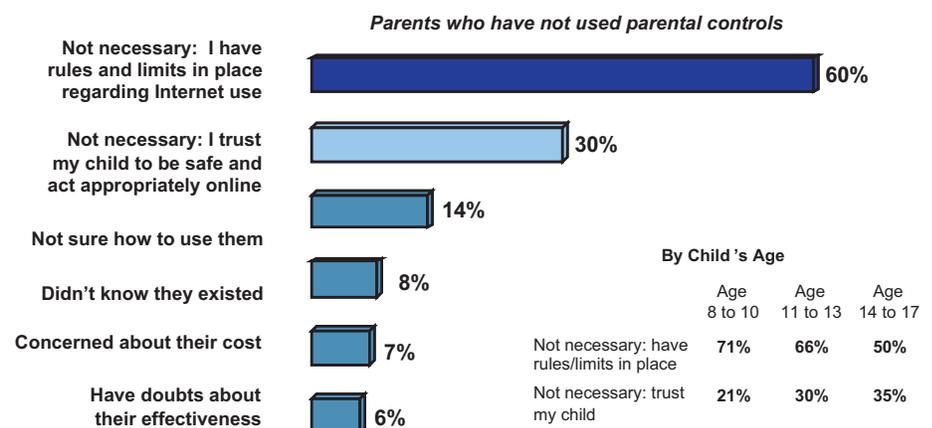
- Parents are least aware of programs and tools offered by wireless phone companies to help limit or monitor Internet usage. Just 35% of all parents say they are aware of parental controls offered by wireless companies, and only 39% of parents whose child uses a smartphone to access the Internet say they know of parental control technologies.

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

- Among the 46% of parents who have not used parental controls, their top-two reasons for why they do not are that they feel 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 with eight- to 10-year-olds are more likely to say parental controls are not necessary because of rules or limits in place (71%), while parents with 14- to 17-year-olds place greater trust in their child to be safe online (35%).
- 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%).
- Cumulatively, just 27% of parents say they do not use parental controls because of a lack of knowledge about these technologies or concern about their cost. Mothers (35%), parents age 50 and over (33%), those with no more than a high school education (37%), and yearly incomes at or below \$50,000 are most likely to say lack of knowledge or cost prevented them from using parental controls to monitor their child’s Internet usage.

**Parents who have not used parental controls believe they are not necessary.**

*Which of these statements best describe why you have not used a parental control tool or program to assist you in limiting or monitoring your child’s Internet usage?*



**9. Parents report various ways of monitoring their child’s Internet usage. Of all 18 methods queried, setting rules or limits for online behavior are most common. Large proportions of parents also report blocking or actively monitoring their child’s Internet usage across various platforms.**

Parents were asked about their use of various methods to monitor their child’s Internet usage. Eighteen methods were tested in total, with some methods posed only to parents whose child uses the applicable technology. The parental control methods were grouped into four categories based on various actions a parent could take: a) setting rules and limits, b) using parental control technologies, c) blocking, and d) active monitoring of a child’s Internet activities.

*NOTE: For parental controls involving specific technologies, only those parents whose child uses the applicable technology were asked about its usage. For example, the use of methods to monitor a child’s Internet usage on a gaming console were asked only of the 30% of parents in the sample who say their child uses a gaming console to access the Internet. Where questions were asked of a limited portion of the total sample, the proportion that answered that question are indicated.*

**Setting Rules Or Limits**

- Nearly all parents (93%) say they have set rules or limits in at least one of five ways to safeguard their child online.
- Most common is that among parents whose child uses a computer to access the Internet (96% of sample), 79% report setting rules that allow their child to use the computer only in common areas of the household.
- Three in four (75%) parents have set rules for the amount of time their child can spend online, or the time of day their child can be online (74%). Rules regulating the amount of time a child can spend online are more common among parents with children under age 14 (81%) and among parents of eight- to 10-year-olds (87%) than parents of 14- to 17-year-olds (69%).
- Among the 53% of parents whose child owns a cell phone or smartphone, 59% report setting rules or limits to their child’s use of their mobile device.
- Just 10% of parents surveyed say their child has signed a family online safety contract that outlines parents’ expectations and rules regarding how the child should conduct him or herself online.

## Parents' Reported Setting Of Rules And Limits

*% who say they have done this to limit or monitor their children's Internet usage\**

**93% Say they have set rules or limits in at least one of the following ways**

- 79% Set rules requiring your child to only use the computer in a common area of the house** *(among the 96% of parents whose children use a computer to access the Internet)*
- 75% Set rules or limits for the amount of time your child can spend online in a given day or week**
- 74% Set rules or limits for the times during the day when your child can be online**
- 59% Set time limits or rules for your child's use of his or her cell phone** *(among the 53% of parents whose child owns a cell phone or smartphone)*
- 10% Had your child sign a family online safety contract that outlines parents' expectations and rules, discusses how the child will conduct him/herself online**

\* Each activity asked only of parents whose child uses applicable technology

### Using Parental Control Technologies

- Nearly two in three (65%) parents report using at least one of the six specific parental control technologies queried, including those available through computer operating systems, online search engines, Internet service providers, video game consoles, or smartphones. (This aggregate proportion of parents who report using at least one parental control is slightly higher than the previously cited 53% who reply in the affirmative when asked about usage of parental controls overall, as reported on page 7.)
- Parental control technologies used within the operating system of a home computer (47%) or through an online search engine (40%) are more widely used than tools provided by Internet service providers (33%).
- Only a third (33%) of parents whose child accesses the Internet using a gaming console (30% of sample) say they set up parental controls on that device.
- The use of parental control technologies is least common among parents whose children use a smartphone to access the Internet (21% of sample). Among these parents, 25% say they have set up smartphone parental controls, and 16% have downloaded a parental control app.

## Parents' Reported Usage of Parental Controls

*% who say they have done this to limit or monitor their children's Internet usage\**

**65% Say they have used at least one of the following parental controls**

- 47%** Used parental controls in the operating system of your computer to limit access to programs and Web sites or when and how long children can use the computer *(among the 96% of parents whose children use a computer to access the Internet)*
- 40%** Put limits on online search capabilities using programs, such as Google Safe Search, which filters out potentially harmful material
- 33%** Used parental controls offered by your ISP to limit access to programs and Web sites or when and how long children can use the computer *(among the 96% of parents whose children use a computer to access the Internet)*
- 33%** Set up parental controls that are built into your child's videogame console *(among the 30% of parents whose child uses a gaming console to access the Internet)*
- 25%** Set up parental controls on the smartphone your child uses *(among the 21% of parents whose child uses a smartphone to access the Internet)*
- 16%** Downloaded a parental control app available from an app store, such as iTunes *(among the 21% of parents whose child uses a smartphone to access the Internet)*

\* Each activity asked only of parents whose child uses applicable technology

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### Blocking A Child's Internet Usage

- A substantial proportion (61%) of parents say they have blocked their child's Internet usage either by setting an access code on a computer or restricting a child from downloading applications and games to a wireless device.
- Just over half of parents (54%) say they have set up a code and password to block a child from accessing the Internet using a computer.
- Among the 48% of parents whose child uses a smartphone, handheld device, or gaming device to access the Internet, 44% say they have restricted a child's ability to download applications or games directly to a phone or wireless device.

## Parents' Reported Blocking of Child's Access

*% who say they have done this to limit or monitor their children's Internet usage\**

**61% Say they have blocked child's Internet use in at least one of the following ways**

**54%** Set up a code lock and password on the computer that your child uses *(among the 96% of parents whose children use a computer to access the Internet)*

**44%** Restrict the ability to download applications and games to your child's phone or wireless device *(among the 48% of parents whose child uses a smartphone, handheld device, or gaming device to access the Internet)*

\* Each activity asked only of parents whose child uses applicable technology

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### Actively Monitoring Online Activity

- The large majority (85%) of parents report actively monitoring, (i.e., reviewing browser history, reading text messages, etc.) their child's Internet activity in at least one of the four ways tested.
- Facebook is the most common means of monitoring a child's online activity. Among the 52% of parents whose child uses a Facebook account, 83% have logged on to their child's profile page, or friended them on Facebook.
- Reviewing a child's browsing history (Web sites visited online) is common among parents (79%). Active monitoring of recent Web activity is employed mostly by younger parents. More than nine in 10 (91%) parents under the age of 40 report having reviewed their child's browser history.
- When it comes to methods of actively monitoring children on mobile devices, 70% of parents whose child owns a cell phone or smartphone (53% of sample) admit to having looked at their child's phone to read their sent and received text messages. Mothers (74%), parents under age 40 (84%), and social media users (74%) are most likely to monitor their children in this way. Among parents of children with smartphones, just 14% say they have used their child's cell phone GPS system to check on his/her whereabouts.

## Parents' Reported Active Monitoring of Child's Usage

*% who say they have done this to limit or monitor their children's Internet usage\**

**85% Say they have monitored child's usage in at least one of the following ways**

- 83% Logged on to your child's Facebook account to view (his/her) page or friended your child on Facebook** *(among the 52% of parents whose child has a Facebook account)*
- 79% Reviewed your child's browsing history -- that is, the Web sites they visit online**
- 70% Looked on your child's phone to review sent and received text messages** *(among the 53% of parents whose child owns a cell phone or smartphone)*
- 14% Used your child's cell phone GPS to check on (his/her) whereabouts** *(among the 14% of parents whose child has their own smartphone)*

\* Each activity asked only of parents whose child uses applicable technology