

Online Safety for Young Teens

STUDENT NAME

University of Hawaii Maui College

**SAMPLE CASE STUDY – STUDENT REPORT – UH Maui College**

Discussed with students in the Business Department (also relevant for Social Studies

**PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Assuming parents are at least partially in the dark brings us back to the question of how a parent goes about tracking their teen's online activity and communications. One of the biggest challenges in monitoring digital communication is the speed with which new communication methods arise. Currently, parents that want real-time information on the latest social apps have limited options. For the most part, they are left to conduct their own research. The process can demand so much time and effort that it can be off-putting.

**RESEARCH QUESTION**

RQ1: What would be an effective method for parents to better keep their young teen safe online

### Online Safety for Young Teens

The same information superhighway that makes global business possible, can also be employed in nefarious activities. Those that seek to harm, lurk in many areas online pretending to be someone they are not. Navigating the useful areas of the internet, while avoiding the pitfalls is difficult for any adult. The dilemma is heightened for tweens and young teens. Expanded freedom in exploring the online world is usually first experienced in this age group.

Many, if not all, parents will have spent time teaching their child about internet safety. Some children will have also had the benefit of learning how to be safe online in the classroom. Caregivers may be tempted to conclude that their work in this area is done. However, the task of keeping children safe online should not stop at ‘the talk’. In an interview with ABC affiliate WFAA in Dallas, two child sex offenders stated that the top deterrent for them was an adult who took the time to monitor their child’s electronic communication (Huffman, 2017). Child sex offenders are not the only danger in cyberspace. Data from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) show that social networking websites and apps have replaced bus terminals and truck stops as the top recruiting spots for human traffickers (NCMEC, 2015).

In 2018, 18.4 million reports were made to the NCMEC’s National CyberTipline (NCMEC, 2019). Assuming that each report was for a single child, that would mean that one-quarter of the children in the U.S. experienced an act of online sexual exploitation in 2018 (Childstats.gov, 2017). However, 35% of respondents in a survey conducted by the author (The Survey) reported their child receiving some form of sexual request.

Trying to keep a child safe online can be an arduous task. There are a myriad of ways that offenders can gain access to a child. One might safely assume that a surefire way to keep an offender at bay is through parental controls on electronic devices. Unfortunately, parental

controls can be circumvented fairly easily. All it takes is a quick internet search and wikiHow will show you “8 Easy Ways to Turn off Parental Controls” (wikiHow staff, 2019), or “5 Ways to Get Around Parental Controls on the Internet” (wikiHow Staff, 2019). There are many other ways to fool digital monitoring, too many to list here.

As mentioned before, monitoring a child’s electronic communication is the most effective deterrent against child predators. Monitoring a young teen though is often challenging for parents. The terrain between giving them privacy and trying to protect them can be perilous. Whether this type of observation violates one’s privacy is an ethical question that will not be addressed in this paper. This paper assumes that supervising a young teen’s electronic communication is ethical and necessary to keep that teen safe.

### **Problem Statement**

How then, should a parent go about tracking their teen’s electronic communications? In fact, why not just ask them what they are using? In a perfect world an adolescent would answer their parent’s questions with complete honesty. Because we don’t live in a perfect world, parents can presume that they are kept in the dark about some things. Some of those things may include simply not being informed about a new social app they downloaded. Or, in a more serious scenario, using an app like Calculator Vault. This app hides any other app behind an innocent calculator icon (Google Play, 2019).

Assuming parents are at least partially in the dark brings us back to the question of how a parent goes about tracking their teen’s online activity and communications. One of the biggest challenges in monitoring digital communication is the speed with which new communication methods arise. Currently, parents that want real-time information on the latest social apps have limited options. For the most part, they are left to conduct their own research. The process can

demand so much time and effort that it can be off-putting. What then, would be an effective method for parents to better keep their young teen safe online.

### **Background/History**

As of today, there are only a few web-sites that track social networking apps that are trending with young teens. Parents may set up controls or block certain apps but soon there are new ones available that parents may not know about. Traditionally parents have had to rely on annual “Best of”, “Worst of” type lists to find out what apps they should be banning their child from. The problem is that by the time the list comes out (in electronic or print form) many of the apps are already out of vogue and the teens have moved on to something else. It can be a perpetual game of catch-up.

### **Literature Review**

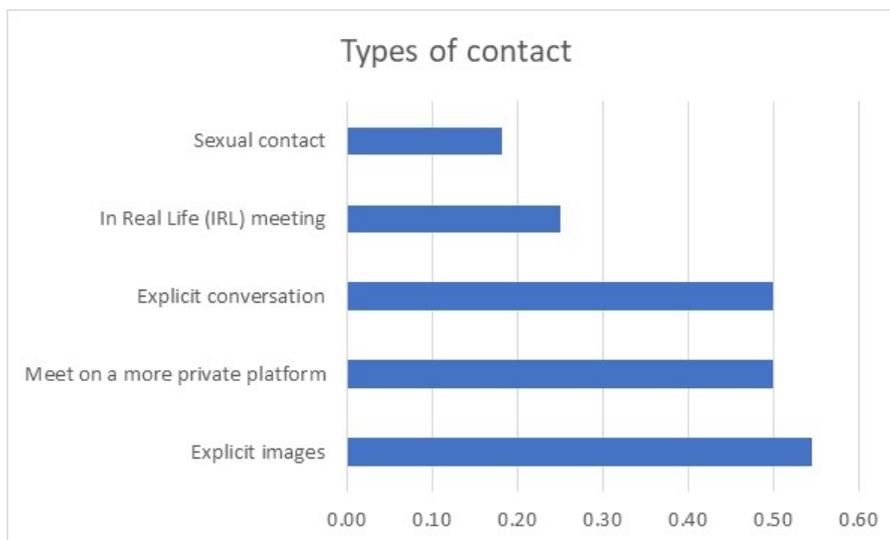
Currently, there are two websites that aggregate the information for concerned parents. Both have extensive libraries of apps and websites that can be dangerous for young teens. However, the issue remains that the parent looking for information still needs to know the name of the apps to complete a search. Lists of the year’s most dangerous apps are available but can be outdated by the time they are published. These websites do not inform the parent of the *current* popularity of the app or website. They also do not contain information about how teens may be circumventing the parental control features of the app or website.

Just knowing of the app and websites is no guarantee that a parent will be able to keep their child safe. However, with the knowledge of the website/app and safety features offered, or not offered, a parent can make an informed choice of which apps and websites to allow their young teen to access.

In order to limit the chances of their child being harmed online, parents also need to know how potential offenders find their victims. The Survey asked parents what type of relationship the child and attacker had. 72% said the relationship was online, and 28% said the child knew their attacker in real-life. The offender's goals will likely dictate the platform used to communicate with the victim.

In a CyberTipline report, the NCMEC said that the goal of 60% of predators was to obtain sexually explicit content from the victim, 40% wanted sexual contact or explicit conversations with them. These offenders use a variety of platforms such as social networking sites and apps, and gaming platform chats to cast a wide-net for potential victims. Platforms can be used to entice a young teen to share sexually explicit images.

The Survey received 127 responses. Of those 127 respondents, 44 (35%) said their child received a request for some sort of explicit content. Respondents could choose one or more of the five types of contact offered. Of the 44 who reported their child having received some sort of sexual contact online, more than half received requests for explicit images and half reported receiving requests for explicit conversation. The chart below shows the percentage of affirmative responses for each type of contact.



Once the images are in the offender's library, they can be used for sextortion, put up for sale or used for trade with other child pornography dealers. If obtaining images is the end-goal, then the relationship will likely stay on the platform where it began. For the 40% that want more intimate contact, the abuser will try to move the child to a more private platform. The Survey showed 25% of those that experienced sexual contact online received requests to move to a more intimate platform. For example, anonymous messaging apps and texting can be used for graphic conversations. Abusers can also obtain live shows from their victims via platforms like YouTube and other streaming apps. These methods are typically used when sex is the ultimate goal (NCMEC, 2017).

### **Methodology**

**Participants.** A survey for parents of children 11 through 13 years of age, regardless of gender, was created through Survey Monkey. The survey was open to interested participants in the United States. The survey was open until a minimum of 100 responses were collected. A total of 127 responses were ultimately collected.

**Materials.** The survey was created online using Survey Monkey. Results were aggregated through Survey Monkey's analysis tools and Excel spreadsheets.

**Procedure.** Participants completed the survey at their convenience using a home computer, laptop, or mobile device. The type of device used was solely at the discretion of the participant.

**Analysis.** Open-ended questions were coded for analysis. Answers that didn't fall within obvious categories were placed at the discretion of the author.

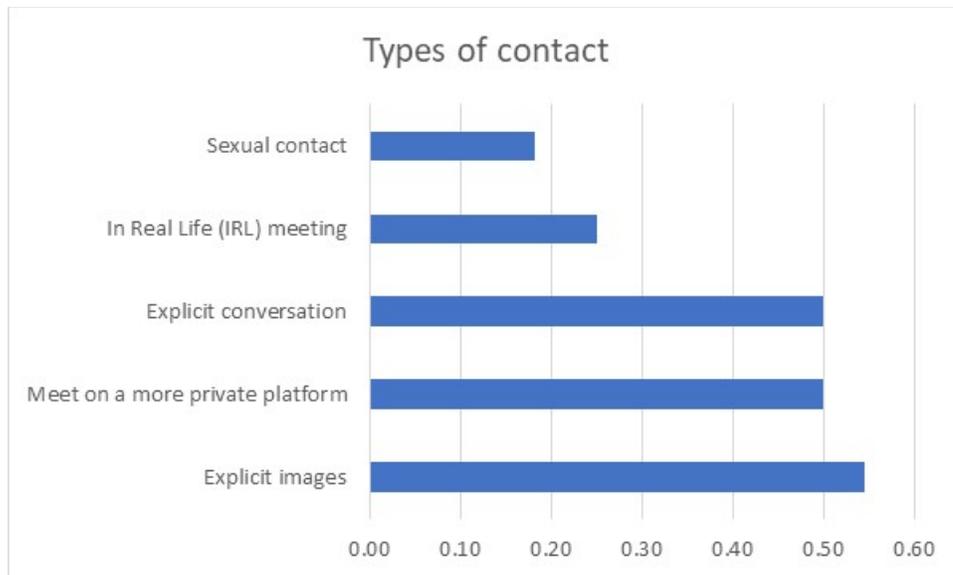
### **Findings and Analysis**

In their paper, “The Online Enticement of Children” (NCMEC, 2017), the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children found that 82% of offenders were male, 9% were female, and 9% answered ‘Unknown’. 76% of the offenders in The Study were male, 24% were female. It should be noted that The Study participants all knew the gender of the predator.

PureSight, an Online Child Safety website, states that 20% of children 12 to 17 have received unwanted sexual solicitation through the internet (“Online Predators - Statistics | PureSight,” n.d.). The Study found that number to be 35%. This is most likely due to The Study being targeted toward parents of children 11-13 years old, rather than the broader age range of 12-17. It does raise the question of whether youngsters 11-13 are targeted more often than other age ranges.

The Survey found that explicit images were the top inappropriate requests made by predators. Of the 44 children that experienced online exploitation, 55% of them received requests for explicit images. Moving to a more intimate online platform and participation in explicit conversation tied for second place, with half of the 44 receiving such requests. 25% were asked for a meeting in-real-life, making it the third top request. Lastly, 18% received a request for sexual contact.

The study asked respondents if they were aware of three relatively simple ways to hide online activity. The three were: Calculator vault (or similar app), portable browsers, and proxy sites. The following chart shows the percentage of respondents that were not aware of these ways to hide online.



The Survey found that 37.69% of respondents felt that just talking to child was enough to keep them protected online. Talking and online safety education was the next most popular at 31.54%. Talking and monitoring online activity came in third at 14.62%. Respondents had other suggestions to go along with talking to the child. Some of these suggestions include: computer use is restricted to public areas in the home, the child must share all their passwords, and secretly monitoring them.

These findings are interesting because education alone is the most suggested method for online safety. There are any number of non-profit organizations receiving grants to educate children about online safety. A simple google search for 'how to educate children about online safety' returns over 48 million results. Considering that more than half of the parents polled were not aware of the simplest ways to circumvent online monitoring, perhaps education dollars would be better spent on educating parents rather than children.

### **Recommendations and Conclusion**

More than half of the parents surveyed were unaware of the three of the simplest ways to evade online monitoring. Most parents felt that they could keep their children safe online by just talking to them. The predators themselves said that talking alone is not enough, they were online deterred by an adult monitoring the child's online activity.

Many American families today have both parents in the workforce. Work worries, worries about finances, and worries about raising their children do not leave parents with a lot of extra mental energy. This may have something to do with the number of parents saying that talking alone will keep their children safe online. Perhaps this belief is a fantasy born out of desperation. Desperation borne out of trying to do it all.

Parents do not need further education of what kind of predators are out there in cyberspace. They do, however, need to be educated on how those predators are finding their children, and how their children are unknowingly (and knowingly) helping those predators find and exploit them.

Online safety education needs to be reviewed and revised. Organizations that help educate children on how to use the internet safely should have sections that educate parents on how to effectively monitor the child online. It is understandable that Organizations may want to

focus on one or the other, however it adds to a parent's burden. Imagine this, a parent goes to a website that tells them how to keep their child safe online. The site may have suggestions for parental control software and other tips. However, there is no information about how the software may be circumvented or how other safety measures may be exploited. This leads the parent to innocently believe they are doing all they can to protect their child.

In conclusion, online safety for children needs to be a two-pronged attack. Education is needed for both parents and the children they are protecting.

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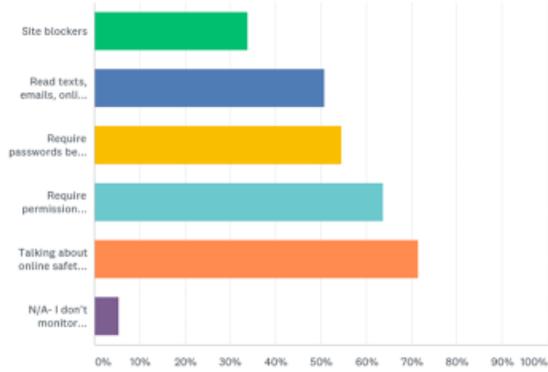
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Internet

### SURVEY RESULTS

#### Q1: What methods do you currently use to monitor your child's electronic activity?

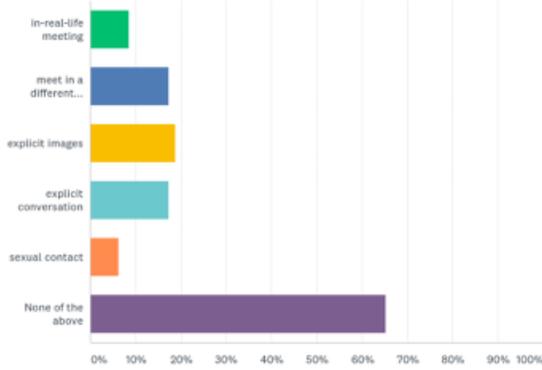
Answered: 130 Skipped: 0



Powered by  SurveyMonkey

#### Q4: Has your child ever received requests for the following? (mark all that apply)

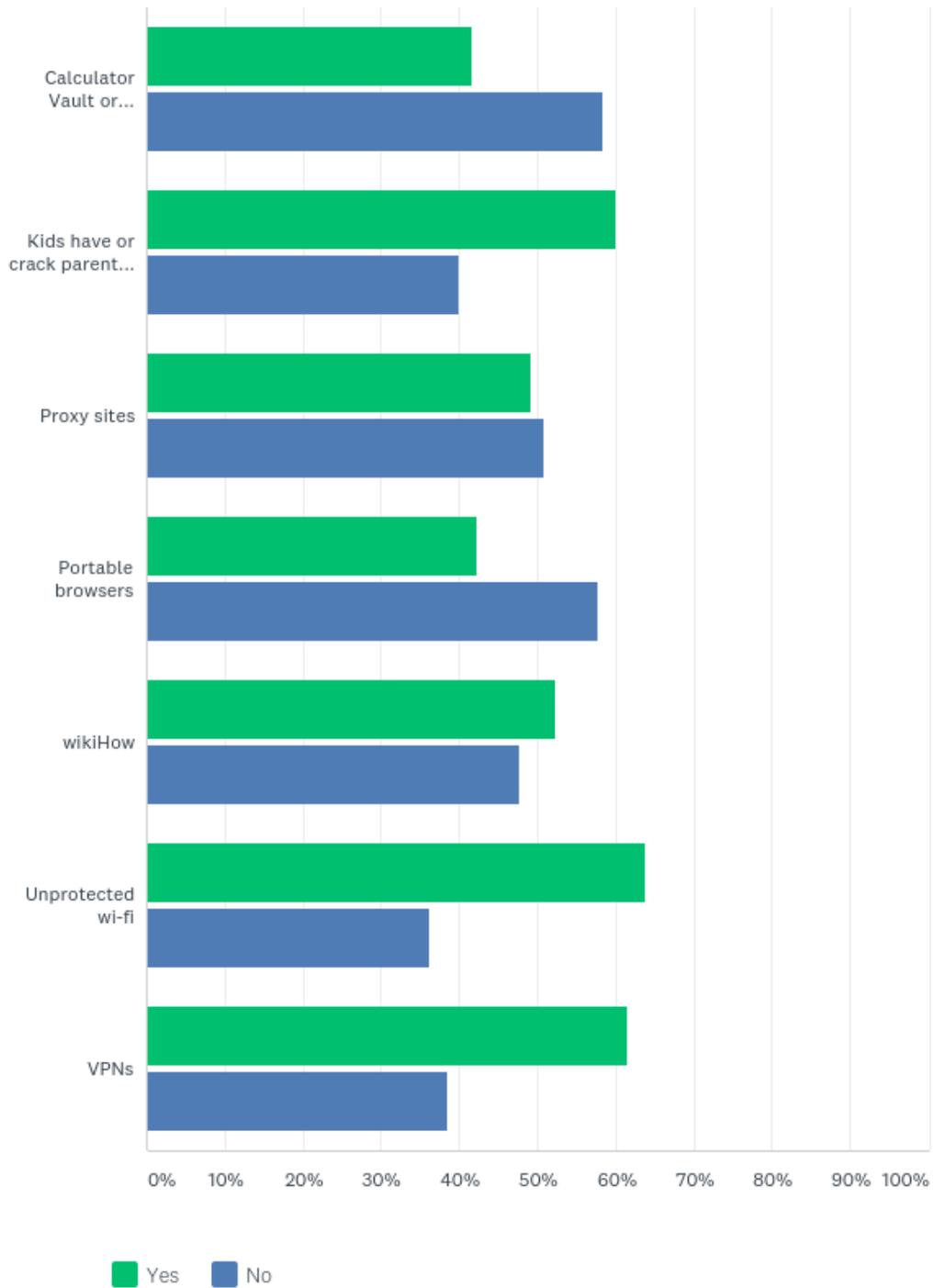
Answered: 127 Skipped: 3



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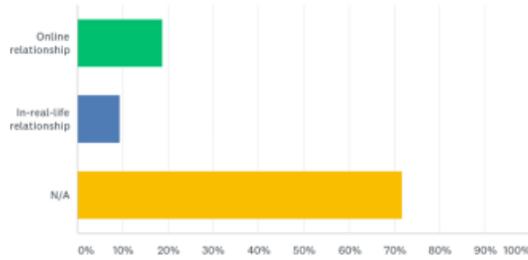
**Q2: Are you aware of the following ways to hide activity or get around parental controls?**

Answered: 130 Skipped: 0



**Q5: For the previous question, what was the child's relationship with the requestor?**

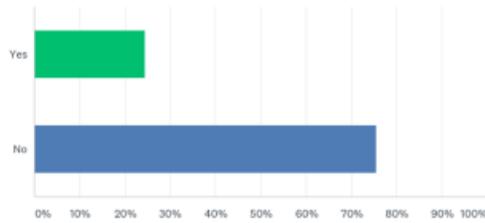
Answered: 127 Skipped: 3



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**Q6: Has your child ever received unprompted sexually explicit images?**

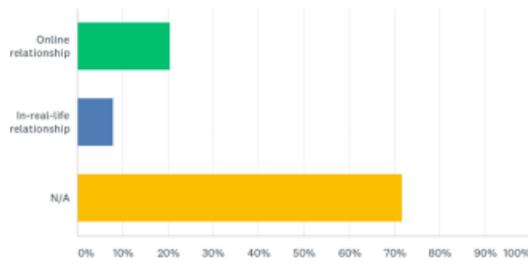
Answered: 127 Skipped: 3



Powered by  SurveyMonkey

**Q7: For the previous question, what was the child's relationship with the requestor?**

Answered: 127 Skipped: 3



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**Q8: For Q4 and Q6, was the contact reported to law enforcement?**

Answered: 127 Skipped: 3

