In the fast-moving era of the Internet, school leaders and parents increasingly face a dilemma: Is it possible to protect children from inappropriate content on the Internet without denying them access to engaging and valuable educational content? Can adults set guidelines that strike a balance between safe and smart Internet usage by children?

To help parents and school leaders make better decisions, the National School Boards Foundation worked with Grunwald Associates, a leading market research firm specializing in technology, to develop an unprecedented national survey of parents and children. The Dieringer Research Group conducted the survey and tabulated the data for Grunwald Associates. With generous support from the Children’s Television Workshop and Microsoft Corporation, we asked parents of children aged two to 17 a number of questions about the role the Internet plays in their children’s lives. We also asked 601 nine- to 17-year-old children themselves, from the same random sample of 1,735 middle-income families.

The bottom line: Parents and children alike view the Internet as a positive new force in children’s lives. Despite recent negative headlines about online violence, pornography, predators, and commercialism, parents and children generally are upbeat and favorable about their own Internet experiences.

Parents, in fact, are even more positive than children—they believe the Internet is a powerful tool for learning and communication, and they want their children to be on the Internet. And, as parent responses suggest, the Internet can be an equally powerful tool for schools that want to increase family involvement.

The data also suggest that schools have an opportunity to help bridge the digital divide between those who have computers and Internet access and those who don’t.

By the time they are teenagers, nearly three out of four children are online. Moreover, children who use the Internet are more likely to log on at home than at school. In light of the survey findings, school leaders must consider the major roles that parents, families and even peers play in children’s use of the Internet. To be most effective, policies and practices should be developed in collaboration with parents.

The Internet gives schools the opportunity to help narrow the gap between the haves and have-nots. Over all, 76 percent of parents with incomes of $75,000 or more have Internet access for their children, compared to 23 percent of African-American parents. A relatively high 30 percent of white parents report that their children use the Internet, compared to 23 percent of African-American parents.

A closely related concern is the types of sites children visit. Fifty-seven percent of white parents say they log on at school, compared to 68 percent of children from wealthy families and 54 percent of children from middle-income families. In African-American families, 80 percent of nine- to 17-year-old children who use the Internet say they log on at school, compared to 68 percent of children from wealthy families and 54 percent of children from middle-income families.

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There are many reasons children, parents, and school leaders say they want Internet access for students who otherwise would have none. In fact, the bottom line is that the Internet gives schools the opportunity to help bridge the digital divide between those who have computers and Internet access and those who don’t.

67% Guide to good content
6% Don’t know/didn’t answer
5% Mother
4% Father
24% Not watch
5% Other

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6% Don’t know/didn’t answer
5% Mother
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Guide to good content
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Source: Grunwald Associates

For the full Safe & Smart report, including more data, implications and resources for school leaders, visit the National School Boards Foundation Web site at www.nsbf.org.
GUIDELINES for School Leaders and Parents

Internet Spurned Learning Activities

- Percentage of nine- to 17-year-old children with home Internet access who use the Internet once a month or more for schoolwork: 80%

Internet Use Doesn’t Disrupt Children’s Everyday Habits

- Eighty-five percent of children use the Internet at home: 48 percent cite this as the main use, followed by email (32 percent). Education also figured prominently in reasons for children’s increased Internet use:

  - Developmental, health activities: In fact, the findings present a picture of American children who leave home in a variety of activities, including reading, playing outdoors, engaging in arts and crafts, and continue and improve activities even — even as their Internet usage is rising.

- Thirty percent of all parents whose children use the Internet report that their children spend more time reading books since they began using the Internet, compared to 14 percent who say their children spend less time reading.

Internet Doesn’t Isolate Children, It Connects Them

- Contrary to conventional wisdom, parents and children report that the Internet does not isolate children from their families, peers or communities instead. The Internet is a powerful communication tool that connects children (and parents to others) — and could bolster the home-school connection.

- Ninety-four percent of all parents whose children use the Internet report that their children spend the same amount of or more time with family and friends since they started using the Internet. Sixteen percent say their children spend more time with family and friends. Parents would like to use the Internet to communicate with their children’s teachers and schools. That would create a powerful opportunity for schools to increase parental involvement. Sixty-four percent of all parents are interested in using the Internet to communicate with their children’s teachers. Forty-five percent of parents would like to be able to view their children’s schoolwork online; 55 percent are interested in using the Internet to communicate with the local community, as well. Parents and students alike agree that parents and students are using the Internet to e-mail friends and family at least once a month. Sixty-four percent of parents and 73 percent of students report using the Internet to e-mail friends and family at least once a month.

- Eighty-five percent of children say they use the Internet to write e-mail, compared to 71 percent of all parents. Eighty-five percent of children report that the proportion of girls using the Internet is the same, television viewing has decreased since they began using the Internet, compared to 5 percent who say it has increased.

- Eighty-five percent of parents whose children use the Internet report that the Internet helps their children with homework and other academic activities. Parents see the Internet as a powerful tool for helping them do their job of educating their children.

- Ninety-four percent of all parents who use the Internet say they would use the Internet more often for entertaining their children if they knew about technology-phobic girls who use the Internet.

- Girls who use the Internet as much as boys: 73%

- Girls who use the Internet less than boys: 70%

- As Much Time — or More — Staying In Touch

- Overall, 48 percent of nine- to 12-year-old boys and girls and 37 percent of 13- to 17-year-old boys and girls are online. Girls are just as likely to use the Internet as their male counterparts: 50 percent of nine- to 12-year-old girls use the Internet, compared to 46 percent of boys in this age group. In the 13- to 17-year-old age bracket, 73 percent of girls use the Internet, compared to 70 percent of boys. Overall, there is no statistical difference between the proportion of girls and boys who are online. Clearly, this encouraging news debunks any stereotypes about technology-phobic girls when it comes to the Internet.

- Girls and boys find different ways to use the Internet. Girls aged nine to 17 report using the Internet more for education than boys in the same age range (57 percent vs. 39 percent). Girls in this age group also report using the Internet for schoolwork more often than boys do: 88 percent of girls (compared to 71 percent of boys) report using it at least once a month for schoolwork.

- Girls are more likely to use e-mail than boys, according to the Internet for games at least once a week.

- Eighty-five percent of girls aged 12 to 14 use the Internet at least once a week, compared to only 50 percent of boys. Thirty percent of boys never use e-mail. Girls aged two to 12 are more than twice as likely as boys (23 percent compared to 10 percent) to use the Internet to e-mail friends and relatives, according to their parents. Girls also appear more likely than boys to use chat rooms on the Internet: 36 percent of girls and 27 percent of boys use chat rooms at least once a week, according to their parents.

- Boys on the other hand, report using the Internet more often for entertainment than girls. Thirty percent of boys and 45 percent of girls aged nine to 17 report using the Internet for entertainment at least once a week. In the same age group, 54 percent of boys and 26 percent of girls report using the Internet for games at least once a week.