



# Connected, Mobile and Social

## The Online Lives of Canadian Youth

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*Digital natives. Tech-savvy. Narcissistic. Innovative. Mean.* There are a lot of assumptions about kids online, but the labels we use are often misleading and out of step with what young people are actually doing with networked technologies. In order to better understand the online lives of Canadian children and youth, MediaSmarts – a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization for digital and media literacy – has conducted an extensive national survey of students in Grades 4 through 11 as part of the *Young Canadians in a Wired World* research series, which began in 2000.

It goes without saying that eight years is a long time on the Internet. Between 2005, when MediaSmarts published Phase II of its *Young Canadians in a Wired World* research, and 2013, when it conducted the national student survey for Phase III, the Internet changed almost beyond recognition: online video,

once slow and buggy, became one of the most popular activities on the Web, while social networking became nearly universal among both youth and adults.

Young people's online experiences have changed as well, so MediaSmarts surveyed 5,436 Canadian students in Grades 4 through 11, in classrooms in every province and territory, to find out how. The first report drawn from this survey, *Life Online*, focuses on what youth are doing online, what sites they are going to and their attitudes toward online safety, household rules on Internet use and unplugging from digital technology. (Future reports based on this data will look at students' habits, activities and attitudes toward privacy, digital permanence, bullying, commercialization, offensive content, online relationships and digital literacy in the classroom and in the home.)



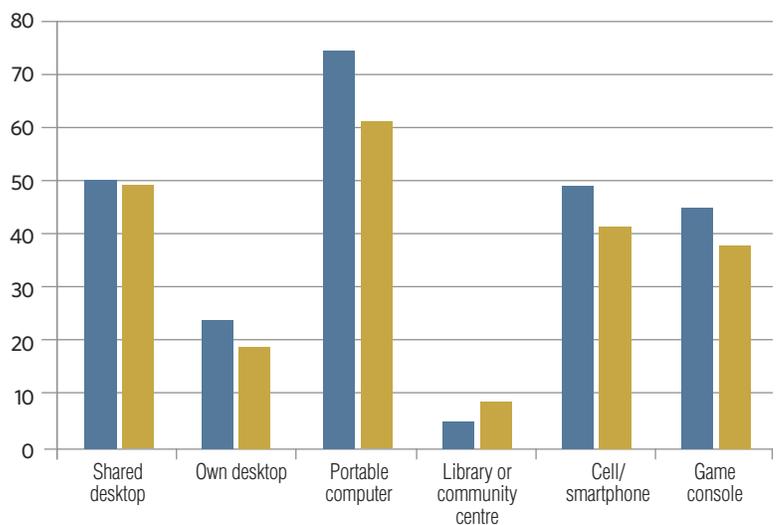
Students report looking for information on the Internet on sensitive topics such as mental health issues, sexuality, physical health issues and relationship problems.

One finding, which is unlikely to be a surprise, is that nearly all youth are going online. In fact, 99% of students surveyed have access to the Internet outside of school using a variety of devices. The biggest change

since the last survey is the proliferation of mobile and portable devices, such as tablets, smartphones and web-enabled MP3 players, which give youth constant – and often unsupervised – online access. In the previous *Young Canadians in a Wired World* report, in 2005, the majority of students accessed the Internet through shared desktop computers at home (which were often kept in the family room or kitchen so parents could keep an eye on the online activities of their children), whereas now portable and personal networked devices, such as tablets and smartphones, are the primary access point for many of these students.

Portable, private access to the Internet was found to increase with age, while reliance on shared computers has decreased: 64% of Grade 4 students report using a shared family computer to go online outside of school, but this drops to 37% by Grade 11. Ownership of cellphones and smartphones, on the other hand, is reported by 24% of students in Grade 4, 52% of students in Grade 7 and 85% of students in Grade 11. Perhaps not surprisingly, ownership of these devices is correlated with family affluence: a greater proportion of more-affluent students compared with medium-affluent students report access to portable computers (74% vs. 61%), cellphones (49% vs. 41%) and game consoles (45% vs. 38%).

**Access to Networked Devices Outside of School: Affluence\* (%)**



\*A modified version of the Family Affluence Scale was used to measure students' socio-economic status. More information can be found under *Comparing High Affluence Students and Medium Affluence Students* in the Methodology section of the *Young Canadians in a Wired World* report.

A larger percentage of boys than girls (27% and 18%, respectively) access the Internet over their own desktop computer, whereas girls are more likely than boys to access the Internet with a laptop (71% and 66%, respectively). This, in combination with the higher likelihood of boys accessing the Internet through a gaming console than girls (60% and 27%, respectively), suggests that boys are more likely to be using the Internet from a fixed location.

Not only are students getting connected, they are *staying* connected: more than one-third of students who own cellphones say they sleep with their phones in case they get calls or messages during the night. This is true of both girls and boys (39% and 37%, respectively, of those who own cellphones). The trend increases across grades to peak at just over half (51%) of Grade 11 students, but one-fifth of all students in Grade 4 also report that they do the same.

Students are well aware that they are frequently “plugged in”: 40% of girls and 31% of boys report worrying that they spend too much time online. When asked how they would feel if they could not go online for anything other than school or work for a week, just under half (49%) say they would be upset or unhappy. Interestingly, English-language students outside of Quebec are more likely to be upset than French-language students in Quebec (51% vs. 40%). However, 46% of all students indicate they would not care one way or the other and 5% report that they would be relieved or happy to go offline.

Many students try to balance their online and offline activities, saying that they sometimes choose to go offline in order to spend more time with friends and family (77%), go outside or play a game or sport (71%), read a book (44%) or just enjoy some solitary quiet time (45%). Only 4% say that they never choose to go offline to do any of these things.

What are Canadian youth doing when they are online? For many, the Internet is a tool for learning and sharing information: half (49%) of students in all grades have gone online to find information about news and current events and half of students in Grades 7-11 have sent links to news stories or current events to others. However, relatively few have participated in online debates, either by posting comments on a news site (71% of Grades 7-11 have never done so) or joining an activist group (65% of all grades have never done so).



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Children and youth are not just interested in learning about news and current events, however. Many report going online to learn about health and well-being, whether it's to learn about physical health (20% of girls and 16% of boys), mental health (14% of girls and 9% of boys) or relationship problems (18% of girls and 9% of boys). The percentage of students who use the Internet as an information source increases from Grade 4 through to Grade 11. Compared with students in younger grades, a higher percentage of students in Grades 7-11 report looking for information on more sensitive topics, such as mental health issues, sexuality, physical health issues and relationship problems. However, nearly one-quarter (22%) of students report that they do not use the Internet to find information about any of these things. Close to one-third of students report having gone online to ask an expert (30%) or other kids (33%) for advice about a personal problem, although only a small percentage report frequently doing so.



Two-thirds of students report that they play online games, with this activity being significantly more popular among boys (71%) than girls (47%). Unlike other online activities, which increase with age, the proportion of students who report playing online games decreases over time, from a high of 77% in Grade 5 to a low of 42% in Grade 10. The games students play differ significantly between boys and girls: boys in Grades 4–6 choose Minecraft, a game in which players build virtual environments, while girls prefer virtual worlds such as Webkinz, Moshi Monsters and Poptropica, which contain chat and social networking features.

Not surprisingly, social networking is also a popular activity, particularly among older students in the survey. The increased participation in social media-related activities is consistent with developmental literature

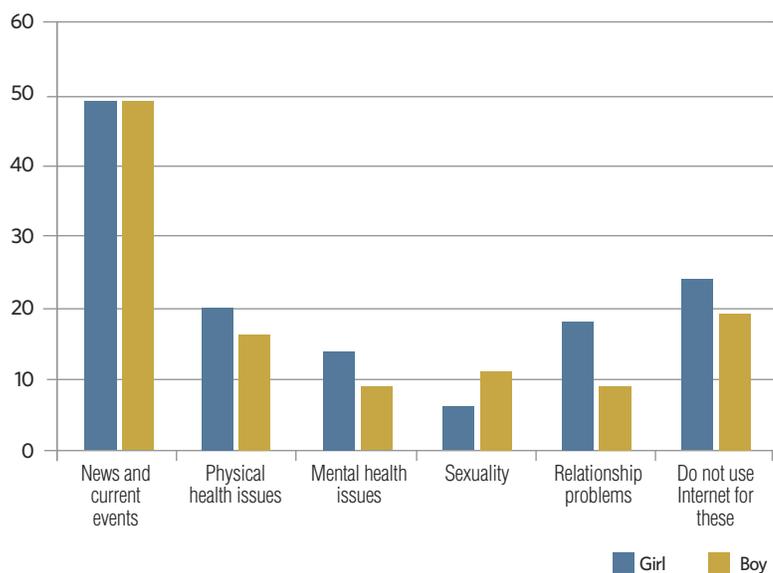
that suggests that social connection becomes more important as young people move from childhood to their teen years. Between Grade 4 and Grade 11, reading others' profiles increases from 18% to 72%, tweeting increases from 5% to 42%, following friends/family on Twitter rises from 8% to 39%, posting on one's own profile rises from 19% to 50% and following celebrities on Twitter rises from 5% to 32%. Girls are more likely than boys to report using social media to communicate with family and friends (45% posted on their own social networking site, compared with 36% of boys).

Nearly one-third (32%) of students in Grades 4–6 reported having a Facebook account and 16% have a Twitter account, in spite of terms of use agreements that bar children under the age of 13 from using these sites. Boys this age are slightly more likely than girls to have a Facebook account (36% compared with 30% of girls), but there is no gender difference regarding Twitter (17% for both boys and girls). The number of Facebook accounts rises substantially after Grade 6, from 67% in Grade 7 to 95% in Grade 11. About half of students in Grades 7–11 also have accounts on Twitter (47%), rising from about one-third (31%) in Grade 7 to almost two-thirds by Grade 11. Twitter appears to be less popular among French-language students in Quebec (8%) than English-language students in the rest of Canada (22%).

Parents have continued to be involved in their children's online lives, with 84% of surveyed students reporting that they have household rules to follow regarding their online activity. The most common rules are about posting contact information online (55%), talking to strangers online or on a cellphone (52%), avoiding certain sites (48%), treating people online with respect (47%) and getting together with online acquaintances (44%).

There have been changes involving household rules regarding online activities since the 2005 survey. Although MediaSmarts' 2012 focus groups with parents and youth showed parents were more concerned than ever about what youth were doing online, the average number of household rules has actually *declined* since 2005. For example, in the earlier survey, 74% of students had a rule at home about meeting people whom they first met online, compared with only 44% today. Regarding personal information, 69% of students in 2005 had a rule about giving personal information online, whereas 55% in 2013 had a rule about posting contact information.

**Finding Information Online: Gender (%)**





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Consistent with our previous research, household rules have a significant positive impact on what students do online, reducing risky behaviours such as posting contact information, visiting gambling sites, seeking out online pornography and talking to strangers online. In general, though, the number of household rules takes a sharp dive after Grade 7 and at all ages girls are more likely to report having rules about their online activities than boys. For example, girls are more likely than boys to report having online rules about talking to strangers (61% of girls vs. 40% of boys), getting together with someone they have met online (52% vs. 35%), telling their parents about anything that makes them uncomfortable online (46% vs. 30%) and treating people online with respect (54% vs. 40%).

The greater number of rules placed on girls may be based on a sense that girls are generally more vulnerable, but it may also relate to the fact that the Internet is a very different place for girls than for boys. Girls are less likely to agree with the statement “The Internet is a safe place for me” and more likely to agree that “I could be hurt if I talk to someone I don’t know online.” Despite these differences, both boys and girls feel confident in their ability to look after themselves, with nine out of 10 agreeing with the statement “I know how to protect myself online.”

How often students have an adult or parent in the room with them while online has also changed since the 2005 survey: this figure has risen. This comes as a surprise, considering the decline in household rules and the proliferation of mobile devices. As with household rules, the rate is higher for girls. One in five Grade 4 students never has a parent or adult with them when they are online at home, and by Grade 8 – a time when students are most at risk of encountering and getting involved in trouble online – four out of 10 students never go online with a parent or other adult in the room.

Students do see their parents as a valuable resource for learning about the Internet: nearly half (45%) of students say they have learned about issues such as cyberbullying, online safety and privacy management at home. However, parents aren’t their only source of information about online issues, with students also reporting learning about these issues from teachers (41%), friends (18%) and online sources (19%). As students get older, they are less likely to report having learned about these issues from parents and more likely to learn from teachers: for example, students in Grades 4–6 were more likely to report having learned about how to be safe online from parents (75%) than teachers (50%). A worrying number of students have not learned about these topics from any source. For example, more than half of students in Grades 4–6 have not learned any strategies for authenticating online information either at home or at school.

*Life Online* has raised many issues that call for more in-depth study. However, the evidence is clear at this early stage that despite their confidence with digital tools – or perhaps because of it – Canadian youth, and particularly elementary-aged children, need instruction in digital literacy skills, and parents and teachers need to be given tools and resources to help them provide that instruction.

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Adapted with permission from material originally posted on the MediaSmarts website on January 22, 2014 and from the full *Young Canadians in a Wired World* report.



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