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Kids, Parents & Online Safety

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That's the unsurprising but nonetheless heartening finding from a new survey of parental attitudes about online child safety and parental control technologies. The July survey, which was conducted by Hart Research Associates on behalf of the Family Online Safety Institute (FOSI), asked over 700 parents with household Internet access how they were coping with online safety challenges. The results illustrate how parents are taking an active role in mentoring their children as their kids increasingly assimilate digital technologies and the Internet into their lives.

A majority of parents (53%) say they have used parental control tools offered by Internet service providers, mobile operators, search engines, software makers, or video game companies to assist them in monitoring their child's Internet usage. Regardless of their specific usage, awareness of parental control tools was quite high according to the survey with 87% of parents reporting knowledge of at least one parental control.

The FOSI survey revealed that parental control technologies were not the most important tool or strategy parents utilized. Talking to our kids continues to be the most important approach to mentoring youth and protecting them, just as it was for

previous generations of parents. Almost all of the parents surveyed (96%) said they have had a conversation with their child about what to do and not to do online.

Parents supplement those discussions with various household media rules. In a book I penned a few years ago on parental controls and online child protection, I outlined a taxonomy of household media rules and methods that parents use to control media access and online interactions. Some household media rules can be quite formal in the sense that parents make clear rules and enforce them routinely in the home over an extended period of time. Other media consumption rules can be fairly informal, however, and are enforced on a more selective basis.

These household media consumption rules can be grouped into four general categories: (1) "where" rules; (2) "when and how much" rules; (3) "under what conditions" rules; and, (4) "what" rules.

The FOSI survey reveals that such household media rules are widely utilized. Nearly all parents (93%) said they have set rules or limits to monitor their children's online usage. In particular:

- 79% of parents surveyed require their children to only use the computer in a certain area of the house. This is an example of a "where" rule.

- 75% of parents limit the amount of time a child can spend online. This is a "how much" rule.

- 74% set rules for the times of day a child can be online. This is a "when" rule.

- 59% established time limits for use of a child's cell phone. This is another "how much" rule.

Many pundits and policymakers ignore the importance of such household media rules when talking about online child safety. They incorrectly assume that lower than expected usage of various parental control technologies means that those tools have failed or that kids are in great danger online. As the FOSI survey suggests, however, parents usually think of most parental control technologies as a backup plan to complement, not replace, the traditional parental mentoring and rule-setting role. In fact, the survey revealed that, of those parents who have not used parental controls, 60% of them said it was because they already have rules and limits in place. That shouldn't be surprising, of course, since most of us over 40 grew up without *any* parental control tools in our homes. Our parents had to use common sense and smart monitoring and mentoring strategies to guide our development. Today's parents continue to use such strategies and household media rules first and then look to use parental control tools to help them supplement and better enforce those rules as needed.

The FOSI survey also seems to suggest that today's parents are growing more comfortable with the Internet and online environments. 86% of parents reported that they feel their child is very (42%) or somewhat safe (44%) online. Many parents

still have concerns about exposure to inappropriate content, communication with strangers, and revelation of too much personal information online. But the "techno-panic" hysteria of past years appears to have subsided. This may be because the first generation of "digital natives"—those who grew up in an always-on digital world—are now becoming parents themselves.

Challenges will remain and others will develop as newer technologies come online. Just wait till virtual reality goes mainstream!

The good news, however, is that there has never been a time in our nation's history when parents have had more tools and methods at their disposal to help them decide what constitutes acceptable media content in their homes and in the lives of their children. Ingenious innovators continue to create technologies to help parents meet the challenges of a world of information abundance. Meanwhile, parents continue to adopt equally ingenious household strategies to better mentor their children's development.

Slowly but surely, we are adapting to life in the information age.