Family Online Safety Institute

Online Safety | Across the Generations

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research conducted by:

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It's not easy being a digital parent these days.

On the one hand, parents worry about what content their children may access, how much screen time they allow and how their kids conduct themselves online. On the other, they field tech support questions from their own parents and worry over how best to keep Mom and Dad's accounts secure and their identities from being stolen online.

Parents are continually making a risk/benefit analysis about their family's tech use and their ability to simultaneously protect and enable their offspring and elders to get the best that digital technology has to offer. They have concerns over their own screen use and how to be a good digital role model. And many feel they need more control over the content their kids access and time their children spend online.

In this new report, we have done a deep dive into the lives of families and their relationship with technology. For the first time, we've asked questions of elders and grandparents as well as parents to better understand their attitudes and behaviors. And we tested how well parents thought they were doing to guide, protect and enable their kids to flourish in this digital age.

We also took a special look at African-American and Hispanic families and considered similarities and differences across socio-economic classes. We wanted to find out where the baseline is when it comes to steps people are taking to stay safe, secure and private online. And we wanted to see what more has to be done – the tools, rules and schools needed to create a sense of safety and security no matter which generation you're from and to learn what might help seniors use the Internet or feel safer online.

While there is much cause for concern among parents and grandparents about their own or their kids' online use, it is heartening that most see digital technology as a boon to connect and communicate with family members – drawing them closer together. There also appears to be a generational shift, with younger, Millennial parents feeling more confident about their ability to monitor and control their kids' tech use than their forebears.

Whether you are a policy maker, an industry executive, an NGO advocate, an educator or simply a parent, I hope you find much to ponder and to act upon. We urgently need an evidence-based approach to develop new tech tools and innovate public policies and educational efforts to respond to the risks, address the harms, and ultimately to realize the rewards of this fast-moving digital space.

And then to pass the torch to the next generation.

Stephen Balkam
CEO, Family Online Safety Institute

ONLINE SAFETY ACROSS THE GENERATIONS
AT A GLANCE

57% of parents think technology has improved communication among their family members

56% of parents wish they had more control over the content on their child's devices

94% of parents say their older relative turns to them to help troubleshoot technology problems

66% African-American parents are the most likely to use technology together with their child

65% of online seniors say that identity theft of their personal information is a major reason they do not do more online than they do currently
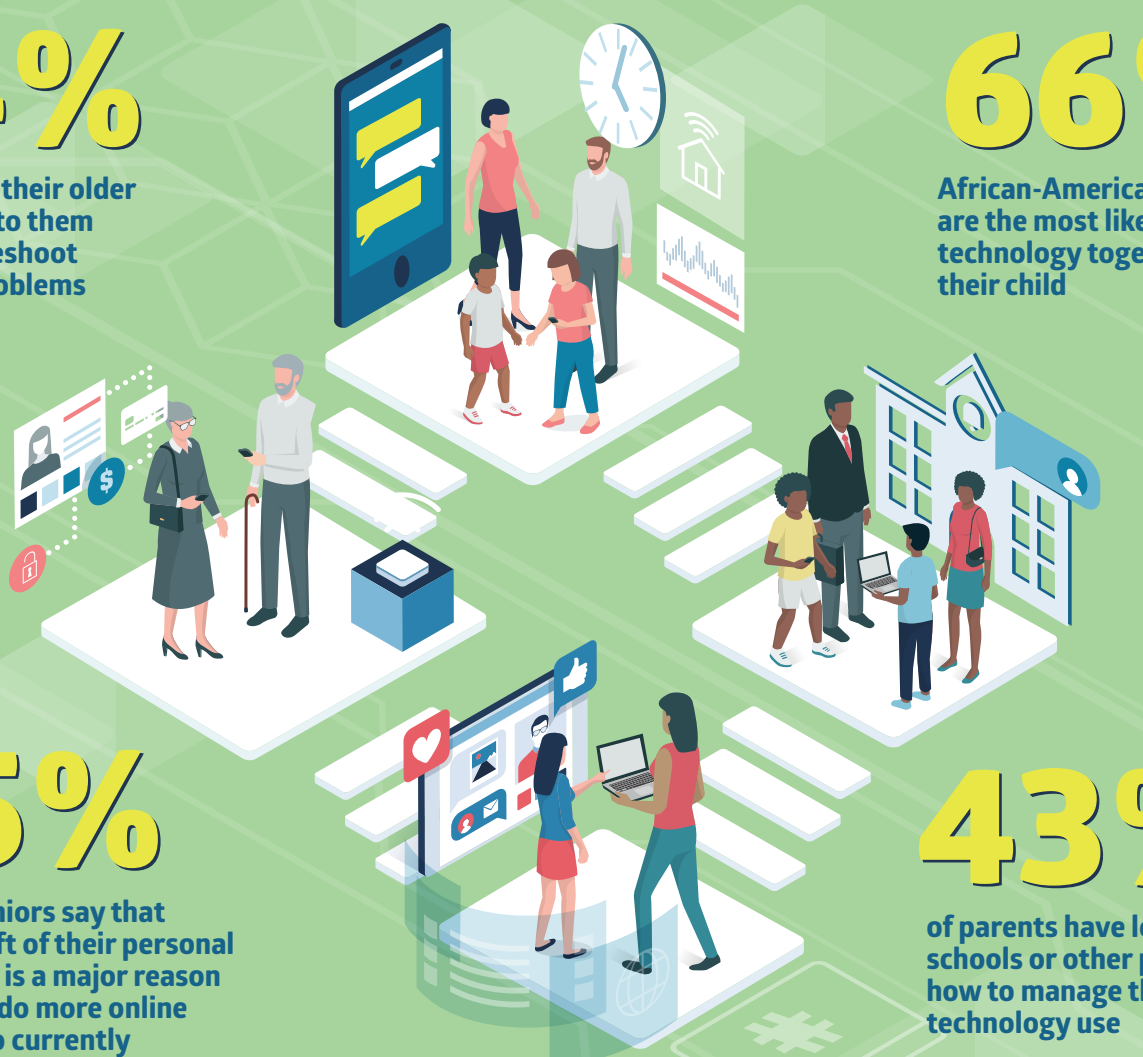
43% of parents have looked to schools or other parents on how to manage their child's technology use

38% of parents say they have had their child help their older relative who needed technological assistance

80% of seniors report that they go online and use the Internet

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Technology has the power to bring families together across generations.

As Internet use among Americans of all ages increasingly becomes second nature, there has been an intergenerational conversation within the family – between parents and their children, and among seniors and their adult children and grandchildren – about online safety. Today's parents are the first generation to be confronted with technology use by their parents and elderly relatives, as well as their children, and are in uncharted territory.

This study confirms families' significant participation in the growing ecosystem of online services, and their role on the frontlines of navigating various online threats, and managing the use of tools and technologies to protect their safety and security online. This report offers new insights into the impact of technology on families and fills in some of the informational gaps about the benefits and challenges of being online.

To get a more complete picture of how Americans are faring across the digital landscape, this report consists of two surveys: a survey of senior citizens and a survey of parents. The surveys oversampled the African American, Hispanic, and low-income communities to better understand the unique challenges these groups and their children face, and the choices they make.

Seniors and parents realize the benefits of using the Internet and technology. Two in three online seniors say technology has had a positive effect on their lives. Many online seniors report they use social media and navigation apps, and shop online. Fewer use the Internet for health-related services or grocery delivery, but many express interest in doing so.

Parents of connected children are nearly twice as likely to feel technology and the Internet have made their job as a parent easier rather than harder. Technology and the Internet help with children's homework, and provide access to entertainment, information, and educational content. Parents report being online helps their children build technology skills, research information, foster career skills, life skills, and creativity, and enhances their performance in school.

But challenges remain. About seven in 10 online seniors are concerned about identity theft, computer viruses and malware, and hacking of financial accounts. Across most other online safety concerns explored in the survey, African-American and Hispanic seniors are more likely than whites to worry about them. Most of the 20% of seniors who do not use the Internet report they have little interest in being online.

Parents are concerned about keeping their connected children safe online, noting they find it challenging to monitor their child's use of technology, access to inappropriate content, who their child is engaging with, and total screen time. Social media use in particular worries parents; by a sizable margin, parents think the potential harms of their child having a social media account outweigh the potential benefits. While a majority of parents rate themselves as highly confident in their ability to keep track of and manage their child's use of technology, this confidence diminishes as both parents and children become older.

Most digital families proactively protect themselves. More than nine in 10 seniors take at least one step to protect personal information online and nearly half take two or more steps, such as using strong passwords, using unique passwords for each of their accounts, and installing anti-virus software. Nearly two thirds of parents report using at least one parental control tool, and interest in parental controls is high among those who do not already use them. In addition, the majority of parents have faith that their child fully appreciates the need to be safe and guard personal information online, and understands that things said or posted online are never truly deleted.

Technology has the power to bring families together across generations. Despite the challenges, the majority of parents think technology has improved communication among their family members. Nearly eight in ten parents with living parents or elderly relatives say these relatives use text messaging, e-mail, or social media to communicate with them. And, importantly, both parents and seniors are talking to their children and grandchildren about the importance of being safe online.

Methodology

In August and September 2018, Hart Research Associates conducted qualitative and quantitative research among parents and seniors on behalf of the Family Online Safety Institute.

Seniors:

On August 21, 2018, a focus group was convened in Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania, among seniors age 62 to 79 who use the Internet.

From September 24 to 30, 2018, a telephone survey was conducted among 701 Americans age 62 and older. This included oversamples of African-American seniors (for a total of 151); Hispanic seniors (total of 144); and seniors whose household income, coupled with the number of people in their household, places them at or below 185% of the federal poverty level (total of 322, referred to in this report as "low-income" seniors). The margins of error are ±3.7 percentage points for the full sample, ±4.3 percentage points for seniors who access the Internet at least a few times a year, and ±7.2 percentage points for seniors who never access the Internet.

Parents:

On August 21, 2018, a focus group of parents of children age 8 to 12 who use the Internet was convened in Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania.

From September 18 to 26, 2018, an online survey was conducted among a total of 673 parents of connected children age 2 to 17. This included oversamples of African-American parents (for a total of 151); Hispanic parents (total of 149); and parents whose household income, coupled with the number of people in their household, places them at or below 185% of the federal poverty level (total of 244, referred to in this report as "low-income" parents). To qualify for the survey respondents had to say that their children use the Internet at least occasionally and have access to at least one connected device. To simplify survey administration, parents of multiple children in the age bracket were asked to answer questions about their child who had the most recent birthday. The credibility interval is ±3.8 percentage points for the full sample, and is higher for subgroups of the sample.

Overview of Findings among Seniors and Parents

Overview of Results among Seniors

- Eighty percent (80%) of seniors report that they go online and use the Internet; 20% of seniors do not. Those who are not online are, on average, appreciably older, less white, less educated, and lower-income than those who are online.

- **Seniors who are online** use the Internet avidly, averaging 18.2 hours per week online. A majority (56%) have been online for at least 10 years.

- Two in three online seniors say technology has had a positive effect on their lives; just 4% say the effect has been negative. They are more mixed when it comes to society in general: 34% say the positives of technology outweigh the negatives, 24% say the reverse, and 34% say the positives and negatives are about equal.

- Online seniors report engaging in many activities online, including using social media, using navigation apps, and shopping online, among others. Fewer use the Internet for health-related services or grocery delivery, but many express interest in doing so.

- To the degree online seniors harbor concerns about being online, hacking, identity theft, and financial theft top their list of concerns, with about seven in 10 saying they worry about these things. Indeed, concern about compromising of personal information is the largest obstacle seniors cite to doing more online. Worry about these and a larger range of issues is notably higher among African-American and Hispanic seniors.

Fewer online seniors use the Internet for health-related services or grocery delivery, but many express interest in doing so.

More than nine in 10 online seniors take at least one step to protect personal information online and 46% take two or more steps.

- At the same time, more than nine in 10 online seniors take at least one step to protect personal information online and 46% take two or more steps. The most popular actions seniors take in this regard are using strong passwords, using different passwords for different accounts, and installing anti-virus software.

- Despite these efforts, just 58% of online seniors say they are confident they are taking appropriate steps to keep their personal and financial information secure when using the Internet; though, confidence increases among those who go online on a daily basis.

- When seeking help on technology-related matters, seniors—especially those who have less online experience—are more likely to have reached out to family members, particularly their adult children, than any other source.

- **Seniors who are NOT online** express little interest in the Internet—just 22% of this group has at some point considered getting online, and fewer than 20% express any interest in online activities and services such as navigation apps, video calls, online banking, or online health services.

- Moreover, these seniors express substantial concern about the online world. They say that people who are online should worry about identity theft, financial theft, and being tricked into giving up personal information above all else, but majorities also express concern about computer viruses, companies tracking purchasing behavior, and encountering offensive content online.

- Their lack of interest in the Internet and concerns about identity theft are each major obstacles to offline seniors getting online—68% say their preference for doing things in person or over the phone rather than online is a "major reason" they are not online; and 62% mention identity theft as a major reason. Cost—of either devices or Internet service—is cited much less often as a reason for not being online, even among seniors with lower incomes.

- Fewer than half (47%) of offline seniors say that a family member has encouraged them to get online. Men and more highly educated seniors are more likely to report that a family member has made this recommendation to them.

- **Regardless of their online status,** many seniors have encouraged young family members to be safe online. Just over half (53%) of all seniors say they have had this conversation with their children, grandchildren, or other younger family members; 56% of seniors who are online have done so, as have 41% of those who are not online.

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Overview of Results among Parents

- Parents of connected children are nearly twice as likely to feel that technology and the Internet have made their job as a parent easier (53%) rather than harder (28%), though attitudes become less positive as they and their children get older.

- Parents think that their child's use of technology has had a positive impact on many areas of their child's life—most notably their child's technology skills (+77 more positive than negative), ability to research information (+71), future, career, and life skills (+50), creativity (+38), and performance in school (+35).

- They are less sanguine about the impact technology has had in other areas of their child's life, with more parents who feel that the impact of technology has been more negative than positive when it comes to their child's level of physical activity and fitness (-33); their child's attention span (-12); and their child's ability to engage with people in person (-5).

- Parents are slightly more likely to think the potential benefits of their child having a smartphone outweigh the potential harms (36% benefits outweigh, 31% harms outweigh), but by a sizable margin they think the potential harms of their child having a social media account outweigh the potential benefits (20% benefits outweigh; 52% harms outweigh). In both cases, parents of teens are the most positive.

- A 55% majority of parents rate themselves as highly confident in their ability to keep track of and manage their child's use of technology; but this leaves 45% who are less confident. Parents' confidence diminishes as both they and their children become older.

- Majorities of parents have faith that their child fully understands and appreciates the need to be safe and guard his or her personal information online (59%) and that the things he or she says and does online do not necessarily disappear when deleted (57%). However, this still leaves more than two in five parents who do not think their child fully understands these things.

- Online content (64%) trumps time spent online (32%) as a concern for parents about their children's online and technology use, but many parents wish they had more control in each of these areas (56% wish they had more control over content; 42% wish they had more control over time). Only one in three parents are satisfied with the amount of control they have in both of these areas, which leaves two-thirds of parents who wish they had more control over one or both of them.

- To keep their connected children safe online, 91% of parents set household rules, 63% report using at least one of a variety of parental control tools, and 64% frequently discuss online safety with their child.

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- The most common rules parents set include what sites their child can access (81%), the time of day he or she can use technology (77%), what online accounts he or she can have (75%), and the amount of time he or she can spend on technology (73%).

- The parental controls that parents are most likely to have used include those that limit the types of websites the child can visit on a mobile device (40%), from a home computer (37%), or from a video game console (34%), as well as approval of in-app purchases (35%).

- Parents look to schools, other parents, and friends as information sources for how to manage their child's technology use.

- More than three in five (63%) parents say they have used information from various sources to learn how to manage their child's technology use and keep them safe online, relying most on their child's school (27%), other parents (27%), and social media posts from friends (24%).

- Parents say their children most commonly have gotten information from their school (45%) to learn how to be safe online.

- Parents see themselves, along with their children's friends, as one of the biggest influences on their child's technology use, and they give themselves high marks as positive technology role models (82% rate themselves as "A" or "B" grade).

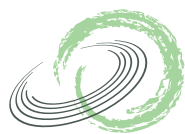- Technology has the power to bring families together across generations.

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- Nearly eight in ten parents (78%) who have living parents or elderly relatives say that their parents or elderly relatives use technology such as text messaging, e-mail, or social media to communicate with them, and many (44%) would like them to use technology and the Internet more than they currently do.

- Notable proportions say that they and their parents or elderly relatives draw on a variety of technologies to communicate with their child/grandchildren, including via text, Facetime or Skype, social media, and e-mail.

- Nearly all parents with a living parent or elderly relative indicate that their elderly relatives always or often turn to them for help understanding how to use technology or to troubleshoot problems always or often, and nearly two in five parents (38%) say they have had their children help an elderly relative who needed assistance with technology.

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