

Youth Culture Window

What Happens to Right and Wrong Online?

A Look at the "Virtual" Morals of Teens

An article from David R. Smith at TheSource4YM.com

What's the difference between "cheating on a test" in an actual classroom and "emailing test answers to friends" over the Internet? They're both unethical, right? So why is it that some teenagers are willing to do one, but not the other?

Does "Right or Wrong" Matter Online?

Researchers at Michigan State University wanted to know if young people held the same moral standards online as they do offline. So, in ongoing studies they asked hundreds of 12-year-olds to classify certain *virtual* actions as "right" or "wrong" and then they asked them to classify similar *real world* actions as "right" or "wrong."

The tweens were asked about the acceptability of online practices such as "spreading computer viruses," "viewing pornography," and "sending sexually explicit messages to strangers." The real world actions they were asked about included "bullying or teasing," "lying to parents or teachers," and "using racial slurs."

What they discovered was a bit unsettling. Students' online values didn't always match their real world values. For example, when the students were asked if they would accept answers to a test (in the real world), most said "no." However, many in the same group eagerly sought out answers to a test that was posted online.

So what influences the 'disconnect' in their minds between "real world" *right & wrong* and "virtual world" *right & wrong*?

Doing Time Leads to Crime?

Researchers identified one of the contributing factors to be the amount of time young people spent online. Students who spent large amounts of time online were also the same ones who were most likely to engage in immoral behavior.

It seems the more teenagers surf, the more likely they are to have a moral wipeout.

So, how much time do young people spend online?

Well, it depends on who you ask. Back in 2003, Yahoo conducted a study where they found young people ages 13-24 spent an average of 16.7 hours online weekly (excluding email). Fast forward to 2008 when the Rochester Institute of Technology conducted a study and found 10-12th graders spending an average of 21 hours per week doing online activities (RIT Survey of Internet and At-Risk Behaviors, page 31). Last month yet another reports surfaced, this one from the UK's *CyberSentinel*, claiming that teenagers spend an average of 31 hours online each week. *(These numbers seem to dwarf earlier studies we've written about).*

Though these reports may not agree on exactly how many hours teens spend online, these studies all point to the risky behaviors that students engage in when they log onto the Internet. Here's a few:

- pirating music, movies, and software

- viewing pornography

- posting/sending risqué photos/videos of themselves
- cyberbullying
- sending unwanted sexual messages to others
- academic dishonesty (including plagiarism)

And most of these reports agree that parents are not as aware as they think they are about what their kids are doing on the web.

So much for thinking teens used their online time to prepare for the SAT or monitor the stock market....

If it's true that the more time teens spend online the more likely they are to be immoral, we face a big problem, because teenagers practically live on the Internet.

Reclaiming “Virtual Morals” that are Virtually Non-existent

Helping teenagers maintain their morals these days has become an increasingly difficult challenge. Parents and youth workers must help teenagers navigate two worlds, an offline one...*and an online one*. If they tag team the problem, parents and youth workers can take several actions to help teenagers maintain their morality online.

1. **We must get an accurate perspective on kids' online habits.** Ultimately, each family will have to decide what an appropriate amount of time spent online is, but 31 hours is more than a part-time job. Heck, it's almost as much time as teenagers spend sitting in a classroom! But, perspective cannot be limited to merely understanding how much *time* our teens spend online; we must also seek to understand what they *do* when they go online. (Check out this [article](#) for an in-depth look at the online actions of teenagers.)
2. **We should expect online morality... and model it ourselves.** As adults, we set rules in place for our kids' lives in the real world; we need to do the same for them in the online world, as well. One discussion on "how-to-use-the-Internet" probably won't get the job done; we must be committed to having ongoing conversations about it. Keep in mind that it's more important to be practical than legalistic in implementing ways to help teens maintain online morals. And of course, it always helps if we remain consistent with the expectations we set for them!
3. **We must teach our kids how important it is for their ENTIRE lives to be moral.** It's so easy for teenagers to compartmentalize their lives and simply turn off any expectation of values when they venture online. They don't see their online lives as "real life," even though there are [real world ramifications](#) for immoral "cyber-behavior." In teaching teenagers about online behavior, it may help if we revert to more old-fashioned terminology. Why don't we just say "stealing" instead of "bootlegging" or "burning?" And isn't "cyberbullying" just an electronic version of the "slander, gossip, or malice" that's mentioned in the Bible? Teenagers need to understand that Jesus' lordship extends to our online lives, as well. Here's a

great resource to help your teenagers learn how to remain virtuous in a virtual environment.

We all want our teenagers to exemplify godly morals in their lives. With the Internet consuming such a large portion of their life, we must place a huge priority on the development of strategies to positively impact this facet of teens' lives. It will be time well invested.