



HOLD FOR RELEASE
May 16, 2000

CONTACT: Lorie Slass
202-879-6701

Free Gift Could Entice Children Into Revealing Personal Family Information Online

Boys More Likely Than Girls, & Older Kids More Likely than Younger Kids To Say it is OK to Divulge Information

(Washington, DC) While parents are struggling to reconcile their fear that the internet could harm their kids with the feeling that their kids need the Web for its educational value, a new study from the Annenberg Public Policy Center reveals that many kids say it is OK to reveal sensitive family information on the Web when enticed with the offer of a free gift.

According to *The Internet and The Family 2000*, the majority of parents who have home web access look favorably upon the internet – 89 percent believe access to the internet helps children with their schoolwork and 85 percent believe children discover fascinating, useful things they have never heard of before on the internet. But parents still have fears about their children's use of the internet – almost three out of four parents (74 percent) are concerned their children give out personal information on the net.

The study found that parents and kids agree that teenagers should have to get their parent's permission before giving out information online (96 percent of parents and 79 percent of kids).

“While children seem to share their parent's concern about online privacy, many kids are nevertheless willing to give out sensitive information with the enticement of a free gift,” said Joseph Turow, Robert Lewis Shayon Professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication and author of the report. “Kids' release of information to the Web is could well become a new arena for family discord.”

Across all types of private information studied, kids are more likely than parents to say it is OK to give out sensitive information. In addition, older kids (13-17) are more likely than younger kids (10-12), and boys are more likely than girls, to say it is OK to give out sensitive family information in exchange for a free gift (see Appendix 1).

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In exchange for a free gift:

- Almost two out of three kids (65 percent) are willing to give out the name of their favorite stores.
- Over half (54 percent) of kids are willing to give out the names of their parents' favorite stores.
- Forty-four percent of kids are willing to give out the type of car the family drives.
- More than one in three (39 percent) kids are willing to give out the amount of their allowance, whether their parents talk a lot about politics and what they do on the weekend.
- More than one in four (26 percent) kids are willing to give out what their parents' do on the weekends.

“Simple discussions between parents and children won't cut it when it comes to kid's revealing private information on the web,” added Turow. “Parents need to better understand the web's ability to track information and kids need to be engaged in serious discussions with their parents about privacy and sharing information.”

According to the study, fully 69 percent of parents say they have talked to their kids about these issues and 66 percent of kids say they have had discussions with their parents. But when pairs of parents and kids in the same family were interviewed, most didn't agree on whether these sorts of discussions had ever taken place.

Other key findings from the study:

- Forty-one percent of parents and 36 percent of youngsters report experiencing tensions at home over kids' release of information to the Web.
- Forty-six percent of parents are not aware that Web sites gather information on users without their knowing it.
- Three in five parents (61 percent) say they are more concerned about 13 to 17-year olds than they are about younger children revealing sensitive information to marketers.
- While 16 percent of 10-12 year olds admit to having given information about themselves to a website, older kids (13-17 year olds) are much more likely to do so (39 percent).

Turow recommends that web sites aimed at tweens (10-12 year olds) and teens be prohibited from offering free gifts, including prizes through sweepstakes, if those gifts are tied in direct or indirect ways to the youngsters' disclosure of information.

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“For marketers, information about teens is an increasingly valuable commodity,” said Turow. “We must create a system that protect youngsters’ privacy interests while at the same time enables them to enjoy the full benefits of the Web.”

The report recommends the following:

- Parents and their children should talk in detail about how to approach requests by Web sites for personal and family data. Parents should not take for granted that traditional cautions such as “don’t give out your name” or “don’t talk to strangers” will be enough for the Web. Family members need to understand how all sorts of information about their interests can be tracked through cookies and related software without their even knowing it.
- Many parents cannot develop norms about family privacy alone. Parents simply do not know enough about the Web to be aware of the way Web sites gather information and what to do about it. Community groups, libraries, schools, and state and Federal agencies should work together on campaigns aimed at making information privacy a hot family topic and bringing community members together to learn about it.
- Encouraging family Web surfing, and family discussions about Web surfing, ought to be a priority of government and nonprofit organizations that care about enriching Americans’ Internet experiences.
- Virtually all parents surveyed believe that they should have a legal right to the information that Web sites know about them. One proposal would be for a ‘A Web Freedom of Information Act’ that allows every person access to all data, including clickstream data, that a Web site connects to his or her individual computer or name. Whether parents should have the right to access their youngsters’ data should be a matter of public discussion.

A national research firm surveyed 1001 parents of children 8-17 with home Internet connections during January and February 2000. Three hundred and four 10-17 year old children were also interviewed. Ironically, unlike online marketers, academic researchers for this study had to get parents’ permission to interview the teens included in the study. The full report is available on the Annenberg Public Policy website (appcpenn.org).

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The Annenberg Public Policy Center was established by publisher and philanthropist Walter Annenberg in 1994 to create a community of scholars within the University of Pennsylvania that would examine the role of communications in public policy issues at the local, state and federal levels. The Center has four ongoing research foci: Information and Society; Media and the Developing Mind; Media and the Dialogue of Democracy; Health Communications. Each year, as well, a special area of scholarly interest is addressed. The Annenberg Public Policy Center supports research and sponsors lectures and conferences in these areas.

Appendix 1

Percentage Of Youngsters Saying It Is “Ok” Or “Completely Ok” For A Teenager To Give Out Information For A “Great Free Gift”

	TOTAL	GENDER		AGE		TOTAL
	KIDS	Girls	Boys	10-12	13-17	PARENTS
	(N = 304)	(n = 158)	(n = 145)	(n=101)	(n=203)	(N=1001)
Give out names of his or her favorite stores	65	60	71	51	72	45
Give out the names of his or her parent's favorite stores	54	48	58	43	59	33
Give out what types of cars the family owns	44	37	53	37	48	22
Give out how much allowance he or she gets	39	33	46	27	45	17
Give out whether his or her parents talk a lot about politics	39	33	45	17	49	26
Give out what he or she does on the weekends	39	35	43	29	44	18
Give out how many days of school he or she missed in the past year	35	29	41	30	37	18
Give out how many times his or her parents have gone to a place of worship in the past month	30	26	34	21	34	25
Give out what his or her parents do on the weekends	26	23	30	18	31	10
Give out whether he or she has skin problems	24	23	26	11	31	24
Give out whether his or her parents speed when they drive	24	23	26	11	31	14
Give out whether the family drinks wine or beer with dinner	23	22	25	16	27	16
Give out whether he or she cheated in school during the past year	22	20	24	12	27	16
Give out how many days of work his or her parent missed in the past year	21	19	23	17	23	10
Give out whether his or her parents have skin problems	19	23	25	11	31	15