



## For teens, a friend online is usually a friend offline, too

By Sharon Jayson, USA TODAY

New research about online and offline friends shows that most teens use the Internet to interact with people they already know rather than strangers who might turn out to be predators.

The 2008 study by University of California researchers asked 251 teens about their face-to-face friends and those they communicate with via social networking and instant messaging. The study will be presented at a meeting of the Society of Research in Child Development, which begins today in Denver. Results of a similar study of college students were published last year in the *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*.

Both in-person questionnaires and online surveys were conducted among students in grades 9-12. They included asking them to list the top 10 people they interact with face-to-face, through social networking sites and through instant messages.

For 44%, using social networking sites such as MySpace or Facebook had no effect on their relationship with their friends; 43% said it made them closer.

A subset of the adolescents — 126 — also answered online surveys. Of these, only 5% said they had friends known only from the Internet.

Most teens in the study weren't looking to meet people but rather used the Internet to stay in touch with existing friends and make plans, says Stephanie Reich, assistant professor of education at the University of California-Irvine.

"It's possible to have face-to-face friends and go online and talk to people you don't hang out with in school," she says. "It's a chance to have relationships in a different way."

Ongoing studies show that being on a social networking site doesn't create risk for sexual victimization, says David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire-Durham. On Tuesday, the center released a study that found no evidence online predators were stalking or abducting victims based on information posted on social networking sites.

"One of the predominant scenarios typically portrayed by people concerned about social networking sites is that when kids are on the sites, it makes it possible for offenders to harvest their personal information and begin to stalk them," he says.

Finkelhor agrees that most young people don't seek out interaction with strangers.

"If you talk to any young people about why they have social networking sites, it's so they can keep up with friends and have friends keep up with them," he says.

Reich says she and her research colleagues in Los Angeles didn't test whether face-to-face friendships suffer because of the Internet.

It is a question, however, that has gotten lots of attention, says Nancy Baym, an associate professor of communication studies at the University of Kansas-Lawrence who began studying online relationships in 1991.

"There's been a fascination about new relationships and trying to pit what happens online against what happens face-to-face. It's never been the case that they are in opposition to one another. It always overlaps," she says. "If you track relationships over time, you can't tell the difference between a relationship that started online and one that began to face-to-face."