Global Kids, Inc.

The GoodPlay Project
at Harvard University's
Project Zero

Common Sense Media

Meeting of Minds:
Cross-Generational Dialogue on the Ethics of Digital Life

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At times it can feel like today's youth are adrift in a strange, new digital world.

Parents and educators offer what guidance they can, yet struggle to make sense of it all.

If adults wish to learn from youth's experiences and provide the guidance they need, cross-generational dialogue is critical.

Today's youth inhabit new digital social spaces foreign to most adults. These spaces offer unprecedented opportunities for connection, creativity, and community. At the same time they present challenges that are often either invisible to adults or exaggerated beyond reason.

It can be difficult for parents, educators, and other adults to talk about these challenges with young people, especially if they feel intimidated by youth who navigate sites like Facebook or master video games effortlessly.

This report aims to document what we learned through the Focus Dialogues, the first cross-generational online conversation on digital media and ethics. It will highlight how adults and youth think about ethical issues online through the use of direct quotes and information from the Dialogues and provide context around what we believe is the first step towards addressing issues relating to ethics in the digital age.

The Focus Dialogues, associated research and report produced by: Rafi Santo, Carrie James, Katie Davis, Shira Lee Katz, Linda Burch, and Barry Joseph.

Why Dialogue?

The Dialogues, held online in April 2009, were prompted by three organizations: Global Kids, Common Sense Media, and Harvard University's GoodPlay Project. The project was born out of a sense of curiosity and experimentation. Can youth and adults have open and honest conversation in an online setting? What are the perceptions and tensions across generations when it comes to how we act on the Internet? Is it possible to reach common ground when it comes to digital ethics?

The organizations brought over 250 parents, teachers, and teens together for a three-week online conversation. Every day, participants responded to scenarios and questions presented, and shared thoughts and situations from their own lives. Posting over 2,500 messages over the course of the Dialogues, participants shared a wealth of perspectives. The findings summarized here are being disseminated in hopes that they might inform research, curricular development, and parenting in a space so often hard to navigate.

Media scholar Henry Jenkins is known to say, "Kids don't need us watching over their shoulders; they need us to have their backs." This report is shared in that spirit, as one more resource supporting parents and educators in their roles as caring adults in the lives of young people trying to navigate a new digital world.

What's the Disconnect?

In the Focus Dialogues, we found certain patterns of thinking about online life that prevail among digitally engaged youth, and these patterns are different from those displayed by adults. The dialogues suggest that:

- Teens are most likely to engage in individualistic and consequence thinking (concern for the self, and for consequences to the self of different courses of action online) across a range of topics (e.g., sharing information online, illegal downloading, cyberbullying, etc.).
- Teens are somewhat likely to engage in moral thinking (concern for others one knows offline or with whom one interacts online).
- Teens are least likely to engage in ethical thinking (thinking in abstract, disinterested terms about the effects of one's actions on the online community at large), though the dialogues did see some incredibly nuanced thinking in this area.

Other research, such as The GoodPlay Project's study of digital youth and national surveys conducted by Common Sense Media, suggests the existence of these patterns as well.

Overall, adults exhibited strong and consistent patterns of moral and ethical thinking about digital dilemmas. These age-related findings may not be surprising, but they clarify that adults need to help youth think about online life in moral and ethical ways – and to act as moral and ethical digital citizens. As youth participate more and more, and at younger ages, in networked publics, their ability to grasp the moral and ethical potentials of their participation is critical – for their own futures, for that of their friends and peers, and for the communities in which they are citizens.

The Focus Dialogues revealed that both youth and adults are willing to engage in reflection and dialogue about moral and ethical issues that are raised in online spaces. We believe that projects like this one highlight a key first step in providing youth with experiences that scaffold self-critical, moral, and ethical ways of thinking about their online behavior. More broadly, we hope that the Dialogues highlight the importance of genuine exchange across age groups about ethics in the digital age, a process critical to fostering a generation of digital citizens.

ADULT VOICE

"One should conduct themselves in the same way – with respect and kindness – in the online world as they do in the face-to-face world. I think the online world has enriched my life because it allows me additional access to information and people I wouldn't normally have! To some extent, it is my responsibility to consider that information and those viewpoints as I live life on a daily basis, and teach as well."

TEEN VOICE

"I think the online world is one of the most important inventions of man. It has helped people on many different levels of life. But also there are cons. People are preyed upon if they don't know what they are doing. There is the yin, and there is the yang."

Ethics in the Digital Age

The online world is no less a social space than a playground or classroom. All of the potential messiness of social interaction that exists offline emerges online as well, with the addition of new and possibly distinct ethical challenges.

In an effort to understand these new challenges, Harvard University's GoodPlay Project has engaged in research to uncover ethical issues online. They have outlined five areas of interest:

Identity

The ways people handle and perceive self-expression and identity exploration online.

Privacy

How, where and with whom we share personal information online.

Credibility

How we establish trustworthiness of both people and information online, and establish our own personal credibility.

Authorship and Ownership

The ways we perceive intellectual property and practices such as downloading/remixing content.

Participation

The meaning of responsible conduct and citizenship in online communities.

These five themes shaped the Focus Dialogues. In the pages that follow, we'll more fully introduce these ideas and the perspectives that youth and adults expressed about them.

TEEN VOICE

"People are different online because they want to be. Why continue to be yourself when you can turn yourself into somebody you would rather be? It's like how everybody always chooses the prettiest or best picture of themselves to put as their profile pic. We don't have to be ourselves online; we have the freedom to be who we want others to believe we are."

ADULT VOICE

"I think it's important that people be themselves all the time, everywhere. It doesn't benefit anyone to try to be something or someone you are not."

Identity

Key Questions:

How do youth and adults think about online identity and self-expression?

When is it OK, or even helpful, to present one's identity in a way that isn't entirely consistent with one's offline identity? When does it cross a line?

During adolescence, identity experimentation is an important part of development. Just as they try new hairstyles and clothing, youth naturally play out this process online through blogs, videos, games, and virtual worlds where they can emphasize certain parts of their personality, or even try on completely new ones.

Online spaces are useful for this sort of exploration, providing new tools for identity play, self-reflection, and feedback. But youth can also cross a line if they deceive or otherwise harm others through their online self-expressions.

In the Dialogues, we asked what the participants saw as acceptable, and what they viewed as the risks and benefits of this experimentation and exploration.

Different takes: Identity

The Dialogues highlighted some common ground in the area of online identity, with both youth and adults mentioning many of the opportunities and pitfalls associated with this area. The idea of testing out an ideal self was recognized as being useful, but both adults and teens saw real risks in terms of not being true to oneself or becoming disconnected from one's offline self.

Youth and adults were asked to respond to a scenario about a friend who presents herself in one way on Facebook, and quite differently on MySpace. Some teens were opposed to this kind of identity experimentation, feeling like it was dishonest or "fake."

Overall, though, youth tended to emphasize the social motivations (e.g., to be cool, to fit in) for presenting oneself differently. More than anything else, they asserted the personal benefits of online spaces where they could "try out" different ways of being.

When the negative potentials of online self-exploration were discussed by youth, the typical focus was on consequences to the individual self, such as hurting oneself by forming inauthentic relationships and becoming disconnected from your "true" (offline) self. Fewer youth expressed concern about others feeling deceived or harmed in the process, which is quite telling about the ways in which youth are relating to these issues.

Privacy

Key Questions:

How do youth and adults think about their own and others' privacy online?

How much personal information is reasonable to share online?

Privacy has historically been strongly valued in the United States, but online engagement is causing a rapid shift in the meaning of what's public and what's not. Young people hold different notions of privacy than adults do, and are more comfortable sharing their lives online.

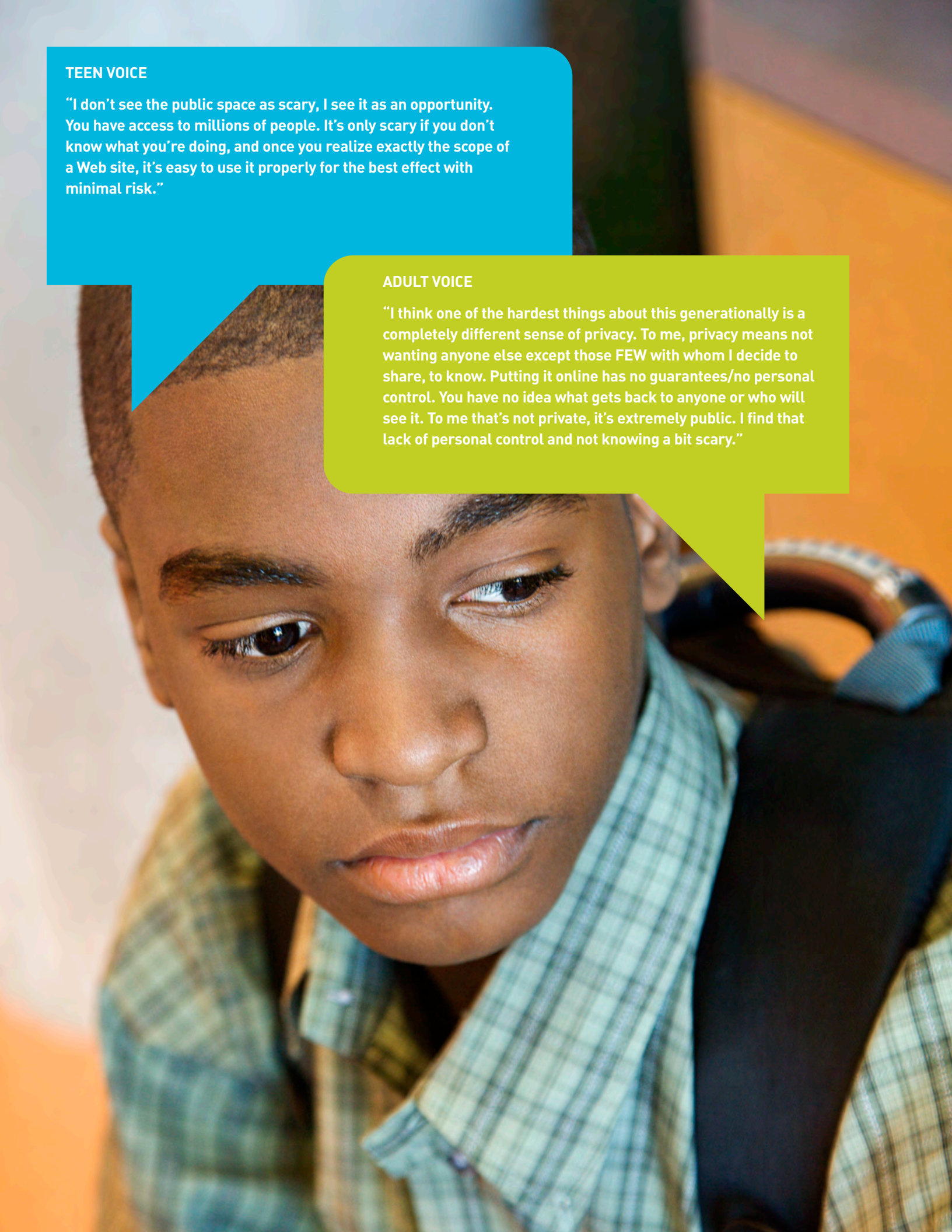
The ease of online sharing can provide outlets of support and connection, but youth, and even adults, can easily fail to understand that online information is often searchable, can be viewed by unintended audiences, and is not easily deleted.

Different takes: Privacy

In the Focus Dialogues, teens discussed the benefits of sharing things about themselves online, like opportunities for self-expression, getting things off of their chests, and connecting with friends in ways they can't offline. The adults, not surprisingly, voiced more concerns about information shared online reaching unintended audiences.

When asked about the acceptability of youth being "friends" with parents and teachers on social networks, adults were more likely than youth to be in favor of this practice. Youth were more concerned about their privacy from these adults, which suggests that youth see benefits in sharing information online, but among peers rather than with adults in their lives.

Importantly, most youth talked about the benefits of sharing in relation to themselves, but very few touched on the risks and potential harms of sharing information about others. Youth generally view privacy as an individual, rather than collective, responsibility.



TEEN VOICE

"I don't see the public space as scary, I see it as an opportunity. You have access to millions of people. It's only scary if you don't know what you're doing, and once you realize exactly the scope of a Web site, it's easy to use it properly for the best effect with minimal risk."

ADULT VOICE

"I think one of the hardest things about this generationally is a completely different sense of privacy. To me, privacy means not wanting anyone else except those FEW with whom I decide to share, to know. Putting it online has no guarantees/no personal control. You have no idea what gets back to anyone or who will see it. To me that's not private, it's extremely public. I find that lack of personal control and not knowing a bit scary."

ADULT VOICE

"I would not let my son meet someone they had met online without some strict guidelines. While the situation could be harmless it has the potential to be very risky. Going with friends is a good idea or meeting at a public place, but I would never let him get together with someone by himself."

TEEN VOICE

"It is true that being online you have a certain sense of anonymity, but it is kind of a paranoid attitude to think that because of that everyone is or could be bad people."

Credibility

Key Questions:

How do youth assess the credibility of online individuals and information?

How do youth establish their own credibility in these spaces?

Online, teens constantly confront not only questions of which Web sites to trust, but also of whom to trust and how to show their own trustworthiness.

In online spaces, definitions of credibility – who is an expert, the integrity of information – may be different from in offline environments where traditional credentials often signal a credible, trustworthy source.

Online communities offer low barriers to entry for anyone to have a voice and share their knowledge. At the same time, this openness can easily be abused; youth and others can misrepresent themselves and risk harming others. It is important for youth to think critically about information sources, but also about whether they can trust individuals with whom they interact online and how they can convey their own credibility.

Different takes: Credibility

Reflecting the broader public discourse around Wikipedia, the site was much discussed in the Focus Dialogues, with adults and teens displaying similar ways of thinking about it. Almost all knew how Wikipedia functioned as an editable encyclopedia and saw it as an effective starting point for research and reliable for basic information, but not an end point for things like school assignments. A couple of teens mentioned the importance of being careful when using less popular articles. One adult, a stated Wikipedia administrator herself, saw the site as an important cultural development that promoted informational literacy and skepticism of any single source.

Views were somewhat more divergent on the issue of personal credibility. In response to a scenario about a teen who plans to meet an older teen that he became friendly with on the online game World of Warcraft, more teens displayed extreme views than adults. These teens either believed that there were no circumstances where it would be OK to meet the person, or thought the meeting was fine without any conditions at all. Other teens agreed with the majority of the adults and thought that conditions like making sure friends or parents were present, or meeting in a public place were necessary preconditions for the meeting.

Authorship and Ownership

Key Questions:

How do youth relate to the idea of intellectual property and to the practice of illegal downloading?

How does engaging in media creation and knowledge sharing change youth's relationship to the idea of intellectual property?

Since downloading and media creation are norms in the digital age, young people have more opportunities to grapple with issues relating to intellectual property than past generations have, and these issues are growing more complex and ubiquitous as time goes on.

Conceptions of what constitutes creative appropriation as opposed to theft of ideas and content are dramatically different depending who you talk to. Yet while teens are engaged in these issues, they rarely talk with anyone about them.

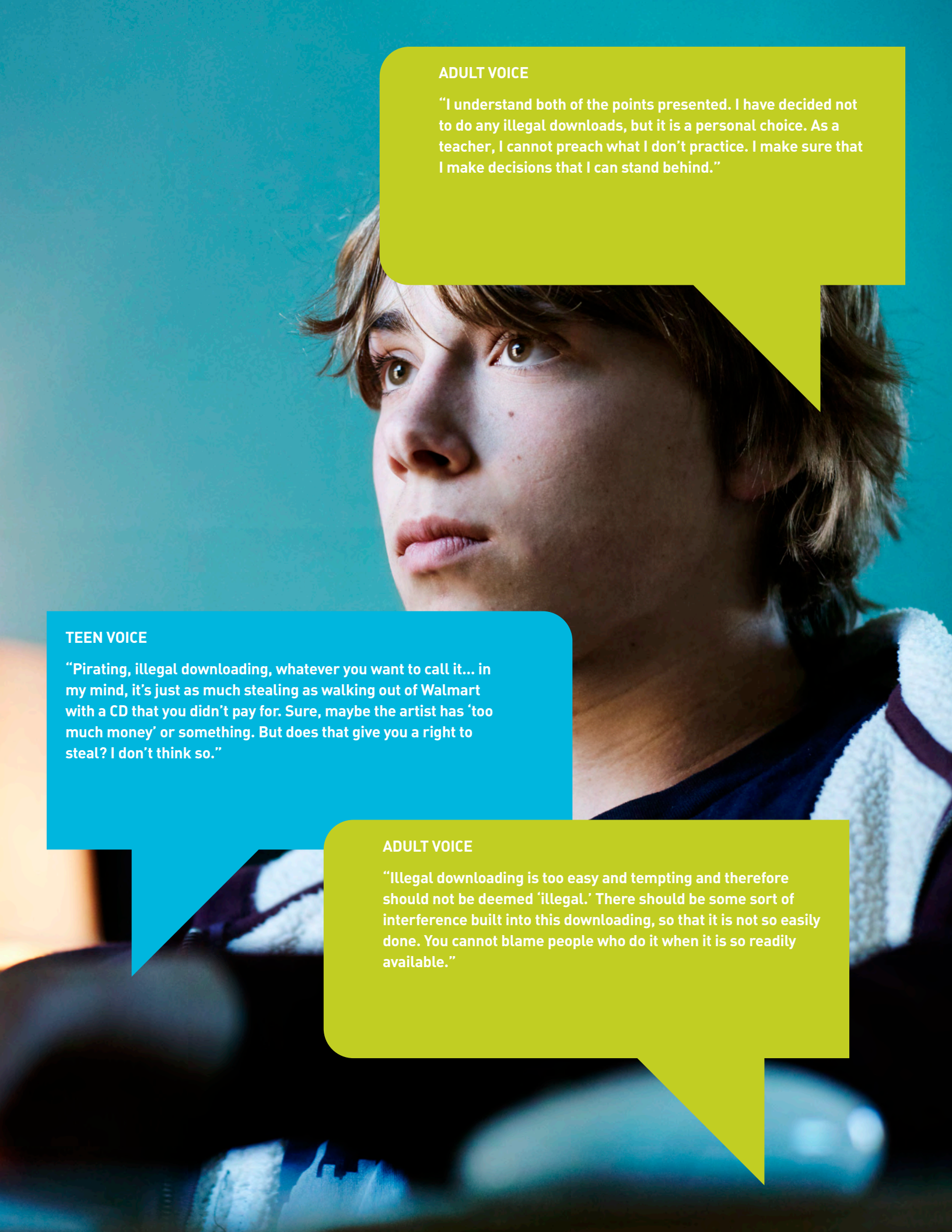
Different takes: Authorship and Ownership

When it came to the hot issue of illegal downloading, adults in the Focus Dialogues were overall against the practice, though some did express conflict. Teens came out in favor, giving reasons of ease and lack of money, though some recognized that illegally downloading music harms artists.

TEEN VOICE

"I grew up having any song or movie at my fingertips by just downloading it illegally. As a teen I don't have much money to spend on music and movies. Usually though I download things that I had never intended on buying. I don't understand why people are so uptight about it."

Participants were also asked to discuss the meaning of creativity in the digital age. With respect to remixing or appropriating other people's creative works, teens were highly conscious of the need to give credit to original creators. However, this awareness usually came from being worried about getting in trouble. While some adults noted the importance of attribution to original creators, none of them suggested fear of negative sanctions as the motivation. Both youth and adults acknowledged the benefits of new opportunities for creativity afforded by digital media, and a good number of youth explicitly mentioned the potential of digital media to democratize creativity.



ADULT VOICE

"I understand both of the points presented. I have decided not to do any illegal downloads, but it is a personal choice. As a teacher, I cannot preach what I don't practice. I make sure that I make decisions that I can stand behind."

TEEN VOICE

"Pirating, illegal downloading, whatever you want to call it... in my mind, it's just as much stealing as walking out of Walmart with a CD that you didn't pay for. Sure, maybe the artist has 'too much money' or something. But does that give you a right to steal? I don't think so."

ADULT VOICE

"Illegal downloading is too easy and tempting and therefore should not be deemed 'illegal.' There should be some sort of interference built into this downloading, so that it is not so easily done. You cannot blame people who do it when it is so readily available."

Participation

Key Questions:

What does it mean to be a responsible citizen of an online community and of the Internet in general?

How do youth and adults think about the civic potentials and limitations of digital media?

One of the biggest surprises to many about the digital world is that it is communal and participatory, as opposed to isolating and purely individualistic. The online world can bring people together in new ways, and we need to understand the implications of new kinds of participation.

Community responsibility has many of the same contours whether online or off. Notions of how others are treated, with respect or with disregard, are key to shaping the sensibilities that teens bring to their participation online.

In its darker manifestations, participation can mean bullying, harassment, or deception, and in its more virtuous forms can engender empowerment, mentorship, and camaraderie. It also has the potential to form the basis of new modes of civic engagement for which the online world offers unprecedented spaces. Teens can engage in diverse global communities that aim to address critical social problems from climate change to child slavery. Emerging notions of digital citizenship, at its highest ideal, may create a generation of youth with a larger sense of purpose and responsibility to the world.

Different takes: Participation

While we found many teens who thought deeply about their behavior towards others, many thought about participation as responsibility to only themselves, such as keeping themselves safe by not giving out personal information.

These attitudes were reflected in responses to two scenarios, one involving teens scamming others in an online game, and another where a teen encountered cyberbullying. In the game, players were selling "pseudogems" that looked valuable but were actually worthless in the game's marketplace. A number of teens responded with sentiments of "buyer beware" or "it's just a game." Almost as many would not sell the gems, citing fairness and respect for others as reasons.

In response to a cyberbullying scenario, while most teens advised proactive steps to deal with the situation, such as reaching out to parents or friends, a full third of the teens argued for ignoring the bullying. (No adults suggested this approach.) Both of these examples highlight some ways of thinking that adults should pay attention to: overly individualistic thinking in the case of the pseudogems, and a lack of agency in the face of the cyberbullying.

In terms of civic engagement, both teens and adults expressed optimism about the potential of the Internet to effect positive change in the world. Participants noted the Internet's remarkable capacity to connect people and information and the potential to build support to address social problems, such as poverty and inadequate access to health care. At the same time, a number of youth, and some adults, expressed concern that such potentials are unfulfilled to date. One teen described online civic acts as "token activism"; other teens said that online activism distances people from their causes. Other expressed concerns included misuses of the Internet (pointless and time-wasting web surfing) and the creation of new social problems (stranger-danger, privacy risks, opportunities for hate groups to build support). Such nuanced stances reveal that teens and adults are engaged in thoughtful consideration of the civic potentials of online life.

TEEN VOICES

"I don't think anyone has a responsibility for the Internet and the communities people participate in because the Internet is a way for people to do what they want without getting in trouble."

"My role as a member of the online world is to be courteous, encouraging, truthful... an asset to the community. Just like offline!"

ADULT VOICE

"It is important in all aspects of life to behave in a moral way, no matter what the consequence. The importance of your word and your reputation are pretty much all that you have when it comes down to it...Fairness in all behavior is paramount. [By selling a new player something worthless in an online game...] sure, you have some fun and think you are getting one over on the new players, but how will you feel when they pull something over on you when they are more experienced?"

Moving Forward

Emerging from the Dialogues are a number of key lessons that can be applied to other cross-generational conversations, such as at home, in the classroom, online, and in broader community contexts.

Create open spaces

We made a conscious effort in the Focus Dialogues to create a space where conversation was valued and where participants felt safe sharing opinions and experiences that added depth to the discourse.

Ask the right questions

We presented questions and scenarios in the Dialogues that were meant not only to be compelling, but also relevant to the lives of both young people and adults without being skewed towards one age group or another.

Be inclusive

We made a strong effort to ensure that diverse voices had equal weight in the conversation. This meant that we valued those with lower levels of comfort with technology as much as those with high degrees of fluency, and, more importantly, valued teen voices as much as those of adults.

TEEN VOICE

"Common ground can be achieved if adults trust teens. It's up to them to teach teens about responsible use of the Internet. After you've told your teens everything, then you should trust them enough to let them navigate the online world."

More than anything else, the biggest lesson was that we need these types of conversations. Whether teachers in the classroom, parents in the home, or in online settings like Focus, the ethics of digital life must be co-created by adults and young people, and in communities as opposed to on the individual level. Moral and ethical norms have largely been developing with little conscious conversation; through dialogue this process can become explicit, reflective, and inclusive of diverse viewpoints. Achieving an age of ethical digital citizenship will not happen through adults prescribing behavior, nor through self-navigation and negotiation by teens, but rather only through an intentional meeting of minds.

The Focus Dialogues were created by Global Kids, Harvard University's GoodPlay Project, and Common Sense Media with the generous support of the MacArthur Foundation. These organizations are all interested in how the lives of young people are changing as a result of this new digital age. Their work together aims to promote understanding of those changes so that both adults and teens can get the most out of the digital world, while learning to deal effectively with the parts of it that can be difficult. You can learn more about each organization below, and by visiting their Web sites.

Global Kids®

Founded in 1989, Global Kids' mission is to educate and inspire urban youth to become successful students, global citizens and community leaders by engaging them in academically rigorous, content-rich learning experiences. We educate youth about critical international and domestic issues and promote their engagement in civic life and the democratic process. Through our Online Leadership Program we provide teens with opportunities to address community needs, raise awareness about global issues, and develop 21st-century skills through the use of new media. You can read about this work at www.globalkids.org and olp.globalkids.org.

The GoodPlay Project
Harvard Graduate School of Education

Supported by the MacArthur Foundation, the GoodPlay Project is an initiative focused on the ethical contours of young people's digital lives. Led by Howard Gardner, we are exploring five issues we believe to be ethically charged in the new digital media: Identity, privacy, ownership/authorship, credibility, and participation. In our research, we study the ethical stances of digital youth with respect to these issues. We also create curriculum to scaffold greater ethical thinking online. To download the white paper on digital ethics that framed the Focus Dialogues, visit: tinyurl.com/GoodPlayReport

commonsense media

Common Sense Media is dedicated to improving the media and entertainment lives of kids and families. We exist because media and entertainment profoundly impact the social, emotional, and physical development of our nation's children. As a non-partisan, not-for-profit organization, we provide trustworthy information and tools, as well as an independent forum, so that families can have a choice and a voice about the media they consume. Common Sense Media also works with educators and policymakers to build programs that empower kids to become good digital citizens. Visit CommonSenseMedia.org for parent media tips, media reviews, and educational resources for classroom use.

Visit FocusOnDigitalMedia.org to find the full archives of the cross-generational Focus Dialogues.

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