



In the online age of emails, blogs, wikis, chat and SMS messages, just what do young people think of technology and importantly how are they using it?

Talking to a group of children ranging from primary school to Year 12 shows that while all have access to mobile phones and computers, they are protecting their identity and mostly behaving in a responsible way.

Students say they protect their identity when communicating online. Details such as phone numbers and addresses are not divulged, and most use avatars or images other than photos of themselves on their profile.

Ruby, 13, says: "It's just like stranger danger - you have to be careful what you say and who you talk to and keep your details to yourself."

The students also know they can authorise who gets access to their page or profile and who they communicate with.

Vignesh, 11, was once contacted by someone he didn't know while using an instant messaging service.

"I asked them who they were and they didn't reply - they just gave me random names I didn't know - so I deleted them [as a contact]," he said.

Josephine, 15, also once blocked someone she didn't know while Alice, 15, only adds people she has spoken to.

The students say the incidence of cyberbullying - and its effect - is blown out of proportion. Lisa, 13, was once bullied at school through email, but she simply printed the letter out, took it to her principal, and the situation was resolved.

"You can block them, you can control it," she says. "For me you have more control in cyberspace than you do in the real world".

However all the students say they have seen "inappropriate content".

Vignesh says: "I usually tell my parents that something inappropriate has come up or I just close the web page and ignore it."

Lance, 17, says: "You usually decide what's appropriate for yourself ... most of those bad sites give your computer viruses anyway so that's why you avoid them."

While a few parents trust their children's judgement, most directly monitor their children's use of the Internet and some check the history tab to see what websites their child visits. But children are sometimes ahead of their parents.

Josephine says: "I've found a way around it by deleting the history."

Soren, 12, uses software that allows him to access restricted websites without detection.

"That's how you can access other websites that are blocked," he says.

Teenagers also have ways of letting their online friends know a parent is in the room. Typing "pos" on an online messaging service or forum was a traditional way of alerting friends there was a "parent over shoulder" observing

the communication.

"But then a while ago some parents actually found what that meant so there was a change," Lisa says. "If you typed the number 7 it means your parents are watching so you start talking about homework."

William, 17, recently introduced his mum to instant messaging.

"I added my mother as a friend and she messaged me from the other room once so I asked her to get some snacks."

The Internet is also used for entertainment, with YouTube a clear favourite. Marehandro, 17, says: "When I want to kill some time I go onto YouTube and watch crappy videos and listen to music videos on there while I'm doing some study."

The site is also popular with Ruby who uses it for help with her French language studies.

"There are clips of movies and songs, there are French cartoons on there so I look at the characters." ■