

Lessons from Young Users on Handling Unwanted Messages Online: Summary Brief

Protecting young people on the internet is an important goal but what particular threats should we prioritize and what solutions will make a difference? New CDT research studied the experiences of 32 young people aged 14-21 over a 3 week period to understand the nature of unwanted messages they receive and how they address them. Overall, young people called for more tools to keep themselves safe and maintain their autonomy. Other young people and researchers agree.

Young people are concerned by unwanted messages but they are not equally distributed.

Young people define “**unwanted, unpleasant, or concerning**” messages as unsolicited messages that come from strangers, often including sexual content. In our study, such messages were not equally distributed; over a 3 week period some participants in the study received as many as 2 unwanted interactions per week, while others received only one message, or none at all during that period.

Young people use proactive strategies for minimizing exposure and keeping themselves safe.

Young people in the study had clear strategies to minimize exposure, including setting their accounts to private, interacting primarily with close circles, and keeping their participation online to a minimum (which can unfortunately lead to **self-censorship**). And, young people feel confident in their ability to **mitigate the impact of unwanted messages** and contacting others for support when needed.

“I’ve just been talking to, majority are just school friends. I feel like social media is as dangerous as who you know.”

– Boy, 15



Reaching out to a trusted adult or parent is often not helpful.

Reaching out to a trusted adult or parent was often seen as unhelpful. Some participants were worried that sharing with parents or adult caregivers would result in a **disproportionate response** such as being asked to “delete all your accounts” or a fruitless one: “Telling my parents, I don’t think they will do so much... They’ll just see the message, they just see the tweets. They’ll just acknowledge that people are just wayward out here.” Nevertheless, young people told us that they know that **adult intervention or support** can be important; they just want to be trusted to know when to ask for help.

“It’s not that big of a deal. If it’s something really serious that could cause harm to me or other people, I will obviously tell an adult. Most of the time, I’ve never got anything that extreme.”

– Girl, 14

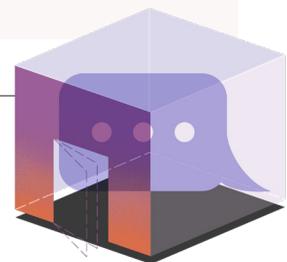


Young African American boys and men received the most unwanted messages.

Our study found that young African American boys and men are also vulnerable and receive more unwanted messages through direct messaging apps than any other group of participants. **This is an area that requires further research.**

Next Steps:

- **Policymakers and technology companies** should prioritize and nurture teen autonomy in their efforts to protect children online by listening to young people, treating them differently than younger children, and upholding their rights to private communication and access to information.
- **Technology companies that offer digital messaging services** should equip young people with tools and signals to help them assess and address unwanted interactions, including but not limited to: allowing users to delete messages, setting new accounts to private by default, introduce more friction or “speed bumps” in interactions with unknown profiles or potential strangers, and offering timely responses to user reporting requests.
- **Researchers and technology companies** should invest in conducting more research into tooling to keep young people and all users safe on the internet including features such as user-side filtering to allow users to define their own filtering and blocking criteria for private messages and interoperable blocklists to allow users to block unwanted messages across platforms.



Read the full report at
[***cdt.org/More-Tools-More-Control.***](https://cdt.org/More-Tools-More-Control)

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