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FRONTLINE INVESTIGATES THE RISKS, REALITIES AND MISCONCEPTIONS OF TEEN LIFE ON THE INTERNET

FRONTLINE presents
GROWING UP ONLINE
Tuesday, January 22, 2008, at 9 P.M. ET on PBS

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Jessica Hunter was a shy and awkward girl who struggled to make friends at school. Then, at age 14, she reinvented herself online as “Autumn Edows,” an alternative goth artist and model who posted provocative photos of herself on the Web, and fast developed a cult following. “I just became this whole different person,” Jessica tells FRONTLINE. “I didn’t feel like myself, but I liked the fact that I didn’t feel like myself. I felt like someone completely different. I felt like I was famous.”

News of Jessica’s growing fame as Autumn Edows reached her parents only by accident. “I got a phone call, and the principal says one of the parents had seen disturbing photographs and material of Jessica,” her father tells FRONTLINE. “They were considered to be pornographic. ... I had no idea what she was doing on the Internet. That was a big surprise.”

In *Growing Up Online*, airing Tuesday, January 22, 2008, at 9 P.M. ET on PBS (check local listings), FRONTLINE takes viewers inside the private worlds that kids are creating online, raising important questions about just how radically the Internet is transforming the experience of childhood. “It’s just this huge shift in which the Internet and the digital world was something that belonged to adults, and now it’s something that really is the province of teenagers,” says C.J. Pascoe, a Ph.D. scholar with the University of California, Berkeley’s Digital Youth Project. “They’re able to have a private space, even while they’re still at home. They’re able to communicate with their friends and have an entire social life outside of the purview of their parents without actually having to leave the house.”

As more and more kids begin to grow up online, parents are finding themselves on the outside looking in, struggling to remain relevant and engaged in their kids’ lives. “I remember being 11; I remember being 13; I remember being 16,

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and I remember having secrets,” one mother says. “But it’s really hard when it’s the other side.”

At school, teachers are trying to figure out how to reach a generation that no longer reads books or newspapers. “We can’t possibly expect the learner of today to be engrossed by someone who speaks in a monotone voice with a piece of chalk in their hand,” one school principal says. “We almost have to be entertainers,” a longtime history teacher tells FRONTLINE. “If you look at the advertising world and the media world that they live in, they consume so much media. We have to cut through that cloud of information around them, cut through that media and capture their attention.”

Fear of online predators has led teachers and parents to also focus heavily on keeping kids safe online. But many children think these fears are misplaced. “My parents don’t understand that I’ve spent pretty much since second grade online,” one ninth-grader says. “I know what to avoid. ... I think sometimes they forget that because they didn’t grow up online.” FRONTLINE finds many experts agree with the kids. “All the known cases of sexual exploitation involving social networks have involved kids who have gone out looking for a meeting with somebody,” journalist Anne Collier tells FRONTLINE of the findings of a major government report about the sexual solicitation of kids online. “These so-called predators are people who are totally upfront about their sexual intentions. And they are meeting kids who are looking for risk, danger, challenges.”

“Everyone is panicking about sexual predators online. That’s what parents are afraid of; that’s what parents are paying attention to,” says Parry Aftab, an Internet security expert and executive director of WiredSafety.org. But the real concern, she says, is the trouble that kids might seek out or create online on their own. Through social networking sites, kids with eating disorders share tips about staying thin, and depressed kids can share information about the best ways to commit suicide.

In recent years, “cyberbullying” has also become a problem, as the taunts, insults and rumors once left at the schoolyard now find their way online, where they can hound a kid 24 hours a day. John Halligan’s son was cyberbullied for months—first at school, then online—before he ultimately hanged himself just weeks

into the start of eighth grade. “I clearly made a mistake putting that computer in his room. I allowed the computer to become too much of his life,” Halligan tells FRONTLINE. “The computer and the Internet were not the cause of my son's suicide, but I believe they helped amplify and accelerate the hurt and the pain that he was trying to deal with that started in person, in the real world.”

“You have a generation faced with a society with fundamentally different properties thanks to the Internet,” says Danah Boyd, a fellow at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard Law School. “We can turn our backs and say, ‘This is bad,’ or, ‘We don’t want a world like this.’ It’s not going away. So instead of saying that this is terrible, instead of saying, ‘Stop MySpace; stop Facebook; stop the Internet,’ it’s a question for us of how we teach ourselves and our children to live in a society where these properties are fundamentally a way of life. This is public life today.”

Growing Up Online is a FRONTLINE co-production with Ark Media, LLC. The film is produced and directed by Rachel Dretzin and John Maggio, and is written by Rachel Dretzin. The directors are Rachel Dretzin and John Maggio. FRONTLINE is produced by WGBH Boston and is broadcast nationwide on PBS. Funding for FRONTLINE is provided through the support of PBS viewers. Major funding for FRONTLINE is provided by The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Additional funding is provided by the Park Foundation. FRONTLINE is closed-captioned for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers and described for people who are blind or visually impaired by the Media Access Group at WGBH. FRONTLINE is a registered trademark of WGBH Educational Foundation. The executive producer of FRONTLINE is David Fanning.

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