

GROWING UP ONLINE

FRONTLINE, the award winning PBS documentary program, interviews scientists, policy experts, and parents to learn about the effects of the internet upon America's children and teens. This inside look at the new rules of internet education and socialization demonstrates the promise and perils of online youth culture. It is a world that will revolutionize our educational informational culture; it is no less a world of secret adolescent life -- sometimes dangerous and often invisible to parents and educators.

Take the case of Jessica Hunter. She was a shy and awkward girl who struggled to make friends at school. Then, at age 14, she reinvented herself online as Autumn Edows, a goth artist and model. She posted provocative photos of herself on the Web and fast developed a cult following.

"I just became this whole different person," Autumn 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. "I had no idea what she was doing on the Internet. That was a big surprise."

In *Growing Up Online*, **FRONTLINE** takes viewers inside the very public private worlds that kids are creating online, raising important questions about how the Internet is transforming childhood. "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 postdoctoral scholar with the University of California, Berkeley's Digital Youth Research 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 grow up online, parents are finding themselves on the outside looking in. "I remember being 11; I remember being 13; I remember being 16, and I remember having secrets," mother of four Evan Skinner 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," social studies teacher Steve Maher tells **FRONTLINE**. "They consume so much media. We have to cut through that cloud of information around them, cut through that media, and capture their attention."

This internet culture is filled with creatures that terrorize the thoughts of many adults. Fears of online predators have led teachers and parents to focus heavily on keeping kids safe online. But many teenagers 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."

Many Internet experts agree with the kids. "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 get into on their own. To offer one example, Aftab offers the idea that, through social networking and other Web sites, kids with eating disorders share tips about staying dangerously thin, and depressed kids can share information about the best ways to commit suicide.

Another threat is "cyberbullying," as schoolyard taunts, insults and rumors find their way online. John Halligan's son, Ryan, was bullied for months at school and online before he ultimately hanged

himself in October 2003. "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 Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet & Society. "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."

FRONTLINE'S exploration of the problems and possibilities of online life provides parents and educators with real-life analysis of the behavior of adolescents on the Internet, and the documentary should serve as a scientific starting point for future dialogue about the online lives of kids today. We love our children intensely, and we have a heartfelt desire to protect our loved ones. If you are a parent or educator concerned about online culture, internet socialization, or wired predators, it is essential that you watch this revealing insight into a world that, until now, has been hidden from adults.