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Media consumes teen psyches, says report

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Young people spend more time a week consuming media on their computers, televisions and cell phones than most people spend working a full-time job, according to a report released this week.

Children age 8 to 18 devote an average of seven hours and 38 minutes daily - or about 53 hours a week - to tweeting on Twitter.com, texting on their mobile phones and tagging notes, videos and photos on the Facebook Web site, among other media use.

Released this week by the Kaiser Family Foundation, the report, "Generation M2: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-year-olds" reveals America's youth spends an hour and 17 minutes more on media than it did five years ago. And this time doesn't account for media multitasking, as in listening to music on iTunes while texting on iPhones and tweeting on iMacs.

Minorities consume more media than most, the study found, with African American and Latino youths watching nearly six hours of television a day compared with 3.5 hours for their white peers. The study is based on a survey of more than 2,000 students nationwide.

The more time students devote to interacting with each other through media, the more varied their conversations can be. It's no surprise that not all online conversations among youth are appropriate.

In fact, some discriminatory or harrassing posts, texts and comments are illegal. Mean language in media - known as cyberbullying - is a hot-button issue among school administrators.

Ann Marie Zanfagna, guidance counselor at White Brook Middle School in Easthampton, said she had a conversation just this week with parents about students calling another student bad names on Facebook.

Facebook is "a whole other realm that creates drama," Zanfagna said. "It may happen on your laptop, but these are still people connected to these words and they come into school dealing with that drama."

While school officials intervene when cyberbullying is reported, they also say it's difficult to understand the scope of the problem.

"It's hard for schools to get a handle on how much of that is going on because much of that goes on outside the school," said Karen Jarvis Vance, director of health services, health education and safety in Northampton. "We have no way to go on and monitor 800 kids' computer activity, nor would we want to. That's a parental responsibility."

Vance said she believes it is up to school communities, however, to teach kids and parents about Internet safety. She noted Northampton schools and Smith College, which partner in social and emotional health services, hope to develop online training for parents to help in that endeavor.

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