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UNH Study Finds Youths Who Form Close Online Relationships Are More Troubled

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DURHAM, N.H. -- Young people who form close online relationships are more likely to be highly troubled or to have high levels of conflict or low levels of communication with parents, according to a new study by University of New Hampshire researchers.

These findings are published in the current issue of the Journal of Adolescence by researchers Janis Wolak, Kimberly Mitchell and David Finkelhor of UNH's Crimes Against Children Research Center. The authors used data from a U.S. national survey of 1,501 Internet users -- ages 10 through 17 -- 210 of whom had formed close online relationships within the year before they were interviewed.

The researchers note that youth who are troubled or who have difficult relationships with their parents may be more vulnerable to online exploitation and to other possible ill effects of online relationships. At the same time, the researchers caution against assuming all such relationships are negative and dangerous. For some troubled youth, the online relationships may have helpful aspects. The online relationships are likely to be extremely diverse, as are the youth involved in them.

The authors suggest that parents and people who work with adolescents be conscious of the role the Internet may play in the lives of teenagers and prompt youth to talk about online relationships they may be involved in. This study was funded by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children.

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