

**DRAFT—do not circulate or cite 2/18/00**

**Communicating with Kids in a Web Environment:  
Insights and Recommendations from Web Site Experts**

**[DRAFT FOR REVIEW]**

Prepared for:  
Centers for Disease Control & Prevention  
Office of Communication  
1600 Clifton Road, NE, MS D-42  
Atlanta, Georgia 30333

Prepared by:  
Aeffect, Inc.  
100 Field Drive, Suite 140  
Lake Forest, Illinois 60045

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## Overview

Recently, the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention identified a need to enhance its current Web site—[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)—to better meet the needs and interests of the American public. Surrounding this decision, CDC decision-makers recognized the Internet as an effective vehicle for communicating with youth. From this insight, CDC decided to separate youth and adult communication efforts and create a distinct Web site specifically targeting kids.

The primary objective of CDC's youth Web site is to instill healthy behaviors and de-glamorize unhealthy behaviors among youth 11-18 years old. The CDC hopes to minimize the onset of unhealthy behaviors, such as smoking, drinking, doing drugs, etc. among youth. With this objective in mind, the CDC decided to target youth from 11-18 years old (in grades 6-12). Additionally, the CDC recognized a need to target parents and teachers in its efforts to communicate with youth, but deemed them secondary targets for this initiative.

To this end, Aeffect developed a two-part research plan that involves a review of literature surrounding youth and the Internet and interviews with Web "experts." Web experts are defined as Web site managers, developers, producers, and/or editors. The purpose of the interviews was two-fold: 1) To gather insight into the perceived challenges of communicating with kids in a Web environment, and 2) To learn from the experiences of those who already manage kids sites and may already understand what works, what doesn't, and why when it comes to kids sites.

Aeffect, Inc., in conjunction with CDC technical monitors and creative contractors Porter Novelli and JustKid, Inc., identified a list of 20 Web sites considered to be successful at communicating with kids online. These sites were selected based upon popularity, content (entertainment, education, or both), and target audience. From this list, Aeffect conducted eight individual in-depth interviews, each lasting 30-45 minutes. The Web sites and their targets are provided in the following chart.

<b>Web Site Address</b>	<b>Kids (&lt;12)</b>	<b>Tweens (8-14)</b>	<b>Teens (13+)</b>	<b>Parents</b>	<b>Teachers</b>
<a href="http://www.nationalgeographic.com">www.nationalgeographic.com</a>	X			X	X
<a href="http://www.headbonezone.com">www.headbonezone.com</a>		X		X	X
<a href="http://www.billnye.com">www.billnye.com</a>		X			X
<a href="http://www.freezone.com">www.freezone.com</a>		X		X	X
<a href="http://www.mamamedia.com">www.mamamedia.com</a>	X			X	X
<a href="http://www.teenwire.com">www.teenwire.com</a>			X		
<a href="http://www.cyberteent.com">www.cyberteent.com</a>			X		
<a href="http://www.ctw.org">www.ctw.org</a>	X			X	

## Executive Summary

Many Web site experts react favorably to the idea of the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) developing a Web site targeting youth. Several explain that the CDC is a trusted resource and say they can envision young people visiting the site to obtain information on health and science. They offer a variety of recommendations to help the CDC communicate with kids based upon their experiences managing their own youth-targeted sites.

Web site experts concur that in order to communicate effectively with kids in a Web environment, CDC should consider narrowing its proposed target audience. More specifically, they explain that the 11-18 year old age range is too wide and that it would be difficult to tailor messages to kids within this broad age range. They indicate that kids within this age group have many developmental differences, e.g., mental, physical, and social. A few indicate that once kids reach their mid-teens, their interests and behaviors are more like young adults, making it difficult to be relevant to both younger and older audiences.

Many Web site experts say that the CDC may likely have a difficult time breaking through the clutter of youth-targeted Web sites already on the Internet. Many say that the Web environment is chock-full of Web sites targeting youth. They do, however, offer a variety of solutions to help the CDC potentially generate awareness of its Web site among kids, including partnerships with other youth-targeted Web sites, popular Internet Service Providers like AOL, or search engines like Yahoo.

Additionally, a few experts surmise that it may be difficult for the CDC to attract youth to its Web site. They say that kids may expect a site offered by the “Centers for Disease Control & Prevention” to be rather stodgy and bland. To overcome this perception, Web site experts suggest positioning the site to youth as one that would engage them with content they consider fun and entertaining as well as meaningful and relevant.

Most Web site experts maintain that to effectively communicate with youth in a Web environment, CDC’s Web site must be entertaining as well as educational. To achieve this, most experts agree that the site must include some degree of interactive content. Experts explain that most kids expect interactive content on a Web site to include activities like e-mailing, chatting, posting messages on bulletin boards, playing games, etc. Furthermore, several Web site experts contend that youth learn best when presented with messages in an interactive manner—where they learn by doing rather than by watching, reading, or listening. Experts imply that the Internet is an excellent medium for delivering interactive messages.

Several experts contend that another sure way to communicate effectively with young audiences is to solicit input on content from young people based on areas of interest. Some say this approach has paid off for them and that they routinely invest considerable resources in research with kids. They highly and enthusiastically recommend ways to communicate effectively with youth, such as conducting interviews with kids, online focus groups, hosting chat sessions, administering surveys that track hot/timely issues, and

## **Executive Summary (continued)**

encouraging kids to submit their own ideas for content. These experts say that young Internet users are more apt to enjoy a site that is very tailored to their interests rather than content developed by adults trying to address youth issues, concerns, and interests. They say this is especially true as kids reach their teenage years.

Several experts imply that it is especially important for the CDC to consider how it will encourage young audiences to revisit the site. Some suggest that a great way to prompt kids to come back is to give them the opportunity to belong to a community. They maintain that youth like the opportunity to belong to a group and/or feel like they are a part of something. They suggest including a member's only club where members get special privileges for joining, such as access to specific content, chat rooms, mailers, etc. Additionally, many experts maintain that refreshing and/or updating the sites' content on a regular basis can encourage kids to come back to see what's new.

Most experts recommend that the CDC consider targeting parents with its Web site so they can influence their children to visit the site. Specifically, they say parents would likely consider a CDC youth-targeted Web site to be a trusted, safe, and reliable resource. Additionally, they surmise that parents would consider the CDC to be cautious about how it conveys "sensitive" information making them feel comfortable recommending the site to their kids.

For the same reasons, they support the notion of the site targeting educators. Based on their own experiences, experts tout the benefit of targeting teachers noting that educators are a feasible and inexpensive way to reach youth. Furthermore, teachers, they say, are always on the lookout for new and inexpensive ways to introduce curriculum into their classrooms. They recommend that the CDC Web site include a separate section for teachers that provides activities which correspond to health and science curricula.

## Summary of Findings

### Initial Reactions to the Concept of a CDC Youth-Targeted Web Site

Many Web site experts react favorably to the idea of the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) developing a Web site targeting youths. Several explain that the CDC is a trusted resource for health information and say that they can envision kids visiting the site to obtain health and science information.

When presented with the CDC Web site's proposed target age range (11-18), a few experts say that it would be difficult for the CDC to tailor messages that would be equally relevant to youth in such a broad range. They say that youth in the proposed target age range (11-18) likely have different needs and interests both developmentally and behaviorally. On the developmental side, these experts contend that there are vast physical and emotional differences between an 11-year-old and an 18-year-old.

- *“Developmentally, there’s a huge division [between 11 and 18 year olds].”* (Tween site)
- *“That’s a big age group, 11 year olds are quite different than 18 year olds.”* (Tween site)

On the behavioral side, experts indicate that youth differ with regard to their interests and behaviors. One expert indicates that by the time kids reach 15, their interests begin to align with young adults' interests. This expert explains that youth in their mid- to late-teens participate in the similar activities in which younger adults—ages 18-25—participate, which is too sophisticated for an 11 or 12 year old. Another contends that attitudes and behaviors are already shaped by outside influences by the time they reach their teenage years indicating that the CDC should focus on a younger audience altogether.

- *“You start finding an overlap as kids start to be juniors and seniors in high school, they’re starting to be interested in things that college students are interested in or even people that are a little bit “post-college” in terms of the music groups and films.”* (Teen site)
- *“If you want to start to affect the next generation, get them before they make the mistakes (younger than fourth grade).”* (Kid site)

### Reaching Youth on the Internet

About half of the sites represented in this research say that their sites were developed three to four years ago. At this time, experts maintain that targeting youth was a relatively novel concept with only a handful of sites available to youth. Today, they explain new youth-targeted Web sites hit the Internet everyday and youth marketers from every industry want to jump on the bandwagon because they believe the Internet to be the most effective way to reach and connect with kids.

Experts recommend a variety of ideas that may potentially help the CDC reach kids online. Above all, most experts recommend that the CDC develop a marketing strategy to attract youth to its site. As part of this strategy, experts recommend that the CDC partner with successful youth-oriented Web sites to potentially attract young audiences to its site. They recommend sharing content and/or links with youth-targeted Web sites, such as those included in this research (See Overview).

- *“One of the things they (CDC) should be thinking about is affiliations—being in places where kids are. Thinking about distributing that content in places other than their own Web site. [For example,] if there were this kind of a thing (CDC content) sitting in the context of our site, there are thousands and thousands of kids who are there [and will be exposed to the CDC and its content]. That is a way to begin the conversation [with kids] immediately.”* (Kid site)

Experts also recommend developing partnerships with large/popular ISPs or search engines that reportedly have strong youth visitor bases. They say, this kind of partnership may increase the number of youth exposed to the CDC Web site. Minimally, a few say it could enhance kids’ knowledge of the CDC and its youth-targeted Web site.

- *“Cutting a deal with AOL where you’ve got access to kids is probably a worthwhile investment [to attract kids to CDC’s site].”* (Tween site)
- *“Encourage the CDC to share content with a portal site like Yahoo or whoever, ... that basically links back into their stuff [to attract kids to CDC’s site].”* (Tween site)

Additionally, a few experts recommend that the CDC communicate with kids both on- and off-line to encourage young visitors to come to the site. They suggest advertising the site through other media, such as print or television as well as using banner ads on the Internet. A few site experts, however, admit that they have successfully attracted youth visitors to their site without expending any additional advertising dollars.

- *“I’m pretty much a believer in you get what you pay for. There’s really no way around advertising, and that just cannot be underestimated in terms of how much you need to budget for. I think that a lot of Web sites that start up, they think that people will automatically come find them.”* (Teen site)
- *“[There was] absolutely no marketing of the Web site, there’s never been a banner ad, there’s never been a TV commercial. The URL is not attached to the show. That site has grown organically to the audience it has right now, which is good but also bad because I know it could have been a thousand times more popular had we had the budget to market it.”* (Tween site)

A few experts note the CDC may have a difficult time attracting youth to visit its site. These experts explain that youth may consider a federal Web site to be stodgy and bland and suggest that the CDC may have to overcome these perceptions in order to attract kids to its site. They suggest positioning the site in a way that youth would consider meaningful and relevant and capture their attention very quickly. Some ways they suggest to do this would be to deliver interactive content, multimedia, or appealing graphics and/or illustrations on CDC's Web site. However, most experts caution the CDC to consider the content they develop to ensure that kids consider it to be meaningful and relevant.

- *"The CDC, while it sounds sexy, I'm not sure that to kids it's hugely appealing."* (Tween site)
- *"It (the site and its content) needs to be spicy to appeal to kids."* (Kid site)
- *"[What doesn't work with kids] is being hip for hip's sake."* (Kid site)

### Communicating with Youth in a Web Environment

Experts say that kids' favorite online activities include e-mails, chats, bulletin boards, games, puzzles, or any other activity that requires them to interact with the material rather than read the information presented on their Web sites. Experts say that most youth-targeted Web sites contain some degree of interactivity leading today's kids to expect it from all of the sites they visit. More importantly, several concur that kids learn more by doing than by reading and/or observing and say that the Internet provides amply opportunity to communicate with young audiences using interactive content.

- *"If it's just factual information given to the kid, it's not as interesting, nor will they remember it as well as if they can do an online experiment themselves."* (Tween site)
- *"So much of media that kids interact with is passive, like books taking in stuff, TV is watching stuff and listening. A lot of the way we learn is [through] doing stuff, using information."* (Teen site)
- *"The more multimedia elements that you can include in there where you're listening or seeing as opposed to reading a bunch of stuff, is going to appeal, in general, to kids more. The Web is becoming much more of a visual experience..."* (Tween site)

Most experts recommend that the CDC involve kids when it develops content for its site. They say many youth like the opportunity to provide input and/or feedback in order to create an environment that is meaningful and relevant to them. Moreover, a few indicate that involving kids when developing content gives them a sense of empowerment and belonging. Additionally, experts imply that involving kids with the site may encourage them to come back for more. Experts recommend a few ways to involve youth in developing content for CDC's Web site, including conducting online interviews with kids, or off-line focus groups, administering surveys or polls, or welcoming visitor feedback via e-mail.



It's the same old story. Take out the garbage, cut the lawn, walk the dog, rake the leaves, wash the dishes, clean your room. Don't kids have enough to do, like homework and sports? Are chores a waste of time or are they good for you? What do you think? We may post your message.

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**First name**   
**Age (optional)**   
**State or province**   
**Country**

- “[Participating in content development] gives them a sense of ownership. They feel like they have a voice.” (Teen)
- “It creates, for those kids participating, a sense of ‘Hey, I am part of something bigger, more important.’ They can see the impact of their voice. They can see the impact of participation.” (Kid site)

Many experts recommend that the CDC invite young visitors to provide feedback on its site. Visitors tout the benefit of asking visitors to provide their opinions about the site to develop content that appeals to its audience. Several experts agree that it is important to take action on youth feedback quickly or minimally acknowledge the feedback so that kids feel like they have a voice and it's being heard. Additionally, one expert suggests that the anonymity of providing feedback via the Internet promotes open and honest reactions from kids.

- “The best way to figure out what the people coming to your site want, is to give them the opportunity to e-mail you or contact you in some way.” (Teen site)
- “People certainly are willing to share their opinion, good, bad, or indifferent about what they like and what they don't like. That has helped us steer what we do and what we don't do.” (Tween site)
- “When kids don't have to tell you to your face that something sucks, they'll tell you when they don't have to see you.” (Tween site)

Regardless of how the CDC chooses to develop content for its youth-targeted Web site, most experts agree that content developed for the site should be refreshed regularly. Experts concur that today's kids expect new, fresh material and/or a new experience every time they visit a site—within reason. They say this gives young Web users a reason to come back to the site and even recommend the site to others. While developing new content regularly may be an expensive endeavor, one expert suggests rotating content from a larger pool of information/content which can give visitors the impression that the content is new.



**Question of the day**  
Christina Ran 4ever, What color is in? Is it still blue? What about style? Is it baggy, short, 3/4 or medium?  
— FlunkQueen, age 10  
Find the answer in [Culture Crew](#)

- *“You need to be refreshing on a reasonable schedule because if you want the kids to come back, if you want them to go deeper with a concept, then you need something to pull them back. Whether its new data, an update, or some new widget in the game experience.”* (Kid site)
- *“What we attempted to do was to make the site feel like it had new content, so things like “Demo of the Day” and “Question of the Week,” these things actually just rotate in and it gives the appearance of much more of a dynamic site.”* (Tween site)

A few experts say that youth enjoy participating in online communities. They say these communities allow them to feel like they are a part of something. Several contend that online communities are an effective way to foster repeat visitation. That said, several Web site experts recommend that the CDC incorporate these communities into its Web site.

- *“They like to start talking about themselves and finding out about other people, it’s just part of their growth.”* (Tween site)
- *“If we create a larger, stickier, more community based experience, it works better than just come here for some information. Just straight information, magazines online, is not the most compelling to have it play a role in kids lives.”* (Kid site)
- *“A sense of community keeps them coming back.”* (Tween site)



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Of course, most experts agree that the tone of the Web site is also important to consider when communicating with youth. They explain that it is important that the information be presented in an authentic, objective format and does not appear to be condescending or authoritative. Furthermore, several experts reveal that positioning the information as if it comes from their peers also works well to communicate with kids.

- “[When developing our site, we considered] how to give the kind of accurate information [that we need to] and make it cool enough for kids without talking down to kids, like ‘This is bad for you.’ It’s a real careful tone, and really what we’ve tried to do is flip that around and actually have kids doing some of those talking messages and getting kids to think about things.” (Tween site)
- “[I would recommend that the CDC] don’t talk down to the kids. It’s certainly a cliché, so I certainly won’t take credit for it, but I think that it’s true.” (Tween site)

A few experts maintain that kids have limited attention spans given the number of activities, both online and off-line, vying for their attention. Therefore, they recommend developing site content that is short, sweet, and to the point. Moreover, they say the content must immediately grab their attention, or they contend that youth may quickly “point and click” elsewhere.

- “Keep it short, gigantic lesson plans and things where there’s tons of reading things to do on the site is gonna turn people off.” (Tween site)



- “Factoids’, oddly enough have been popular—just giving people quick little bits of science.” (Tween site)

### Including Parents and Teachers as Secondary Targets

Most experts concur that the CDC should involve parents to some degree in its Web site as a way to generate awareness of and influence visitation to CDC's youth-targeted Web site. Several experts say that parents will likely perceive the CDC to be a credible resource for information concerning health and science. Therefore, experts assume that parents would refer their kids to the site for this type of information.

- *"Its (communicating with parents) another way [to reach kids], you're trying to find every avenue to get kids interested in it (the Web site) and certainly parents and teachers are in a position to influence what kids look at."* (Tween site)

A few experts contend that some parents continue to express concerns about what their children can and will access on the Internet. Therefore, a few experts maintain that it is important to ease parental concerns about what their youth may encounter on the site. They suggest including a parents only section to address their concerns and welcome feedback.

- *"Provide parents with the security that we're not trying to replace them, the message point we try to communicate is that we are a tool for parents."* (Teen site)
- *"Get them (parents) to understand what the child is going to be doing on the site. We explain our chats, bulletin boards, philosophy, and how we monitor. We establish a pretty good dialog with them."* (Tween site)

Most experts suggest that targeting educators is a feasible and inexpensive way to reach youth and attract them to a site. Several comment that teachers are always on the lookout for new and inexpensive ways to introduce curriculum into their classrooms. They suggest that the CDC Web site include a separate section for teachers that provides activities which correspond to health and science curricula.

- *"From a marketing perspective, I think it was pretty useful (targeting teachers). It's relatively easy to get the materials to schools."* (Tween site)
- *"We knew that teachers wanted information and they go specifically to the education site on our Web site to get that information. They wanted ideas on how to teach their classes. They wanted to have ideas for 7, 8, and 9 years olds and 10, 11, and 12 year olds."* (Kid site)
- *"They're (teachers) are really excited about it (teacher content) because it's free content provided through advertisers and sponsorships, so there's no cost for them to use it except to sign up."* (Tween site)
- *"Teachers on our staff indicate that they want something easy that they can do and don't need to customize it. We develop teachers' guides to go along with traditional curriculums and monthly themes."* (Tween site)

## Creating and Maintaining a Web Site

Several experts caution CDC to plan the Web site with the future in mind. That is, they say it is important to plan for site maintenance in addition to planning for its launch. Moreover, they concur that it is important for CDC to consider overall management of the site, content development and revisions, technology upgrades, etc. when planning their site.

- *“If you’re looking at designing a site today, you’re going to need to really plan for technology that’s going to be available months from now, by the time the site’s out, it’s all going to change.”* (Tween site)
- *“You need to plan not just for launching the site, but how are you going to maintain it or add things to it.”* (Teen site)

## Appendix

**IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW GUIDE**  
**Centers for Disease Control & Prevention**  
**Kids Web Site Development**

The purpose of these in-depth interviews is two-fold: 1) To gather insight into the perceived challenges of communicating with kids in a Web environment, and 2) To learn from the experiences of those who already manage kids sites and may already understand what works, what doesn't and why.

**I. Explanation of Interview/Warm-Up (5 minutes)**

- My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I'll be conducting today's interview, which will take approximately 30 minutes.
- First, I'd like to thank you for your time and for your participation; the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention is also very appreciative of your time and opinions.
- Before we begin our discussion, I'd like to give you some background on the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention or the "CDC." The CDC is a federal agency created more than 50 years ago to control malaria in the United States. The agency is probably best known for its "disease detectives" fighting deadly infectious diseases portrayed in movies like "Outbreak" and books like "The Hotzone." However, over the years, CDC has become the nation's primary agency responsible for disease, disability, and injury prevention. In addition to infectious diseases, the CDC works in other areas including the prevention of chronic diseases from smoking, obesity and poor diet, and lack of physical activity; injuries like car wrecks, falls, and violence; work place hazards; birth defects and disabilities; and environmental hazards such as lead and other toxic substances. The CDC's findings and programs are based on rigorous science and disseminated to its partners with state and local health departments as well as organizations to protect the health of Americans and oftentimes those around the world.
- While the CDC has a general Web site, CDC.gov, it is currently working on developing a Web site specifically targeting youths, ages 11-18, as well as parents and teachers. The CDC is interested in your insights, experiences, and recommendations relative to communicating with youths in a Web environment.
- I'd also like to give you a little background about what I do. I work for Aeffect, an independent communications research firm. We talk with people all over the world about a wide range of topics.
- We're not affiliated with any of the organizations that we provide research for, so any positive comments you might have won't work to my advantage, and negative comments won't work against me. I just want your honest impressions and opinions, and I'd like to stress that there are no wrong answers.
- I will be audio taping this discussion so that I can be free from taking notes. These tapes help me when I go back to compile a report. I will not be using your name in the report, but will instead summarize overall themes that come out of all of the interviews I conduct on this project.

**II. Site Overview (5 minutes)**

- Can you describe your role with regard to your organization's Web site? What role, if any, did you play in developing the site? What role, if any, do you have in developing content for the site?
- How long has the site existed?
- In general, what is the purpose of the site? What is the site's overall objective? Secondary objectives? Explain.
- Who do you target with the site? [PROBE: age, gender, interest, parents, teachers, etc.]

- What have you found *works well* with each of the audiences your site targets? How do you know? [PROBE: Evaluation and research methods used.] What have you found *doesn't work so well* with each of these audiences? How do you know? [PROBE: Evaluation and research methods used.]
- How would you describe the site's mix of educational and entertaining content? How do you determine the appropriate mix?

**III. Experiences Developing/Managing a Youth Web Site (20 minutes)**

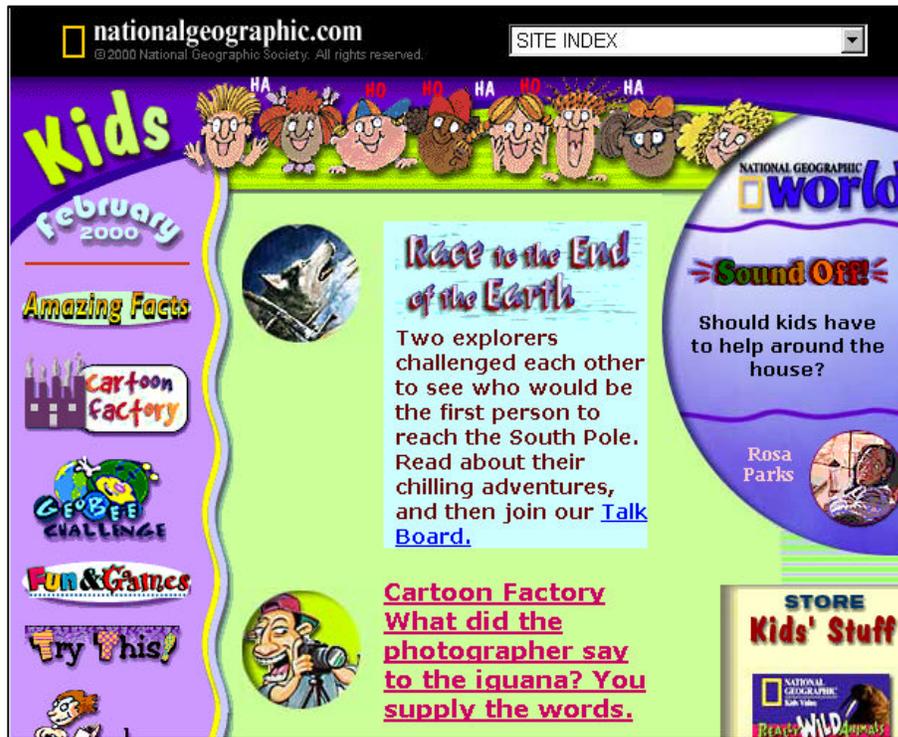
- How would you define a successful youth Web site? In your opinion, what makes a site successful? What are the top three attributes of a successful youth Web site?
- What specific youth Web sites do you consider successful? In your opinion, what make these sites successful?
- In general, what challenges have you faced in developing and/or managing your Web site? How did you overcome these challenges? What have you learned from these experiences that you could share with the CDC?
- What have you learned about communicating with youths in a Web environment? What communications barriers have you encountered? How did you overcome these barriers? What have you learned from these experiences that you could share with the CDC?
- What have you learned about communicated with parents in a Web environment? Educators? What communications barriers have you encountered? How did you overcome these barriers? What have you learned from these experiences that you could share with the CDC?
- What have you learned about communicating health-related information to youths in a Web environment? Parents? Teachers? What experiences can you share with the CDC? What recommendations can you offer the CDC in communicating health-related information to youths?
- What have you learned about communicating science-related information to youths in a Web environment? Youths? Parents? Teachers? What experiences can you share with the CDC? What recommendations can you offer the CDC in communicating science-related information to youths?

**IV. Additional Questions (time remaining)**

- Offer opportunity to advise CDC with Web site development
- Extend assistance from CDC with target's site
- Thank respondents for time and opinions
- Answer any respondent questions

Kids Sites: Targets kids 12 and younger

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Tweens Sites: Targets Tweens 8-14 years old

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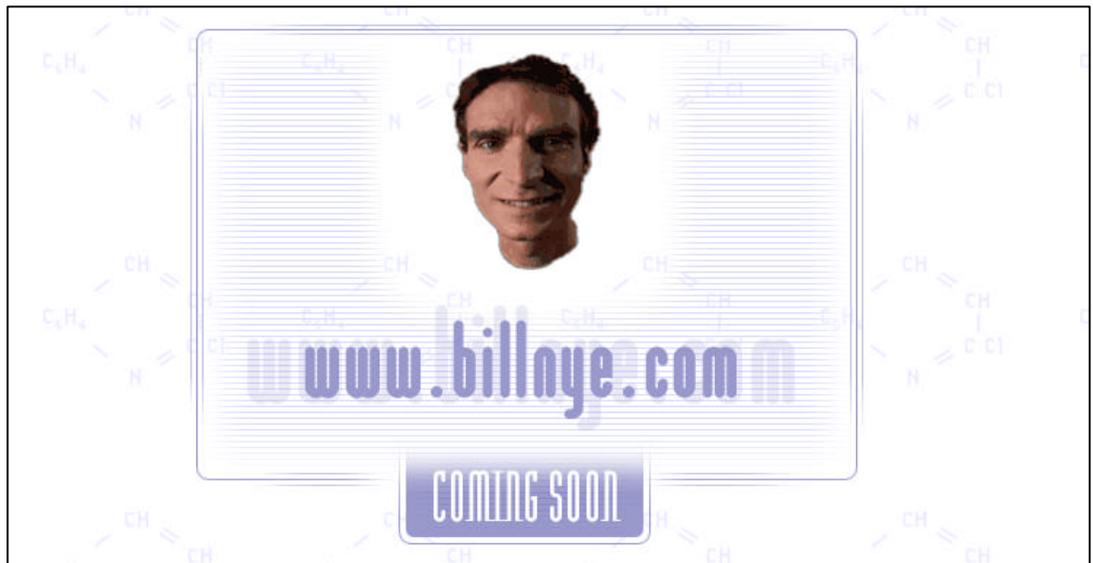
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## Teens Sites: Targets teens 13 years and older

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Sexuality and relationship info you can trust from Planned Parenthood® Federation of America

**Today's Question**  
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**world views**  
Global perspectives on sex, dating, love and life.

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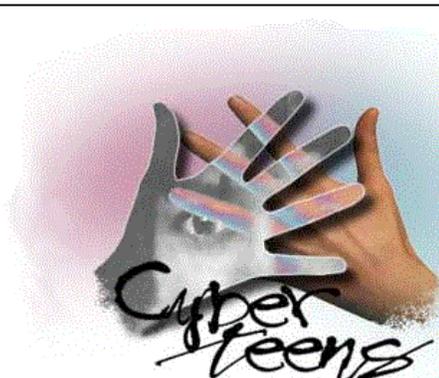
**Respect the Lady**  
For guys only: Do you really listen to your girlfriend? Do you always have to be in control? Take this quiz to see how much you know about relationships, girls, and rape.  
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[Building a Relationship](#)  
Relationships that grow out of feelings of insecurity and worthlessness are often unstable. You may always feel insecure or afraid. This quiz is just a few steps away from

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