

GROWING UP ONLINE



International

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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. News of Jessica’s growing fame as Autumn Edows reached her parents only by accident. “I got a phone call, and...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*, 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. 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.

“Everyone is panicking about sexual predators online,” 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 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. “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,” Halligan tells FRONTLINE.

“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.”

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CREDITS

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