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The Internet, Social Media and You!

There are very few topics that are hotter right now than the effect of social media on our children. We've all read the reports of children encountering dangerous situations via social media. We know about cyberbullying, about students making bad decisions online which can live forever, about the disconnect students see between their virtual and physical lives. Unfortunately, there is little room for social error these days. Let's face it, we all make bad choices sometimes but the bad choices we made in our youth were allowed to fade away. Too often with today's youth the bad choices they make are captured, posted on the Internet and allowed to take on a life of their own - never to fade into the past.

However, while the concerns we have for our children and social media are real the flip-side is that there are also positive aspects of social media. The Internet in general and social media specifically, when used conscientiously, can have several positive effects as well. Students are using social media to share their learning, to collaborate with other students and adults on valid and impactful academic or community projects. They are raising awareness for social concerns, sharing their passions and making connections with peers around the world. The appropriate use of the Internet and social media can give our students a voice with an authentic audience and help them begin to build a positive and powerful digital footprint.

So how do we as teachers and parents support our children as they develop their online presence? In reality, even the brightest, most mature and savvy adolescent needs guidance in this area. We need to be there for them as both models and mentors. To be honest, I think that we do this in much the same way that we handle all other areas of parenting. We learn as much as we can about the subject (from professionals, friends and family) and figure out what works for our own families.

But fear not - there are a lot of resources available and most (if not all) schools are looking to partner with parents in this task. In the meantime, here are my tips and I will end this post with links to other resources.

- Learn as much as you can about the sites and services your child is using. I know, this is a moving target. Even I have to work hard to keep up with this. But as I will point out later in this list - knowing you are making the effort makes a real statement with your children.
- Enforce the rules/laws that are already in place - all adult social media sites have terms of use which indicate that no one under the age of 13 should be using the site. As a matter of fact the use of adult social media sites by persons under the age of 13 is disallowed under federal law via COPPA (the [Children's Online Privacy Protection Act](#)).
- Let your children know that you will be checking the history on their devices, reading their texts, etc. Obviously there are tactics they can use to cover their tracks but often times, just letting your children know that you will be checking in, is enough to make them think twice. And no, this is not an invasion of privacy, especially as you have let

them know ahead of time. Look at it this way - would you let your pre-teen or adolescent go “out” without finding out where they were going first? To be perfectly honest, I would not allow any child under the age of 16 or 17 (depending on the child) to use the Internet or digital communication of any type in a private space - such as their bedroom - and I would insist that children under the age of 13 share all of their passwords with a parent. I know how unpopular this will be but no one said this parenting thing was going to be a bed of roses!

- Model appropriate use of social media - allow your children to see your Facebook, Instagram or Twitter feeds. Show them the kinds of posts you create or pages you follow and talk to them about your decision-making in the process. Maybe even point out a questionable post created by your crazy cousin and talk about why it may have been a bad choice to post it. Let your child see you using social media WHEN and WHERE appropriate. (This is not to say that I think all adults should be using social media - that is a purely personal decision - I am just suggesting that you share your experience if you are using it.)
- Help your child set up and maintain an account on a child/youth centered social media site. Working with your child as they set up a profile and begin to interact with others on [these approved and monitored sites](#) is a great way to help them develop positive patterns of online behavior.
- Help your child to see the connection between their online lives and physical lives. For instance, being “mean” is being mean, whether you do it person on the playground or at a distance in a text message. It is not as if what we do digitally is “pretend” and therefore does not “count.” We are all meant to be productive, intelligent, Christian people **all** of the time and in all places.
- Most important of ALL - talk, talk, talk. And when you are exhausted by talking - talk some more! Nothing is more crucial to parenting than good lines of communication. Now, I also know that getting your pre-teen or adolescent to talk to you can sometimes be a challenge. Don’t let that stop you. Believe it or not, they are listening. Family meal times and carpool rides are great opportunities. Help them to understand the impact of the choices they make - online and in person. My own personal suggestion from when my sons were younger was that I tried very hard not to over-react - no matter how preposterous the conversation or situation. I may have been having apoplexy inside but I tried to remain calm when talking to them in the hopes that they would not be discouraged from coming to me whenever they needed to. That is not to say I did not exercise my parental responsibility and lay down the law when needed - I just tried to do so with as little drama as possible. And in the end I would have to say that it paid off.

Again, these are simply guidelines and each family has to figure out what works for them and be ready to implement whatever they decide to do. But laying the foundation for positive online experiences will benefit you and your child in the long run - I promise!

Further resources and reading:

- [Web Ways](#) (scroll down to Internet Safety and Digital Citizenship)

- From Social Media Sites themselves (you can find most of the following on each site):
 - Terms of service pages
 - Acceptable use pages
 - Privacy policies
 - Community guidelines
- Curriculum:
 - [10 Simple Steps to Internet Safety](#)
 - [Growing Up Online](#)
 - [iKeepSafe](#)