



Healthy matters to keep in mind.

Life Balance

May 2013

Social Media: Your Teenager's Friend or Foe?

In a few decades, we've gone from using a bulky stationary phone for making local calls to engaging the far reaches of our planet from devices smaller than the palms of our hands. We're now connected — like it or not— around the clock and around the world.

Our teenagers, whose births parallel that of this expansive technology, are inherently wired to accept this 24/7 connectivity as the status quo. Social media and social networking sites are their new playgrounds which they prefer to use to communicate with each other even when they're standing shoulder to shoulder.

Pros and Cons

Social networking sites have been fueling debate in the media lately. The advantages are that they serve as the platform for broadening social circles and establishing deeper ties. Teenagers can interact and learn from people of other cultures and customs. And they can get to know those closer to home even better. They can also learn new skills such as creating and posting videos, pages, and the art of self-promotion.

However, these social sites are also conducive to many risky behaviors — particularly among teens— that can result in life-altering consequences. These behaviors include privacy issues, cyberbullying and sexting.

Look at Me, World!

On a daily basis, teens and young adults are revealing themselves, detailing every waking moment, expressing their views on everything from designer shoes to their politics. They're publishing pictures of themselves, their friends, even their enemies. In short,

they're compromising their privacy, their safety, and their future. How so? Employers and colleges are also tapping into these sites. They use them as a means to collect information about the background, behavior, and position on important issues of their potential employees and students. Exposing inappropriate details could cost your teen acceptance to a preferred school, a scholarship, a job, or even a career down the line.

But universities and corporations aren't the only ones looking over or engaging your teen online. Occasionally online predators use these sites to stalk victims. Sitting alone typing into a computer or cell phone may feel like a private exchange. However, once personal information is posted on the Internet, it becomes public. And your teen may have no control over who reads her seemingly private words.¹

Most teens think their lives are private as long as their parents do not read their posts.

Cyberbullying — How Parents Can Help

- Talk to your teen about your past experiences with bullies.
- Block the bully from the electronic devices.
- Limit access to technology. Keep the computer in a public place in the house and limit the use of cell phones and games. Turn on parental controls.
- Know your teen's online world. Check her postings and the sites she visits, and know how she spends her time online. Talk to her about privacy and encourage her to safeguard passwords.
- Speak to a therapist or school counselor.
- If your child is doing the bullying, talk to her firmly about this inappropriate behavior and the repercussions.⁴ While many teens believe their actions on the Internet can be anonymous, law enforcement has ways to track down the information and the source.

SEAP

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(800) 692-7459
(800) 824-4306 TDD
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www.liveandworkwell.com
access code: Pennsylvania

Cyberbullying — An Emotional Crime

Creating a bogus account to fool or ridicule someone; posting or sending threatening messages; altering photos using a classmate's face. These are all forms of cyberbullying, which is a crime. Cyberbullying causes emotional harm and is punishable by law.² Following are a few cases you've probably heard about as they've made the headlines:

- A group of girls posts the following message on FaceBook, "I'm going to kill you LOL!!!" "U R So Dead ;-). When questioned, they cited the emoticon defense, which doesn't hold water because whether they meant it as a joke or not, if the victim felt threatened, it's still punishable by law.
- Three friends. A falling out. And Facebook. Two of them logged into the third girl's Facebook account and edited pictures. They used the victim's account to solicit men for oral sex. The victim's parents said the girls sent hundreds of obscene messages from their daughter's account to friends, school coaches, church members and others. How did they get her information? They tapped into her Facebook account when she inadvertently logged into the social networking site from one of their computers.

Sexting, Not Just Fun

Sexting, or sending sexually explicit photos via text is very popular among teens, especially normal, everyday girls who send these pictures to their boyfriends thinking they will keep them close to their hearts forever.³ However, that doesn't always happen and the pictures sometimes get disseminated to the girls' disappointment and shame. But that's not all that they and their boyfriends should be worried about. Sexting can be considered pornography, and therefore a criminal act. So both parties could find themselves guilty of a crime.

- A young woman in Ohio sent nude pictures of herself to a boyfriend. When they broke up, he sent them to other high school girls. The girls harassed her; called her a slut. She became depressed and afraid to go to school. She went on public television to tell her story in order to prevent others from enduring the same ordeal. However, that didn't improve things and two months later, she hanged herself in her bedroom. She was 18.

Parents, Be on the Alert

While it is true that the actions of a few maladjusted individuals cannot be blamed on the social networking sites, the sites do serve as



the vehicles that allow this kind of behavior to flourish. As parents, it behooves us to be watchful of our children's interaction on cyberspace, to set boundaries and enforce them. Parents should look for signs of cyberbullying such as avoiding or being anxious around the computer or cell phone, being afraid to go to school or being leery of certain friends or acquaintances.

Technology is a wonderful thing. However, as we're learning, we can't set our kids loose with it. They may not always know the implications of their actions; actions which could end up forever changing the course of their lives as well as yours.

Resources

www.liveandworkwell.com

Visit the Live Well section for more information, tools, articles, self-help programs and resources related to life, family and relationships.

1 <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1394/1312>
2 <http://kidshealth.org/parent/positive/talk/cyberbullying.html>
3 http://kidshealth.org/parent/positive/issues_2011/2011_sexting.html
4 http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/feelings/cyberbullying.html?tracking=P_RelatedArticle#