

Social Media

Today's teens and "tweens" are connected to one another, and to the world, via digital technology more than any previous generation. Recent data suggests that social media (SM) venues like Facebook and MySpace have surpassed e-mail as the preferred method of communication in all age groups. While today's tweens and teens may be more digitally savvy than their parents, their lack of maturity and life experience can quickly get them into trouble with these new social venues. For this reason, it is imperative that parents talk with their children of all ages about social media and monitor their online SM use to help them navigate this new online social world. How parents talk with their kids and teens will vary slightly by age depending on the topic being discussed. These tips will help you start that journey with your family.

- Learn about these technologies first hand. There is simply no better way than to have a profile yourself. It will also enable you to "friend" your kids and monitor them on line.
- Let them know that their use of technology is something you want and need to know about.
 - For kids of all ages, ask daily: "Have you used the computer and the Internet today?"
 - Technology use will vary by age. Tweens are likely to be using more instant messaging and texting, while teens use those technologies and also networking sites such as Facebook. (These tools often are referred to as "platforms" for social networking.) Ask daily how your family used those tools with questions such as: "What did you write on Facebook today?" "Any new chats recently?" "Anyone text you today?"
 - Share a bit about your daily SM use as a way to facilitate daily conversation about your kids' online habits.
 - Get your kids talking about their SM lives if you can just so you know what they are doing.
- Keep the computer in a public part of your home, such as the family room or kitchen, so that you can check on what your kids are doing online and how much time they are spending there.
- Talk with other parents about what their kids of similar ages are using for SM. Ask your kids about those technologies as a starting point for discussion. If they are in the same peer group, there is a good chance they are all using the same platforms together. For example:
 - For teens: "Mrs. Smith told me Jennifer uses Facebook. Is that something you've thought of doing? Do you already have a profile? If so, I'd like to see it."
 - For tweens and older elementary school kids: "Are you planning on meeting up with kids on Club Penguin today? I'd love to see how that works." Or, "Let's look at your text log today together. I'd like to see who's been texting you."

- For all ages, emphasize that everything sent over the Internet or a cell phone can be shared with the entire world, so it is important they use good judgment in sending messages and pictures and set privacy settings on social media sites appropriately.
 - Discuss with kids of every age what “good judgment” means and the consequences of poor judgment, ranging from minor punishment to possible legal action in the case of “sexting” (see below) or bullying.
 - Remember to make a point of discouraging kids from gossiping, spreading rumors, bullying or damaging someone’s reputation using texting or other tools.
 - To keep kids safe, have your kids and teens show you where the privacy features are for every SM venue they are using. The more private, the less likely inappropriate material will be received by your child, or sent to their circle of acquaintances.
 - Be aware of the ages of use for sites your tweens and older elementary school kids want to use, including game sites such as ‘Club Penguin’ and ‘Webkins.’ Many sites are for age 13 and older, and the sites for younger kids do require parental consent to use.

- Be sure you are where your kids are online: IM, Facebook, MySpace, etc. Have a policy requiring that you and your child “friend” each other. This is one way of showing your child you are there, too, and will provide a check and balance system by having an adult within arm’s reach of their profile. This is important for kids of all ages, including teens.

- Show your kids you know how to use what they are using, and are willing to learn what you may not know how to do.

- Create a strategy for monitoring your kids’ online SM use, and be sure you follow through. Some families may check once a week and others more sporadically. You may want to say “Today I’ll be checking your computer and cell phone.” The older your kids are, the more often you may need to check.

- Consider formal monitoring systems to track your child’s email, chat, IM and image content. Parental controls on your computer or from your Internet service provider, Google Desktop or commercial programs are all reasonable alternatives.

- Set time limits for Internet and cell phone use. Learn the warning signs of trouble: skipping activities, meals and homework for SM; weight loss or gain; a drop in grades. If these issues are occurring due to your child being online when they should be eating, sleeping, participating in school or social activities, your child may have a problem with Internet or SM addiction. Contact your pediatrician for advice if any of these symptoms are occurring.

- Check chat logs, emails, files and social networking profiles for inappropriate content, friends, messages, and images periodically. Be transparent and let your kids know what you are doing.

The New Problem of “Sexting”

“Sexting” refers to sending a text message with pictures of children or teens that are inappropriate, naked or engaged in sex acts. According to a recent survey, about 20 percent of teen boys and girls have sent such messages. The emotional pain it causes can be enormous for the child in the picture as well as the sender and receiver--often with legal implications. Parents must begin the difficult conversation about sexting before there is a problem and introduce the issue as soon as a child is old enough to have a cell phone. Here are some tips for how to begin these conversations with your children:

- Talk to your kids, even if the issue hasn't directly impacted your community. “Have you heard of sexting?” “Tell me what you think it is.” For the initial part of the conversation, it is important to first learn what your child's understanding is of the issue and then add to it an age appropriate explanation (see next bullet).
- Use examples appropriate for your child's age. For younger children with cell phones who do not yet know about sex, alert them that text messages should never contain pictures of people--kids or adults--without their clothes on, kissing or touching each other in ways that they've never seen before. For older children, use the term “sexting” and give more specifics about sex acts they may know about. For teens, be very specific that “sexting” often involves pictures of a sexual nature and is considered pornography.
- Make sure kids of all ages understand that sexting is serious and considered a crime in many jurisdictions. In all communities, if they “sext”, there will be serious consequences, quite possibly involving the police, suspension from school, and notes on the sexter's permanent record that could hurt their chances of getting into college or getting a job.
- Experts have noted that peer pressure can play a major role in the sending of texts, with parties being a major contributing factor. Collecting cell phones at gatherings of tweens and teens is one way to reduce this temptation.
- Monitor headlines and the news for stories about “sexting” that illustrate the very real consequences for both senders and receivers of these images. “Have you seen this story?” “What did you think about it?” “What would you do if you were this child?” Rehearse ways they can respond if asked to participate in inappropriate texting.
- Encourage school and town assemblies to educate parents, teachers and students.
- Watch the [ABC Good Morning America segment](#) from 4/15/09 featuring a town hall meeting with teens who have sent and received “sexts,” parents and experts.