



PARENTING FOR MORAL GROWTH

SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT RESOURCES FOR INDEPENDENT
SCHOOL PARENTS

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Parenting and the Internet: *Is there an app for that?*

Picture the nervous mom or dad watching as the elated teenager who has just passed her driver's test backs out of the driveway for her first solo journey.

While parents desperately want to protect their children, and know a mistake behind the wheel can have grave consequences, they accept a couple of truths. First, traveling in an automobile, even with the parent in the driver's seat, always involves risk. And second, because it is practically essential that everyone learn to drive, one must ultimately trust in the new driver's good judgment.

Still, this teenage rite of passage is a humbling moment for parents.

And what about the thought of your child navigating the internet highway and negotiating daily life filled with ever-evolving forms of media? Whereas you and your 16-year-old can find some common ground when it comes to piloting the family minivan, he or she might be the equivalent of a Formula 1 racer on the cyber-track, while you haven't even left the garage. And neither of you can predict what technological advance awaits around the next turn!

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Determining Safe Internet Use for All Ages

Considering the developmental level of a child is smart practice regardless of the parenting topic. With media use, this may require a little more consideration, especially when even preschoolers appear to possess some special "techno gene" that is simply lacking in anyone over that age of 40. But don't be fooled. That kindergartner's dexterity with mouse and keyboard does not suggest a sophisticated conceptual grasp of how the Internet functions. In fact, according to Nancy Willard (see article) young children probably think of the computer as a "magic box," and are

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completely dependent on their parents to provide a home environment that supports safe, appropriate media use.

The following guidelines, adapted from the Media Awareness Network (www.bewebaware.ca), capture the connection between developmentally mediated attitudes and parental response.

Five- to 7-year-olds are at a developmental level where they:

- use simple “cause and effect” reasoning
- enjoy make-believe play
- are not apt to question authority
- like being social and sharing ideas

Their attitudes toward media might involve:

- difficulty telling the difference between reality and fantasy
- acceptance of what they see at face value, including advertisements
- trust of characters and people they see in the media, making them especially vulnerable to stereotypes

Eight- to 10-year-olds are at a developmental level where they:

- are starting to develop their moral identity and their sense of responsibility, as well as their ability to think logically and be planners
- seek social approval, feeling pressure to conform and be “cool”
- are increasingly apt to be influenced by peers as well as by parents
- still believe media portrayals are real if they appear possible in real life

Their attitudes toward media might involve:

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“Parenting” continued

We can't teach our children to drive by taking away the keys to the car; nor can we make them technologically street-wise by banning the cell phone or unplugging the computer. But we can have high expectations and provide guidance.

How to do just that is the message communicated by Nancy Willard, founder of the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use (www.new.csriu.org) and author of an indispensable resource for parents, *Cyber-Safe Kids, Cyber-Savvy Teens: Helping Young People Learn to Use the Internet Safely and Responsibly* (Jossey-Bass, 2007). She notes that most of us parents are “digital immigrants”; while we might accommodate, we will never fully acculturate. So, the old paradigm – parents as the authority, understanding environmental risks and intervening effectively – simply isn't useful in this brave new Web 2.0 world. Neither is fear-based messaging or what Ms. Willard calls “techno-panic.” Focusing only on the scariest aspects of technology prevents parents from appropriately engaging in the real work they must do and engenders distrust in kids. Fortunately, empirical data show that our heightened level of concern about young people's use of modern technologies is disproportionate to the actual risks faced. Willard advises that parents find a balance between ignoring and exaggerating the risks.

First, parents need to be actively and positively involved in their kids' online activities, with an emphasis on reinforcing good choices in keeping with personal and family values, without using scare tactics or pretending to be an authority. According to Willard, “many young people are not telling their parents or other adults about problems or difficulties

they encounter online” out of a sense that “adults do not understand the teen online world, (and) will likely overreact to any reported concern, will not know how to respond effectively to such concerns, and may make the situation worse if they do try to help.” In fact, she reminds us, “Teens want to resolve problems on their own – and developmentally this is what they need to do.”

Willard advises that one of the best ways to create a positive relationship with your child is what she calls the “Count to Three” approach. Every time you interact with your child in relation to his or her online activities try to find three positive things to say. Your child will start to feel very good about having you see what is happening online – likely without knowing why. Be especially positive if your child reports an online concern that he or she has handled or asks for guidance in handling.

We parents may not easily grasp the nuances of managing on-line relationships, or even which

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“Teens want to resolve problems on their own – and developmentally, this is what they need to do”

“Safe Internet” continued

- being easily influenced by media images and personalities who appear “cool” or desirable
- being frightened by realistic portrayals of violence, threats and danger
- blending their online actions with other activities, thus beginning to be multi-taskers
- being naïve regarding false online identities

Some safety tips for parents to consider:

- Always sit with your 5- to 7-year-old when he/she is online...also advisable with kids up to the age of 10 unless they are only visiting sites you have approved. (Research indicates that 20% of 9- and 10-year-olds have their own computers with Internet access.)
- Keep Internet-connected computers in an open area for ease of monitoring
- Investigate Internet-filtering tools as a complement to – not a replacement for – parental supervision
- Establish a shared family email account rather than letting your kids have their own accounts
- Don't allow instant messaging at this age
- With 8 to 10-year-olds, talk about healthy sexuality, because kids can easily come across online pornography
- Encourage your kids to come to you if they encounter anything online that makes them feel uncomfortable or threatened, and stay calm when they do ■

“Parenting” continued

wallpaper assures an attractive MySpace page, but we can help our kids practice effective problem-solving and ethical decision-making skills. First, we need to be sensitive to signs that life in cyber-space has become uncomfortable for them – an unexpected decline in using the computer, anger or agitation after using the computer or cell phone, or unexplained anxiety about going to school.

Willard suggests that parents can help to evaluate what is happening on-line by asking who is involved and exploring their motives – having fun, getting attention, expressing a feeling, impressing someone, or manipulating someone. She advises assessing risks or harm resulting from online actions, asking questions such as:

- Is this kind or respectful to others?
- How would you feel if someone did this to you or to your best friend?
- What would a trusted adult do or think in this situation?
- Have any agreements, rules or laws been violated?
- What would happen if everybody did this?
- How does this reflect on those involved?
- Would this behavior be okay if it happened in the real world, rather than the virtual world?

Working from a perspective informed by research on moral development, Ms. Willard investigates the special challenges kids face when making decisions in the “you can't see me, I can't see you” world of Internet anonymity. She also examines the rationalizations that kids (and adults) construct when they decide to act in a

manner contrary to their internalized values, which include:

- “I won't get caught.”
- “It didn't really hurt anyone.”
- “It's not a real person” (in the case of harm to a large corporation or group).
- “Everyone does it.”

Parents might consider their own behavior, in the virtual or the real world, to determine what they are modeling, from burning a copy of that NetFlix DVD to texting while “stopped at the red light” to bringing their Blackberry to the dinner table to check or send emails.

Noting that the “anarchy” that appears to reign on the Internet can foster the belief, “If I can do it online, it must be okay,” Ms. Willard counters brilliantly with a list of family values to set in opposition to the social norms of the online world:

- Personal privacy – when others seek to know all or encourage you to tell all
- Respect – when others condone or encourage disrespect of others
- Modesty and restraint – when others flaunt promiscuous sexuality
- Responsible consumption – when others promote excessive consumption and the need to have it all
- Peaceful resolution of conflict – when others glorify, promote, or resort to violence
- Hard work – when others promise a “free lunch”
- Self-protection – when others encourage taking risks

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Media Consumption & Kids

In January of this year the Kaiser Family Foundation released the third wave of their study of children's media use, documenting changes in habits since the first two waves of the study, in 1999 and 2004. The study surveyed a large sample of 8 to 18-year-olds across the country. As the researchers who designed and conducted the study remind us, "media are among the most powerful forces in young people's lives today...offering a constant stream of messages about families, peers, relationships, gender roles, sex, violence, food, values, clothes, and an abundance of other topics too long to list."

A quick summary of the key findings:

- huge increases in media use among young people have occurred in the past 5 years, with an average of about 7 ½ hours of media use daily with the data adjusted to capture multi-tasking
- an explosion in mobile and online media has fueled this increase
- youth who spend more time with media report lower grades and lower levels of personal contentment
- children whose parents made an effort to limit media use – through the media environment they create in the home and the rules they set – spend less time with media than their peers
- three groups of young people tend to stand out for their high levels of media consumption: those in the tween years (11 to 14) and Blacks and Hispanics

Some additional specific findings of interest:

- While "live" TV watching (as opposed to viewing on another format, such as Hulu on the computer) has actually decreased by about a half and hour over the past 5 years, TV watching continues to represent the bulk of time spent using media. Not surprisingly, researchers found that in homes where the TV is on during dinner or on most of time in the background, young people watch more TV. But considering the strong correlation between sitting down together to a family meal and academic success, one wonders about the extent to which the positive effect is diminished if the TV claims most of the attention.
- The majority of young people report that they have no rules imposed on them about their use of TV, video games, and music. A slight majority (52%) report rules on computer use. Let's hear it for those parents who are bucking the trend by being willing to expect their kids to follow guidelines that are developmentally appropriate, negotiated when practical, and generally enforced – especially in light of the fact that young people who report that their parents have some rules about their media use are exposed to an average of nearly three hours less media content per day than those who say they don't have rules. And this holds true across the age range studied, suggesting that even if a child is an older teen, setting rules decreases overall media use.

Internet continued

- Care and concern – when others glorify "me first"
- Search for truth – when others seek to mislead and coerce
- Balance – when others promote excess
- Responsible behavior – when it might appear that cheaters win

A measured, respectful dialogue with young people about how they might sort out a personal position on any of these continuums could be the equivalent of making sure the cyber-world seat belt is buckled and the airbag is in good working order. ■

Julie Stevens is a parent and former school psychologist. She serves on CSEE's Moral Development Team

- Media is migrating to kids' bedrooms, despite the advice of child development and internet safety experts that parents should be monitoring media use and that is best accomplished with TVs and computers are in more "public," shared areas of the home. The researchers found that 71% of kids reported having TVs in their bedrooms, while 36% had computers and 31% had internet access.
- Interestingly, use of the internet at school has held steady over the past 5 years, while home use has increased by 12%. While educators and school staff continue to have an important role to play in helping young people use media responsibly, the home, where parents can best control what kids see and do, is the arena of growth. ■

See full report at:
www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/810.pdf

Leaders On Line: A Teen Promotes Internet Safety

Chelsea Stessel is a fairly typical 18 year-old in that she has been using Internet social networking for half of her life. She explains, "When I was 9, I had an AOL account with an AIM screen name. I thought I was talking to an 11 year-old boy who was also living in New York City. However, when my parents asked to look at his profile, they found out that he was actually a 43 year-old truck driver from Wisconsin. This internet scare stayed with me."

Chelsea's ultimate response to her "scare" was far from typical. In 2006, as a ninth grader at CSEE member school Harpeth Hall, in Nashville, Tennessee, Chelsea heard Dr. Parry Aftab's presentation on Internet safety awareness. Aftab, an attorney specializing in privacy issues, founded Wired Kids, Inc., dedicated to protecting all Internet users, especially children, from cybercrime and abuse. Chelsea went on to complete a 25-hour Internet safety course, which certified her as a teen educator, and spoke on the topic the following year at a meeting of the National Coalition of Girls Schools in Baltimore, Maryland.

In the fall of 2008, Chelsea was approached by Harpeth Hall's technology specialists and asked to create and oversee a Nashville-based Internet safety group. Chelsea embarked on a three-week independent study to create a business plan, training programs, and promotional materials for her new community service organization, which she named LOL (Leaders On Line).

When asked for a quick overview on the prevalence of and responses to cyberbullying on social networking sites such as Facebook, Chelsea noted, "Facebook does a great job with its safety features; it is very easy to block someone, and if inappropriate behavior is reported, the Facebook team is fast in reacting and responding. Unfortunately, bullying and teasing is a part of every adolescent's life, and the anonymity that the Internet provides can be dangerous. LOL always teaches its audience members to do their best job to not contribute to any mean or degrading comments. If they are the ones being victimized, it is imperative that they tell their 'buddy' (a close friend), as well as a trusted adult (parent, family member, school counselor) so someone else knows that this cyberbullying is going on. As hard as it is, the best thing to do in the case of cyberbullying is to ignore the comments as much as possible."

With stories broadly circulating about college admissions officers and prospective employers denying applicants based on disreputable Facebook postings, parents are concerned that their teenagers, who inhabit an online virtual world, operate with a totally different standard when it comes to issues of privacy. Chelsea acknowledges the significance of this

concern, commenting, "Social networking in general has made my generation much more open to strangers than any generation before us; however, this should not be an excuse to leave your social networking

"Social networking in general has made my generation much more open to strangers than any generation before us; however, this should not be an excuse to leave your social networking profile wide open."

profile wide open. Treat it like your room - no strangers are allowed to see inside every detail of your private space; instead, they can see the basic structure of your house and maybe see a little bit through a window. Protect yourself by restricting what 'non-friends' can see. Be smart!

"It is hard to admit, but parents are

more than often right in this situation. Teens online may not see some of their pictures as racy, inappropriate, or sending the wrong message. Having a parent look at your photos is a great way to guesstimate how someone like a college admissions officer or a future employer will interpret them. It is always better to be safe than sorry."

Chelsea urges parents to "talk to your kids about what they're doing online. Let them show you what their site is all about; ask them to take you on a virtual tour of their site to see how it works. The more you know about the site, the more comfortable you can feel about your kids being online. Don't let the Internet be a 'big, bad' thing-- take responsibility and educate yourself!" ■

Ethics & Media:

Navigating the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

A quick review of recent news seems to suggest that we may be reaching a Malcolm Gladwellesque tipping point at the intersection of ethical communication and social networking media.

Comedy Central's South Park recently took on the addictive nature of virtual life and pseudo-friendships in the world of Facebook and Chat Roulette, lampooning parental failure to support their children's positive social development in an episode entitled "You Have Zero Friends." Watch it on YouTube if you dare.

Beyond the court of public opinion, a real life district attorney took on the case of a 16-year-old Arkansas boy who is suing his mother for harassment, claiming that she hacked into his Facebook page and made slanderous postings.

The most sobering development has been in connection to the indictments of nine students from South Hadley High School in Massachusetts, for relentless bullying and cyberbullying in the case of the suicide of a 15-year-old classmate, Phoebe Prince.

One certainty is that the technological infrastructure that allows defamatory gossip or group ostracism to go viral – through text messages, or postings on Facebook or YouTube – has ratcheted up the potential for bullying behavior to be virtually (in all senses of the word) inescapable for the intended target. And the faceless, primal, frenzied compulsion to inflict pain that comes

to mind when one thinks of a lynch mob is turbo-charged in the digital landscape our kids inhabit.

And by turns that digital landscape can be a dark netherworld of lurking predators or a bright Eden populated by standard-bearers for learning and social good. The feature article in the April edition

of *Fast Company* magazine explores "How Tech Is Making Kids Smarter Everywhere." Pictured on the cover are adorable three-year-old twins working on their iPhones, in addition to a quote from Paul Kim, CTO of the Stanford University School of Education, who says, "With these devices, kids explore by themselves and figure it out."

Figure it out indeed. As parents struggle to achieve a rudimentary familiarity with constantly evolving technologies that their kids have

already mastered, they simultaneously must help their kids strike a healthy balance amidst what might be seen as the good, the bad, and the ugly. The good: kids gain enormous ability to learn about and improve their world when they are competent manipulators of technology. The bad: kids are especially vulnerable to a range of potential exploitation through social media – from being stalked by a pedophile in a chat room, to having personal data mined for sale to advertisers when they log onto an on-line game, to being easily "addicted" to constantly checking or sending text messages. The ugly: kids may effortlessly slip into the roles of perpetrator or co-conspirator in the kind of behavior that took an extreme and deadly form at South Hadley High.

As Rushworth M. Kidder wisely noted in an April 5, 2010, posting on the Global Ethics Institute website, "What's needed is a focus on the moral and ethical culture of the school... How do we change a school culture? First, by understanding that educators can't do it alone. Kids are in school only 20 percent of their waking hours each year. Unless their parents and the entire community are committed to this task — not just *involved*, but *committed* — nothing much will change." ■

“ [Parents] must help their kids strike a healthy balance amidst what might be seen as the good, the bad, and the ugly. ”

Changing Culture: Parents and Schools

by David Streight

How do we change the moral and ethical culture of a school? Page 6 of this issue of *Parenting for Moral Growth* reports Rushworth M. Kidder's comment that parents and the entire community must be committed to the task of improving school culture. True. Parent involvement is a key component in the most successful programs to build ethical school cultures. Kidder's article (not reported here) adds the importance of good modeling, and of proactive teaching of respect, fairness, and compassion. All good suggestions.

More specifically, parents can be both catalysts and assistants in the development of school culture by following a few guidelines:

- **set clear standards**

Help the school decide what standards the school community should be expected to follow. Work together as partners, preferably as a committee. Make sure the standards are developmentally appropriate, generally agreed upon, and that they are reachable.

- **positives more than negatives**

Focus much more on positives than on negatives in setting behavioral expectations. At least four of the former to one of the latter is the general guideline. In other words, "all written and oral communication should demonstrate respect for others" is a more effective statement than "disrespect will not be tolerated." There are times for the clear negatives, but we know that when schools construct long lists of rules, the number of infractions tends to increase.

- **clarity in specifics**

In defining moral / ethical values and goals, offer clear examples of what each looks like in "daily life" (e.g. one example of showing respect is greeting a student when he or she comes into the classroom; another is picking up an article of clothing on the floor, so it will not be stepped on).

- **work *with* the school**

Parents are in charge at home. The school administration and staff must be in charge at school. Be sensitive to working with the school, including when it is time to step back, and when the school might need more encouragement, or even a gentle push. Pushing too much—with schools as well as with kids—is counterproductive.

- **model behaviors**

We are the most powerful behavioral teachers our students have. We should work to live up to our own standards. Indeed, we should work to be exemplars of our standards. The fact that we are working towards, rather than being perfect, is an important observation for our kids.

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Julie Stevens
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Contributions and comments are
welcome
Please send to <info@csee.org>

www.csee.org