



A PARENTS' PRIMER ON SOCIAL NETWORKING

By Walt Mueller

Introduction

Social networking is now the number one online activity for teenagers. This is not at all surprising as emerging technologies allow developing adolescents increased opportunity to connect with friends at a time in life when they are spreading their wings in preparation to launch into the independence of adulthood. Children and teens are social beings who love engaging with social media. . . that new set of rapidly evolving platforms and technologies that enable them to interact around the clock with others through sharing text, pictures, videos, instant messages and more. Engaging with social media equals engagement with friends. . . something very attractive at a time in life when engagement with friends is first and foremost on their minds! We shouldn't be surprised that in recent years, social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube have become popular hangouts for children and teens.

As parents called by God to nurture our children into an active and all-encompassing Christian faith, we have the responsibility to proactively guide our children into engaging with social media and social networking in a manner that brings honor and glory to God. Teaching them now will serve to prepare them for a lifetime of healthy and safe engagement with social media. Remember. . . social media are not inherently evil. It's how we choose to use these tools that is what should concern us the most!

At the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding (cpyu.org), our Digital Kids Initiative has been launched as a resource to help you help your children navigate the Digital Frontier in God-honoring ways. We believe that parental awareness and understanding lead to crafting healthy and proactive parental responses. What follows is an introduction to social networking that we trust will serve you as you endeavor to serve Christ and your kids.

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Social networks are a place for kids to express and vent anger, hurt and emotional pain.

Why are kids drawn to social networking?

- To connect and "hang out" with friends
- It is a way to make new friends near and far
- To stay connected with friends in order to not miss out on anything
- To shape and "try on" different selves as they engage in identity-formation, the most basic task of adolescence
- To extend and enrich real life friendships
- To express one's self through postings, profiles, pictures, videos, blogs, comments, etc.
- To fish for and receive affirmation and "likes" as a way to seek significance and validation
- It is a place to express and vent anger, hurt and emotional pain
- To gossip and flirt
- Because everyone else is doing it!
- It is convenient in the midst of a hurried and harried lifestyle. . . it's a quick, easy, and time-efficient way to communicate
- It is a diversion from the difficult realities and pressures of life

Blessings of social networking

- Offers a way to extend and build off-line real-world relationships with friends and family members
- Reinforces and supports existing physical communities including youth groups, teams, schools, etc.
- An efficient, immediate, and far-reaching tool for sharing ideas, data and information
- Fosters connections around the world that increase understanding of cultural diversity and God's global activity, while breaking down sinful prejudices

Dangers of social networking

- Cyber-bullying
- Sexting
- Online predators
- Pornography
- Overuse, addiction and health issues including loss of sleep
- Oversharing by saying, showing and telling too much
- Developing "multiple selves, "fluid selves" or "fabricated selves" in an effort to seek acceptance from different online audiences, resulting in a loss of finding and being satisfied in one's identity in Christ
- Because the online world can feel anonymous, children and teens often fail to use good online judgment, resulting in impulsive posting that can hurt both themselves and others.
- Exposure to marketing and advertising

Parental Strategies

We recommend that you avoid extremes as you train your child to engage in social networking in healthy and Godly ways. Giving them total freedom without the benefit of your wisdom and oversight will most likely lead to trouble. Over-control and unreasonable limits/expectations rob your child of the ability to learn how to use social networking responsibly. In addition, it might force them to engage in sneaky and irresponsible use behind your back. Here are some suggested parental strategies that will help you strike a healthy balance.

Talk about how they are called to live all of life to the glory of God, including their social networking experience.

- *Monitor and evaluate your own use of social networking and social media tools to be sure that you are not using them too much or inappropriately. Your example is more powerful than you know!*
- *When they are young, think for them by setting and enforcing strict boundaries and parameters. Do not be afraid to say "no."*
- *Know and enforce parameters and rules established by providers (i.e. NO Facebook page until the age of 13).*
- *Encourage critical/Christian thinking by thinking with your older and more mature children about how they are using technology and social networking. Don't do all the thinking for them.*
- *Talk about how they are called to live all of life to the glory of God, including their social networking experience.*
- *Warn them about the potential idolatrous nature and pull of social media and networking. It can and does easily become a time-consuming obsession.*

- *Start young and stay diligent. It's never too early or too late to talk about social networking boundaries and practices with your kids.*
- *Familiarize yourself with technologies, platforms and social networking sites. Be where your kids are online. Establishing your own profile and presence makes it easier for you to monitor your child's social networking activities.*
 - *Have them share their passwords, profiles and sites with you.*
 - *Be sure they keep their passwords private and to themselves. Passwords should never be shared with anyone other than parents.*
 - *Do not allow them to post full birthdate, address, social security number, credit card numbers or other personal information online.*
- *Have them set privacy settings to "friends only."*
- *Be sure they "friend" you.*
- *Continually monitor your child's social media tools and sites for content. Establish a "Google Alert" for your child's name to help you monitor their presence and postings.*
- *Communicate about what they are using, how they are using it and the content they post.*
- *Set appropriate time limits.*
- *Familiarize yourself with all safety and privacy features of your child's social networking platforms. . . and be sure they use them!*
- *Establish, communicate and keep reminding them of your rules and parameters.*
- *Teach them to engage in appropriate online contact and relationships, and to ignore and report inappropriate online contact and relationships.*

- Regularly review their "friend" list, limiting that list to people they actually know.
- Enlist and enforce consequences for misuse.
- Remind them that anything they post can be seen by the entire world and is there forever.
- Have them remove inappropriate content posted by others on their walls.
- Encourage them to pause and think before hitting "send," "post" or "reply". . .because they can't get it back once it's gone. Encourage the use of good judgment.
- Read, discuss, sign and enlist the CPYU Family Digital Covenant of Conduct. You can find and download this covenant at digitalkidsinitiative.com.

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Helpful Links

cpyu.org - The Center for Parent/Youth Understanding

digitalkidsinitiative.com - CPYU's Digital Kids Initiative

connectsafely.org/Safety-Advice-Articles/facebook-for-parents.html - A Parents' Guide to Facebook



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For additional information on the digital world of kids, visit the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding's Digital Kids Initiative at digitalkidsinitiative.com.

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