

Helping your tweens and teens navigate social media

The media loves reporting horror stories about teens online and the negative impacts of too much screen time. Unsurprisingly, internet use can be a real concern for us parents!

The temptation can be to elbow in, stamp our authority over passwords, read Instagram accounts, etc, but in our experience all this does is create tension, reduce trust and teach young people to go ‘undercover’.

Our goal here is explore how we can help (and teach) our kids to stay safe and make good choices without having to lecture, confiscate, ban or go into battle.

THE THINGS WE NEED TO KNOW

- The online world is your teen’s real world – they make their social arrangements there, have meaningful and meaningless conversations with their mates there – it is important, this can’t be underestimated.
- Teens often think you don’t understand this (or social media as a whole), so they’re sometimes cagey. As parents, it can help to school up a bit on different types of social media and consider our own online habits.
- Schools often give kids a great grounding on how to behave online and the frightening consequences of bad decisions. If your teen’s school hasn’t, ask what they have planned. After the event, ask your teen what was said. These talks are often provided by organisations with incredible stories!
- What teens don’t tend to learn as much about is how to cope when their selfie gets a negative comment or a ‘thumbs down’. Talk to them about this and help them find some strategies so their self esteem is left unaffected.
- The negative stuff – including bullying – often comes from your teen’s own peer group. Name calling and leaving kids out can happen anytime (there’s no escape, even at home). Online bullying is often kept a secret from parents, due to a concern we’ll manage it badly (ugh!), remove their access and just like us, there are some things they’d rather keep private.
- Interestingly, your kid’s friends will often help them out when needed. Another reason to encourage those friendships! And of course there are ways to foster communication with your teen (read on!).
- If your teen comes to you with an online issue – say they did post that pic – keep your cool, listen, comfort them and ask how you can help.
- Discuss how they might help a friend if they were being bullied online. Talk to them about reaching out offline, blocking, unfriending and reporting, and teach them to be mindful of their language and tone (i.e. not to be a keyboard warrior!), as things can turn nasty quickly online.
- Know your teen’s school’s policy around online etiquette – if something negative happens, you may be able to get support, but ensure it’s anonymous, as no-one likes a nark (still!).
- If you’re using social media, ask your teen’s permission before posting a photo of them (even family photos). These images can easily be viewed by their friends and peers, and this models great manners and respect.
- One last thing – it can be cool for kids to be online ‘friends’ with your own friends, as well as with aunts and uncles! Let your friends and family know they can come to you if they see anything they’re concerned about, or give them permission to speak to your teen offline. Let your teen know these are great people who have their back.

HOW TO PROVIDE SUPPORT

- Make your continued, positive existence in their life totally normal. Check in on friendships, go see their game, watch favourite tv shows... take an interest in the things they’re interested in!
- If your kid wants a cell phone or to join a social media platform before the legal age (most are 13), ask them to build a case and convince you! They’ll have to think about your concerns, attempt to alleviate them, do some research and think about what they’ll do if issues do arise. When they bring you their case, try to be open minded and ask for further research and clarification if needed. If you’re mostly convinced, give them the chance, with a few guidelines. Better this than just saying ‘no’ and having them hide their account or write you off as a “derogatory noun here”.
- Build a trusting relationships so they can talk to you about the ‘hard’ stuff and know you won’t just disconnect the internet or take their phone away!

Believe it or not, these tips came from teens! We thought they were amazing, insightful and practical, so big thanks to the young people at Bounce for teaching us a thing or 20!

TIPS FROM THE PROS

Here's some extra advice we thought was bang on!

- Engage your teen in creating the 'rules' around their device or internet use – kids who are involved in this are more likely to follow them – hurrah! (Robb, 2017). This may include a guideline around use per day. Our research suggests a maximum of around 2-3 hours (Gluckman, 2010).
- Take an interest in your teen's online activity and discuss this with them like you would with the rest of their day (Hawton, 2017).
- Think about your teen's social network and if they struggle to connect, support them in this. One thing influencing internet usage is loneliness, yet the internet can lead to lessened social interaction (Junghyun, 2009).
- On that note, keep inviting teens and families over. Make your home a cool place to hang out with healthy snacks, places to relax and 'internet access' (they will talk too!). Friendships are a fundamental means of support, fun and validation, and this can be a great way to hear about the latest 'news' as they'll often forget you're there! (Lerner, 2007).
- Keep talking about your values (on and offline) and encourage your teen to think about the sort of person they'd like to be (Lerner, 2007). If something they disagree with is said or done, sometimes the best option is to excuse themselves, or relay their own values. Chat to them about how they can do this in an inoffensive way, e.g. that's an interesting perspective but not my own belief.
- Social media can encourage a lot of self-focus and the teen years are a great time to develop our social conscience (Steve Biddulph 2013) either offline (e.g. volunteering for cool projects) or online, e.g. starting a blog about their political, social, environmental or economic concerns (Lerner, 2007).

AND YES... WE DO HAVE TO TALK ABOUT PORN

Research says it's likely your kids have already seen some porn and that it will be more hard-core than you realise (or have seen yourself).

- Awkward, but the most effective way to keep your kids safe is to talk about it.
- A good way to start is by having a convo about it with one of your friends while your teen is within earshot... they won't miss a word! Or you can broach it with them, try: "Often porn comes up online even if we're not looking for it."
- The key things you want them to know:
 - Porn is fantasy, not 'real'. Relationships aren't like this.
 - Some pornography is violent and illegal.
 - Porn can be addictive and make you want to watch more.
 - Porn is produced to make money and the industry sometimes takes advantage of people.
 - Porn can make people want to try things that may be risky or harmful. It's important to ensure consent is given at the start and during sex, and to never pressure anyone to do something they're not cool with.

For more information check out [The Light Project](#) and [Safe Surfer](#).

MORE GREAT INFO AND RESOURCES

[Reach Out](#)

This is Australian, but it's good. Reach Out has a [site for teens](#) too – let them know!

[Netsafe](#)

Great NZ overview with lots tips and advice

[John Parsons](#)

If you ever have the chance to attend one of John Parsons talks, do so. Or advocate that your school bring him in (and then you'll get the chance to see him too!).

[The Parenting Place aka Toolbox Parenting](#)

This site contains loads of research-based tips and insights into teens and how to help them use social media in a safe and responsible way.

UK Children's Commission

The challenges of being online are similar for young people here and abroad. See:

- [Life in 'likes'](#) While this research focuses on younger kids, it gives great insight into the use of social media of kids and why it's so important. If you can't get through the full 42 pgs skip to 38 and see the recommendations for parents.
- [Growing Up Digital](#) This report makes some great points too!

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We want to thank and acknowledge the amazing professionals who have contributed to this work and care hugely about young people –

- Amber Paterson, Bounce
- Dr Dean Sutherland, University of Canterbury
- Dr Sue Bagshaw, 298 Youth Health and The Collaborative