

A Parent Guide to Teens, Technology, & Social Media ©

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Contents

Introduction

Part I. When Your Child Begins Social Media

Rule #1 One Account Only

Rule #2 Private Account

Rule #3 Friend, Follower, & Passcode

Rule #4 Approve Posts

Rule #5 One Post A Day

Rule #6 Only “Likes” & Compliments

Part 2. Maintenance Rules

Rule #1 MUST Monitor

Rule #2 Have The Tough Conversation

Rule #3 Low-Tech Activities

Rule #4 No Phone Time

Rule #5 Spend Time With Your Kids!

Part 3. Serious Problems

Problem #1: Nudes

Problem #2: High School Sexting

Problem #3: Unsafe Behaviors

Part 4. What Can You Do

Restrictions

Part 5. There is Hope

Please don't give up

Resources

Introduction

As a Psychotherapist who has treated adolescents for more than a decade and mother of two teens, I am growing more concerned about teen peer pressure that is driving large numbers of adolescents to make poor choices on the Internet and social media. Teen decisions impact their reputations, psychological well-being as well as their future lives.

It is important to keep in mind that the Internet is forever.

This guide will walk you through how to establish and enforce your family's Internet and social media rules and their use of devices which provide access to networks. My recommendations will demand your time, effort and follow-through, which can be challenging for today's busy parents.

I can say with confidence that investing upfront in creating and enforcing these rules will help you identify and prevent problems before they happen and/or erupt into full-blown disasters that cannot be erased.

This guide covers Internet and social media "Best Practices," which have worked successfully for other families of teens. While you may disagree with some of these suggestions, the examples provided herein will give you a place to begin setting limits around your teen's technology time. Remember, your teen is not in charge and they want reassurance that this is the case even though their behavior may suggest otherwise. You are the grownup.

Part One

When Your Child Begins Social Media

Technology and all its good, bad and ugly effects is here to stay. You can try to make computers, tablets, cell phones and wearables off limits to your child, but it's not realistic. There are computers in the classroom, library, friends' homes, workplace, grocery store, car and in your pocket.

While it's almost impossible to enforce your child's abstinence from technology, parents must pay attention to how much time their children spend on technology and where they're spending it including websites, chat rooms and social media.

Set limits now with your child to build mutual trust and teach them how to use the social media responsibly. To begin with, your child should be at least 13-years-old to use social media. Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter prohibit children under the age of 13 from using their networks although millions of children provide phony birth dates and sign up regardless.

Once your child is old enough to be on social media, agree on a set of rules and write them into a contract for your child to sign. Take the time to explain each rule. The more your child understands in the beginning, the greater the chance that they will respect your expectations.

Setting up a structure now also will help your child develop a healthier relationship with social media in the long-term.

Here are six rules that will help you start your kids safely on social media:

Rule #1: One Account Only

I recommend that your child begin with one social media account such as Instagram, Facebook or Twitter. Your child must build trust with you and demonstrate that they will follow all the rules on one account before you permit them to expand their social network. Their choice of social media should exclude Snapchat or any site, which allows anonymous or disappearing posts.

Rule #2: Private Account

There are two types of social media accounts: public and private. Your child's account must be private. This means that you and your child will approve all friends and followers. Each account has settings, which enable you to designate the account as private. If you are unsure how to do so, research instructions through an online search engine such as Google. A private account is the best way to insure that your child will not have contact with strangers.

Rule #3: Friend, Follower, & Passcode

Make sure you are on the same social network that your child chooses. Insist that you become their friend or follower so you can monitor your child's activity. Confirm that you have your child's account passcode at all times. This means if they change the passcode, you must be told. If your child wants to know why the friend, follower, passcode rule is in place, remind your child that you make the rules and pay for mobile phones and Internet service. This reinforces that you are in charge and will provide guidance as your child learns to navigate social media.

Rule #4: Approve Posts

Approve all posts for the first six months. During this time, your child will learn about online reputation as you review what's appropriate and what is not, including other friend posts. Remember: the Internet is forever! Reviewing and approving all posts gives you the opportunity to teach your child how to avoid putting anything regrettable on the Internet.

Rule #5: One Post A Day

Only one post per day. This helps your child learn how to moderate their social media posts. Adolescents report that they post multiple times a day, seeking a large number of likes and attention. Validation comes from within, not from posting approval-seeking behavior. Limiting post frequency will help your child avoid using social media to seek approval. Beware! As your child observes social media friends seeking validation through multiple posts, they may develop an unrealistic impression of their friends' lives. While social media offers a great way to stay in touch with friends, it doesn't take the place of face-to-face contact which is essential for building relationships.

Rule #6: Only "Likes" & Compliments

Your child may only "like" and/or write compliments on other people's posts/photos. If someone asks a question in the comments section, answer them via the social network's private messaging or direct messaging channel. If your child becomes part of a group chat in private or direct messaging, the rule remains the same: compliments only. Commenting selectively and only with compliments helps your child avoid cyber bullying including teasing, insults and harassment. Answering questions in private protects your child's privacy and avoids drama.

Part 2

Maintenance Rules

As your teen progresses through adolescence, the distractions multiply especially as they relate to social media. Your child may have started on Facebook, but “all their friends are on Instagram.” If they have demonstrated that they can follow your rules reliably, you may feel ready to expand your teen’s social media privileges. One to three social media accounts are reasonable providing your teen continues to meet their academic and extracurricular commitments. If this is the case, allow your child to select, with your approval, a new network. At the same time, continue to manage expectations.

Once again, a clear set of rules is essential for maintaining trust and social media discipline.

Rule #1: MUST Monitor

You MUST monitor your kids’ phones, iPads, computers, etc. Phones are not a right; they are a privilege! They are not like a personal diary. A notebook and pen provide a modicum of privacy compared to documenting your feelings online for the world to see. Did I mention the Internet is forever?

Thanks to social media and the Internet, kids feel social pressure 24/7. When we were growing up, we could escape from some of the social pressure we felt once the school day was over.

Our children never have a break.

For most parents including myself, monitoring feels daunting, overwhelming, and filled with anxiety. It’s like playing an endless game of “whack-a-mole.” You put out one fire and another one rears its ugly head.

You may need the help of a professional to manage your feelings around this. I also recommend speaking with other parents if you feel comfortable doing so. Changing adolescent behavior begins at home, but managing your children’s time on social media is also a community and global issue. This is where the “good” Internet reveals itself. Search online for additional resources and support groups, which will help you build confidence and stand strong in the face of relentless teen protest.

Rule #2: Have The Tough Conversation

Tell your kids that you will monitor their phones including their texts. Prepare them for the fact that you will randomly check their social media channels. Knowing this will help your teen make more thoughtful decisions.

BEWARE of landmines: your kids will find ways to make secret/private accounts and try to hide them from you. This is where consistent monitoring will help. You may think you will get more information if your kids don’t know you are checking, but remember the goal is to help them learn, grow, navigate, process, and NOT post or do anything that can’t be undone. We want to stop the mess before it happens.

Randomly checking your children’s devices will give you more information than you might think. Teens’ brains are still under construction. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, a person’s brain doesn’t look like that of an adult until their early 20s. Teens will delete, delete, delete if they know you are checking, but they also will slip up and consciously or unconsciously leave information where you can see it because they want your help. I have observed this scenario many times.

Rule #3: Low-Tech Activities

Social media constantly exposes our children to parties and events to which they haven't been invited. I can't count how many teens have cried about this unfortunate byproduct of social media sharing as well as complaints about peer-rating appearance comparisons and cyber-bullying. Other hidden Internet dangers include unsafe contact with strangers, anonymous sites where teens can send and/or receive questions about absolutely anything, and pornographic topics they don't have the brain capacity to understand yet.

Redirect your teen's attention from technology to alternate "low-tech" activities to increase their awareness of their environment and promote human interaction. Some ideas include team and individual sports such as soccer, tennis and martial arts; art classes; hiking clubs; mentoring programs; volunteer animal shelter work; camp counselor; reading/writing clubs; religious or spiritual youth groups; yoga, dance and exercise classes; and cooking clubs. Check your community center, church, school or local YMCA for classes and new opportunities.

Rule #4: No Phone Time

Schedule "no phone" time at home. You will be surprised how much calmer your teen will act even though they may object to this rule. A good practice is to schedule concurrently no phone or computer time for the entire family during dinner or while children do homework.

More and more teens report anxiety trying to manage their social media networks. Trust me. Your child will be relieved to have a break from technology.

"No phone time" also may mean "turning in all phones and devices" at the end of the day to be returned in the morning. This rule helps insure that your child will receive an adequate amount of sleep, as many kids stay up late interacting with their devices.

Parents are the foundation of the family structure and as such, make the family rules. Studies show that children thrive when they know what to expect. They like routines and structure because they are predictable. If you establish a routine of "no phone" at night, they will come to accept it in spite of what they may tell you. Routines eliminate power struggles and help teens cooperate.

Rule #5: Spend Time With Your Kids!

This rule may seem obvious, or in some cases, impossible. Obviously, we all need to spend time with our kids even if they resist doing so. Your kids may act as if their friends are the most important people in their lives, and that you are the last person they want to spend time with. Not true! Your kids need you now more than ever. Your children need family time. They need to feel close to you and have plenty of opportunities to talk to you.

I often remind parents to hug or touch their child or to tell them to a "have a great day" to help their child feel secure throughout the day. Make sure your home offers a "soft place to land" after school where teens can express their feelings and relieve their pressures through healthy outlets without turning to technology for validation.

Part 3

Serious Problems

The good news is that teen suicide rates have actually gone down since 1990. By the same token, there is an increased risk for suicide among people who experience bullying or even witness bullying behavior. The Internet and social media provide a whole new platform for this type of abuse.

Here's some information about troublesome trends that parents need to know about:

Problem #1: Nudes

The latest youth trend is sharing "nudes" via the Internet. A "nude" is a partial or full, naked picture sent via text, private or direct message, or via the Snapchat video messaging application. Snapchat users take photos and record videos and send them to designated recipients with the belief that they will disappear after a range of one to 10 seconds.

According to many of my teen clients, "all the kids are doing it." Sadly, "nudes" have become the norm. Adolescents as young as middle school send nudes, often without being asked for one. Unfortunately, people take screen shots of these pictures and post them on public sites. Did I mention the Internet is forever?

Many kids believe Snapchat protects them from screen shots because the Snapchat app alerts the user if someone takes a picture of their picture. This is not true.

Now there is another app to get around the Snapchat app. The newer app allows users to take Snapchat screen shots anonymously – without alerting the original sender that this has happened. Teens also have learned that putting their phone on airplane mode while taking a photo will conceal the sender's identity.

Problem #2 High School Sexting

The New York Times reported a story on November 6, 2015, about 100 Colorado high school students who were caught trading naked pictures of themselves. Three hundred to 400 nude photographs were circulating on their cellphones. Many of these students face the possibility of felony child pornography charges.

Teen sexting has become an epidemic. Parents must intervene if they suspect sexting is taking place. Many jurisdictions consider underage sexting as child pornography, a prosecutable offense which carries steep punishments including jail time and sex offender registration. If your teen is sending and receiving naked pictures, they are in trouble and need your immediate help.

Young girls and boys are inundated with images, videos and messages through movies, TV, Internet and social media, which objectify and degrade the human body. Airbrushed celebrity photos set absurd beauty standards. Classmates may tease and bully their peers. Even the strongest of individuals will feel the impact of scorn and media distortion.

Adolescence is a time of great change. Teens' bodies develop at different rates and into different sizes and shapes with different results. Parents must teach their children to respect and love their bodies for what they can do.

If your teen suffers from poor body image, suggest that they journal three positive things about their body each day. This will help them overcome self-doubt and feel better about themselves.

Problem #3 Unsafe Behaviors

Unsafe behaviors include sexting, sending nude photos, connecting with strangers, posting pictures while drinking or using drugs, bullying or being bullied, setting up drug or alcohol purchases, or any other illegal, dangerous or risky activities.

Teens are notorious for testing limits through unsafe behavior. The Internet has expanded the opportunities for teens to test those limits. It also has created a permanent record of our children's poor choices.

Part 4

What You Can Do

Be aware and open to the possibility that your child may be engaging in risky behavior. Like it or not, most teens do even if it's one time only. But all it takes is one time for the Internet to record your child's poor decision for posterity. This is why it's so important for you to set rules now regarding technology, Internet and social media use.

Take an assessment of yourself and your teen. Have their grades declined? Have they become angrier, more moody or detached from the family? Are they relying disproportionately on their friends? If you're sense any untoward change, but remain unsure, seek the help of a professional for further evaluation. It's easier to nip a problem in the bud before it blooms into a full-blown disaster. A professional also can help you develop a plan that meets your family's needs, and support you through the process.

A teen that is engaging in unsafe behavior will need restrictions. Consider the following options if this is the case:

1. Enforce all Maintenance Rules (Part 2, pages 4-7);
2. Remove the Internet from all devices;
3. Turn off the phone camera;
4. Only allow them to use the phone when trusted adults are present and engaged;
5. Doors must be opened when using phone and other devices;
6. Replace smart phone with basic calling/texting phone;
7. Restrict phone completely.

How To Implement Restrictions:

1. Unfortunately, there is no phone, which doesn't come with some form of texting. This makes enforcing a "no texting rule," especially difficult, but not impossible. Demand to see the phone at regular intervals and check the bill online to see if texting has occurred. Vigilance is essential for rules to work. It may be easier to take the phone away for a short period of time.

You can turn off texting through your wireless carrier and/or on the device through parental controls or other channels. However, texts can still get through on Wifi and iMessage. Please check with your phone carrier about this. Maintenance Rules #1 and #2 (pages 4-5) are the best ways to address ongoing text monitoring.

2. Contact your cell phone carrier and ask whether the data plan can be removed from your child's phone. If you can turn off your Internet (or data plan), be aware that Wifi will still be accessible through public portals. If you have an iPhone, you can put restrictions on the device, which block data, Internet, and most of what is Wifi-accessible. Before adding the restrictions, delete all social media apps on your child's phone.

For the iPhone: go to Setting, General, then Restrictions. Click "Enable Restrictions." You will be prompted to set a four-digit passcode. Turn off Safari, Installing Apps, Deleting Apps, & In-App Purchases. Then click websites and choose "Specific Websites Only." It is best to change the four-digit passcode regularly to prevent your child from guessing the code. You can impose these restrictions on other Mac/Apple devices. Warning: there is at least one way to disable restrictions. It is called a jailbreak tweak and can be downloaded and applied through iTunes. If your child employs this tactic, I recommend taking the phone away from them. If your child has a different type of smartphone, please contact your carrier about setting restrictions.

3. Turn off the camera on an iPhone (and other Mac/Apple devices) through the restriction settings described above. Once you are prompted to set the four-digit passcode, scroll down and click the camera icon to turn it off.

4. Only give your child their phone and other devices when they are with a trusted adult. This means that your child will only use the phone while they are home with you. They will not take their phone with them when they leave the house, including school. This may feel inconvenient because you won't be able to get a hold of your child as easily. As with all rules, limit the time to what works best for you and your family.

5. No doors closed while using any devices. If your child has been taking "Nudes," they should not be able to take any more with the "doors open" restriction. This restriction also helps your child make more thoughtful decisions about what they will text, post, say, or photograph because they know they are being monitored. Please refer to Maintenance, Rules #1 and #2, for more explanation. Some families choose to remove their children's bedroom doors to enforce this restriction.

6. Consider replacing your child's smartphone with a basic call/text only phone, also known as a flip phone. Unfortunately, a "call-only" mobile phone does not exist. If you choose to give your child a flip phone, texting will be one of the features included. However, your child will not have access to the Internet through their flip phone. Monitoring texting on a flip phone in real time can be more challenging than a smart phone although you can verify texting activity through the bill.

People who share Apple ID's with their child find it easier to monitor their child's iPhone texting. Parental controls on smart phone and some flip phones also facilitate text monitoring. Information and services are always changing so please verify these recommendations with your cell phone carrier.

7. If all else fails, take your child's phone away completely. If you tried to enforce the rules and restrictions, and your child continues to break the rules, they should not have a phone for a minimum of one to three months. The length of restriction will depend on how your family can manage.

If you removed your child's phone, consider letting them use a landline with parent supervision. You also may consider allowing parent-supervised calls (approximately five to 10 minutes a day) for homework questions or making plans. This will require you to be sitting or standing next to your child while they are on the phone.

Taking your child's phone away is usually a last resort. It is best to give your child time to learn how to use a device with limits and in moderation. Banning phone use as your first choice of punishment can drive your child to become sneakier and hide even more from you. In this fast-paced, warp speed, technology-driven culture, parents must work more thoughtfully using family structures, rules, and sometimes restrictions to help their children navigate the multitude of pressures and distractions in today's world.

Part 5

There Is Hope

Please don't give up!

Although it can feel daunting to add more rules and structure to all your other parent responsibilities, you are promoting your children's healthy growth and development. We must remember that technology also offers extraordinary opportunities. Your kids can access the world in many positive ways through the Internet. Our children have the world at their fingertips. They have resources and instant access to education, social activities, volunteer opportunities, world news and current events. Our children can travel the world and visit every continent in a matter of hours virtually, learning about cultures and languages, and discovering new interests and possibilities.

If parents stick together, support and educate each other through personal experience and professional guidance, you will feel less alone in this experience. This life moment will give you the chance to form new bonds with people over a common experience. You can find or form a parent group to help you through this time. There is a resource page in the back of this handbook to help get you started.

With our guidance, our children will learn more about who they are and will come to understand the Internet's awesome power and dominance. They will learn safely and successfully how to post, tweet, Instagram and Snapchat in positive ways for their benefit as well as others, and they will embrace a brighter future with technology as their friend.

Resources

Books

It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens by Danah Boyd

Speed: Speed: Facing Our Addiction to Fast and Faster-And Overcoming Our Fear of Slowing Down by Stephanie Brown

lol....OMG!: What Every Student Needs to Know About Online Reputation Management, Digital, Citizenship And Cyberbullying by Matt Ivester

Screens and Teens: Connecting with Our Kids in a Wireless World by Kathy Koch

American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers by Nancy Jo Sales

Articles

Why some 13-year-olds check social media 100 times a Day by Chuck Hadad
CNN, October 13, 2015

Marin Voice: Helping teens avoid cyber pitfalls by Karen Hamilton
Marin Independent Journal, October 25, 2015

Hundreds of Nude Photos Jolt Colorado School by Kassondra Cloos and Julie Turkewitz
New York Times, November 5, 2015

The Vault Apps That Keep Sexts a Secret by Katie Rogers
New York Times, November 6, 2015

Websites

www.common sense media.org

www.larrys world.com

www.i keepsafe.org

www.netaddiction.com

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