

# A PARENT'S GUIDE TO SOCIAL MEDIA

Expert Devorah Heitner offers tips on helping kids navigate their digital world: a conversation

Not so long ago, “screen time” referred to the hours kids spent parked in front of the tube or playing video games. Today, they’re also using their tablets and smartphones to swap messages with friends, share music videos, and rack up “likes” by posting photos. These forms of social media, which allow people to broadcast information publicly and make connections far beyond the people they actually know, can be confusing for parents to get a handle on. But you might want to, because according to a 2015 survey by Common Sense Media, 45 % of teens use social media every day, spending an average of an hour and 11 minutes interacting on their devices.

How can parents make sure kids are using social media safely and appropriately? When the American Academy of Pediatrics issues its latest recommendations on media use by school-aged kids and adolescents last October, it didn’t endorse any specific screen time limit. Instead, it said getting enough sleep and physical activity should take priority, and that family rules should take into account the media being used and the individual child. The pediatricians noted that research has identified both positive and negative effects of social media on physical and mental health. For advice on how you can keep your own kid’s experience positive, U.S. News & World Report consulted Devorah Heitner, founder of Raising Digital Natives and author of “Screenwise: Helping Kids Thrive (and Survive) in Their Digital World.” This interview was condensed and edited for clarity.

HOW SHOULD PARENTS THINK ABOUT THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THEIR CHILD’S LIFE?

You can argue that social media isn’t needed. But it’s pretty important. Friends are a huge part of defining one’s social identity. And social media is a portal to friends. The same urge that kept you and me up late at night talking on the phone is now pushing kids to connect to SnapChat or Musical.ly, a platform for creating and sharing short music videos. And social media can support your child’s interests. It’s a way to hang out without needing adults to drive somewhere or give permission.

YOU SAY THAT IT’S GOOD FOR KIDS TO MASTER TEXTING FIRST. WHY?

Texting is a crucial skill. If you’re going to send your kids to eighth grade or high school without the ability to text, how will they make plans? It would be the modern-day equivalent of the family that didn’t have a telephone. Also, group texting allows kids to be social online, but in a way that’s less public and less archived than social media. There are fewer

opportunities to damage your reputation, and it's less consuming than social media, which is more of a rabbit hole of possible distractions.

#### HOW OLD SHOULD KIDS BE WHEN THEY VENTURE INTO SOCIAL MEDIA?

The minimum age for many apps is 13, although many kids are using them at 10, 11, and 12. The rule is broken in a widespread way. At younger ages, it's more important that parents mentor and supervise.

You want your children to be mature enough to understand the concepts of relationships, reputation, and time management. With relationships, kids need to understand the difference between a friend and someone who follows them on social media. You can talk to them about people in your life who were there when a sibling was born, or who traveled with you. Those are real friends. If your child is 8 years old and going on Musical.ly, you could require that you know all the people they're connected to. At age 12, you could require that the child personally know all of his or her connections. And at an older age, say 16, maybe it's OK to connect online with other people who have shared interests.

#### WHAT'S YOUR THINKING ABOUT REPUTATION?

We tell kids to be careful about their behavior on social media with warnings like "You won't get into college." That won't work at age 11. What you can say is, "Your friends' parents may check. Will they want you to come to their home for dinner if you've posted a gross joke?" At age 16, it's realistic to say there are implications for colleges and career. And you can say "Yes, you can get kicked off a team for a photo of you appearing to be drinking."

#### WHAT ABOUT TIME MANAGEMENT?

Kids probably need hands-on help with this. You can say no access overnight, no access until homework is done. And think about your own actions. If you're texting your kid during the day, you're undermining the notion that school is a place for school activities.

#### SHOULD PARENTS MONITOR THEIR KID'S ACCOUNTS?

There is no advantage to covertly monitoring accounts. What do you do if you see something bad? Say nothing? How bad does it have to get? But you can overtly monitor new users. You can say, "I'm going to spot check your texts for the first year, and here's what I'm looking for." Be clear that you want to make sure she's not using a potty mouth online or passing around inappropriate pictures. You can also control their passwords so you have access to their accounts.

It's better to mentor than to monitor. For example, you can talk about when to share news. Do you share news that's not yours? You can talk about what's public and what's private in general, what doesn't go outside the family. You can set an example by letting your kids share their own college acceptances and not doing it yourself.

And we can say that it isn't rude to choose not to connect with someone. You don't have to say yes. We can also talk about time boundaries. Help them tell their friends that they can't text after 9 p.m. Otherwise they might feel anxiety if friends text at 10 p.m., and they don't text back. And ask them to find out what their friends' boundaries are too, so they can be respectful.

We also want to teach kids when it's time to go speak to someone in person. If there's a conflict with a friend, it's best to go see that friend; the more important the relationship, the more important it is to have face-to-face contact. Kids can find that awkward. But they need to learn that anything really important can be awkward, and that firing back on the keyboard can have negative consequences.

#### HOW CAN PARENTS STAY CURRENT ON WHAT THEIR KIDS ARE DOING ONLINE?

It good to understand what apps they're on, so you'll know what they're talking about when that they are staying up late to maintain their SnapStreak on SnapChat... But some adults are full abstainers. At that point, you might see if you have a niece or nephew willing to get in the sandbox with them. That can be a good reminder for kids that someone trusted is watching and may talk to their parents. It's also someone they can go to for advice or help. I don't think we want them out there without guidance as new users.

Parents may want to let their kids know they can always use them as an excuse. That's not going to work past a certain age. But for younger kids, it can be very helpful to say, "My dad looks at my phone, and I don't want to get grounded." It's a positive way for kids to not get in over their heads.

If a child is being harassed, or someone is asking him or her to cheat, those are situations we want kids to come to us to get help with. And we need to be clear that anytime someone is telling them not to tell their parents something, that's a huge red flag.

#### SOME RESEARCH HAS CONNECTED SOCIAL MEDIA USE BY TWEENS AND TEENS WITH REDUCED LIFE SATISFACTION AND DEPRESSION. WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF THIS?

We know some of the ways that social media can affect kids—and all of us. Norms can make us feel bad. If the norm seems to be that everyone in our community goes on spring break because the five people we see the most on social media are going, we might feel deprived. There's also exclusion, seeing things we are left out of. WE need to help kids get perspective. They need to know how to unfollow someone. We can support and mentor kids in reflecting on, "Is this making me feel good to spend hours looking at parties I wasn't invited to?"

If kids are anxious and social media seems to increase their anxiety, I would address that with them directly and try to help them find a balance. If your child is especially impulsive or struggles to manage aggression, I'd see how long you can hold off on social media and then start with baby steps, like texting from a shared device. The challenge with mental health

issues like self-harm or eating disorders is that in a worst-case scenario, kids can find “how-to” information on social media or websites.

Kids who are socially on the outs won’t necessarily have their lives improved by being on social media. So don’t force a child who is struggling to get on social media in the hopes it will improve his or her popularity. It’s important for all of us to remember that social media is a performance. Other people are sharing a tiny slice of experience---the slice they think will generate the most approval.

KIDS NEED TO UNDERSTAND THEY MIGHT UNINTENTIONALLY MAKE PEOPLE FEEL EXCLUDED TOO

As much as possible, try to help kids get there themselves. Ask them what a good rule for birthday parties might be. I wouldn’t ground them for posting a birthday photo on Instagram, but talk about your own experiences: “I loved seeing Aunt Lucy’s destination wedding on social media, but it was a little hard because we weren’t invited.” Ask them to share with you what kind of photos might be best not to post to avoid making others feel excluded.

WHAT ABOUT IMPLICATIONS OF BEING CONSTANTLY ENGAGED WITH A DEVICE IN GENERAL?

Research shows that having a phone out makes the conversational quality decline. Anecdotally, a lot of us have experienced this. My own research is qualitative, and when I ask kids to design apps to solve problems, many say they want an app to keep their parents off the phone!

When I’m home working on my laptop, I close it to talk, or make clear I’m working and can talk later. In my family, we call it “turning into a screen monster” when someone really isn’t listening. But you can also have fun on the screen—by reading together on Kindle or an iPad, say, or by playing games together. Screen time can be positive family time.