



the family connection

News to use for families of young adolescents

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The Role of Technology in Parenting a Middle Schooler

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During some interviews with grandparents, I found the universal sentiment that raising children “is harder today” for their children than it had been for the grandparents. Asked why, most of them commented on the role of technology, and when I interviewed current middle school parents, the majority of their worries were in some way related to just that.

To those who argue that kids have always struggled during the middle school years and that parents have always had difficulty guiding them, I must point out that in the last fifteen years since the Internet became widely available, the landscape of being a child of this age and parenting children of this age has changed so radically that there is simply no comparison to previous generations. It’s not even close.

The culture of meanness

There is so much that can be said, and has been said, about the culture of meanness between kids and how, while always a lightning rod during the middle school years, it is now exacerbated by the anonymity and impulsivity that lurks behind a screen. So many parents are looking for ways to limit, reduce, and even reverse some of the damage caused by excessive time spent on the Internet and in the virtual world rather than the real one.

From the parent’s perch, what are some of the other consequences of today’s wired adolescence? A big one seems to be the erosion of respect for adults. A multitude of corrosive websites like <http://www.fmylife.com/> give kids across the country and across the globe a large, interconnected, and reverberating echo chamber for disrespect, entitlement, and humor that really isn’t funny. Clicking on this link is not for the faint of heart. A generation ago if a kid was angry that his parents made him take out the garbage, he could say that to a friend. Now he can broadcast it to the entire world on the above website, and get 15 minutes of fame for doing so. Or, alternatively, he can text it to his 100 closest friends in an instant.

As one parent lamented to me:

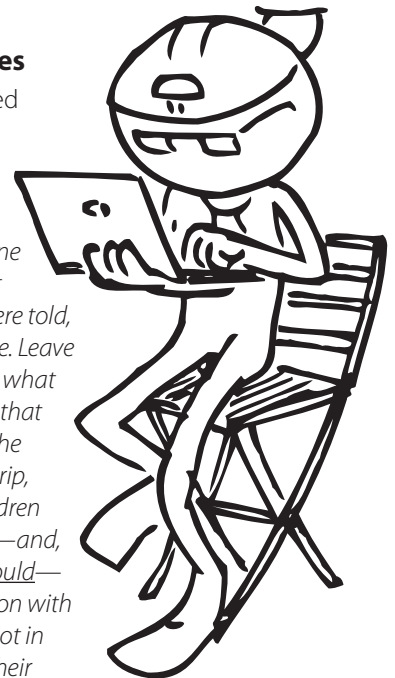
When I was a kid, social dramas and family dramas could not be elevated to the degree they are today when kids have such a large stage to parade across. Things were kept in perspective. Now it seems like everything gets magnified by the 24/7 virtual world and has a certain amount of gravitas attached to it that simply is not merited. Things don’t die down as easily as they used to.

Since research shows that most kids would rather be famous than successful or happy, this new behavior of seeking refuge in the Internet and using it to push boundaries that were until now fairly sacrosanct is commonplace and presents a formidable challenge to parents who want a relationship with their children, not a relationship with their children’s digital peanut gallery.

Parents who break the rules

Another parent that I interviewed shared this story:

I support my child’s principal in her rules about technology use, but other parents undermine the administration. On a recent school trip to China, the kids were told, ‘This is an immersion experience. Leave your phones at home.’ So that’s what I told my son... only to find out that before the plane had even left the runway, and for the rest of the trip, parents who had told their children it was ok to bring their phones—and, in fact, had insisted the kids should—were in constant communication with them. And some of those kids got in trouble for being caught with their phones even though their parents had forced them to take the phones! Children emailed, phoned,



or texted up-to-date information on every detail of the trip during the whole week to those parents. So much for immersion. When I complained about this, parents turned against me! I could not take the hypocrisy.

The school/parent partnership goes both ways. This parent did her part, but other parents and the school did not. School staff should have collected all phones for the duration of the trip, not punished kids whose parents put them in a bind by insisting they break rules, and then addressed parents directly who had undermined the policy, referring to the student handbook where it explicitly stated that parents and students were to respect school technology rules. It was too late to make this one compliant parent's experience any easier, but a clear response from the school would have set an important precedent about technology use guidelines being non-negotiable in the future. Without that mutual understanding, the slippery slope will lead to increasing disrespect of school rules and inappropriate technology usage.

Recommendations for parents

Set technology guidelines so that children develop a healthy, appropriate and safe level of engagement with technology. This is a *huge* topic that merits plenty of outside reading, but just a few of many possible suggestions include:

- Begin with the assumption that no matter how close you are to your child, he or she *will* have an online life that you are not a part of and of which you might not entirely approve. Children “snow” adults about their online behavior all the time, and no parent is immune to the natural disillusionment this can cause. You might be one of the lucky ones, but don't make the mistake of counting on it.
- Change where computers are used. Research has shown that when kids have media in their bedrooms, they are more likely to be overweight, have worse sleeping habits, and do poorly in school. Research has also shown that kids with computers and Internet access in their rooms sleep less and are more likely to use the Internet in unsafe or unhealthy ways.

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