



March 2018

Social Media and Technology- Part 1

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There is no question that the world we live in has been transformed forever by digital technology. Organizations working with families have indicated 3 main concerns that parents have around the digital world:

- 1) Content: what our children see online,
- 2) Contact: who they are talking to online and;
- 3) Conduct: how they behave online.

Their concerns include access to sexually explicit material, bullying, anonymity, identity theft, and impact on social skills. A specific concern is around the use of social media for young people. Most of our young people are digital residents and prefer messaging and social media to speaking on the phone, and also as a way to build relationships and personal identity. They are quite happy to share personal information online, more-so than parents who are more likely to be digital visitors.

Social networks such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram can have positive aspects such as facilitating communication between family members and friends. They can help young people connect on issues such as mental health, subjects they care about and share advice and support. As parents we need to try to understand our teenagers enthusiasm for using social media as a tool for the reasons mentioned. Understanding why our children like using social media and talking about the kinds of connections they have made can help keep communication open and maintain honesty and respect.

However, It is important that whilst encouraging safe use of the internet, we **set boundaries and expectations** around use of social media as we would in any other aspect of our children's lives. This needs to happen **early in adolescence** as even though most social media sites have a minimum age of 13, research shows that around 50% of 11-12 year olds already have an account.

We need to explain the difficulties around social media and impact on health. For example research from Stanford University (Ophir et al, 2008) showed that heavy media multitaskers have greater difficulty in concentrating and find it harder to ignore distractions. It can also impact the ability to make eye contact and spatial awareness (Hayman and Coleman, 2015). Many young people report an upsetting range of incidents on social media such as trolling (when someone posts inflammatory, abusive comments to upset you), to online stalking to being asked to send a sexual message or photograph. Many of these are caused by strangers and are not just an extension of what is happening at school. We need to encourage young people to share any such incidents and maintain the view they are unacceptable and in some cases illegal.

Teaching online safety basics is essential. For example, parents should talk with their child about:

- ❖ not giving out too many personal details;
- ❖ not meeting up with anyone alone;
- ❖ how users wanting to know personal information can be a danger sign

Parental controls can be put in place to monitor online activity and setting limits around digital devices during family meals etc. Being a good role model in using social media can also go a long way in helping our teens make wise and safe choices about social media and the internet.

References:

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Cognitive control on multitaskers: E. Ophir et al, Proceedings of the Natural Academy of Sciences, 2009

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