

Communicating With Teens in Ways That Change Behavior Part 2: Courageous Conversations About Internet Safety and “Netiquette”



MOST OF US ARE FAMILIAR with the online activities that are popular with teens and tweens, like social networking on MySpace or other sites and using cell phones to text message their friends. We've all seen in the news that unwise use of these technologies can compromise kids' safety or harm others. Now comes the harder part: how do you connect with adolescents in ways that get them to change an activity that they enjoy and can participate in safely?

It's common for parents and guardians to struggle to communicate with their teen. And, with the advent of new communication technologies like text messaging and social networking sites, it's equally as important and challenging for adults to try and connect with their children about what's going on in their virtual world.

It doesn't help to spy on their every move and mete out harsh punishment when you catch them doing something wrong or risky – they'll just learn to be devious, rebel and disconnect further from you. So how do you give your teen or tween guidelines for online and offline behavior such as bullying, harassing others or becoming targets of predators?

1. Read “Communicating With Teens in Ways That Change Behavior Part 1: How to Engage a Tuned-Out Teen” if you haven't already done so.

2. Start off generally.

- 🕒 First, find out how your teen spends time online by being open and direct. Ask your child to show you the sites he or she likes to visit most.
- 🕒 Let him or her teach you how to use the technology if you are unfamiliar with it.
- 🕒 If he or she belongs to online social networks, go to one of the websites and begin a discussion by first viewing some pages of people neither of you know (so it doesn't feel like you're invading your teen's privacy).
- 🕒 Compare photos, comments, music or groups that you and your child find cool, funny, tacky, rude or too provocative.
- 🕒 If your teen plays online games, set aside time to learn the basics of a favorite game. Invite him to share what he finds enjoyable about it.

This approach helps give you a sense of your child's virtual world without putting him or her on the defensive.

3. Get more specific. Move to a more personal discussion about Internet activities that threaten privacy or safety, or are offensive, illegal or unethical. First ask your child what he or she already knows about these issues. Listen fully and attentively without interrupting. Suggested discussion topics are below.

Important Topics:

- Talking to strangers online about sex or agreeing to meet them without parental permission. This is a very different situation from talking with online peers about music, politics, culture, etc. The age of the online “friend” and the content of conversation are the flags. Although, it's important to remember that predators often misrepresent themselves online and will sometimes pose as a peer. **(Ybarra et al, 2007)**
- Saying mean, hateful, false, bullying or harassing things to or about others.
- Posting too much personal information.
- Posting or downloading sexy or pornographic photos or videos.
- Spending too many hours online (more than around two hours per day for other than school work), especially late at night. This behavior can become compulsive and interfere with life offline.
- Downloading materials illegally.
- Plagiarizing material (copying other people's work that you found online without citing them or getting permission).
- Buying anything online without a parent or guardian's permission.

4. Talk about the above topics one at time. After gathering your teen's input, applaud their prudent thinking (if they demonstrate some). Then clearly and completely explain anything they've missed about why each behavior above isn't okay. It is important to explain how these behaviors put your child at risk for harming themselves or others. Come from a position of caring and concern instead of repression. Your teen may disagree with you, but you still have the final authority for setting guidelines for online behavior.

"It's important for parents to use technology as a tool to open discussions and develop children's decision-making skills, not as a tool to make decisions for their kids."

PHILLIP ENKE
MINNESOTA PTA

5. Don't automatically take away Internet privileges. If you find out your child has broken one of your guidelines; select the consequences to fit the situation. Fear of losing Internet privileges is the most common reason kids hide or lie about their online behavior.

6. What consequence best fits the situation? If your teen has used the Internet for illegal purposes, it probably is fitting to take away the Internet service. But sometimes it's more appropriate to find ways to deal directly with the issue rather than cutting privileges.

Example 1. Your 16-year-old was looking at inappropriate material online.

- If the material is pornographic in nature, let your 16 year-old know that pornography is age-restricted material and it is illegal for a 16 year-old to download it.
- Talk about the risks of getting infected by computer viruses or other "malware" as a result of downloading files of this nature
- When having this "courageous conversation" you may want to consider having a broader discussion of sexuality. Ignoring the topic altogether does not make it go away or equip teens to make safe, healthy choices. Let your child know your own values around all kinds of sexual practices, whether in the real world or in cyberspace.
- Explain to your child that viewing pornography can make it harder to have a lasting, close, satisfying relationship with a life partner down the road. (Philaretou et al, 1995)

Example 2. Your 15-year-old was talking to an adult she met online about sex. You discover they have been talking for months. She says he understands her and she's in love with him.

- First, preserve as much evidence as you can, such as IM transcripts, e-mails, texts and URLs. Report it to law enforcement.
- Instead of becoming upset with your child, it's a good time for a serious discussion about what might be really going on with her. What needs does she believe were being met that she doesn't think she has another way to express or gratify?
- The teens who are most vulnerable to sexual exploitation often feel unloved, ignored, unappreciated, unattractive to others or misunderstood. They may lack social skills, be depressed or have experienced sexual abuse. It's very important to get to the hidden pain and deal with those issues.
- It's also important to explain how manipulative and charming adults can be -- and that they might use this power to prey on vulnerable teens. Abuse of power is not love. It may be necessary to seek help from a counselor or therapist in this situation.

7. Use online resources to help you have a courageous conversation.

NetSmartz.org offers a very effective group of videos that can help you have conversations with your teen or tween about bullying, harassment, online predators and threats to privacy. Take a look at

www.netsmartz.org/resources/reallife.htm.

REFERENCES

Ybarra, M. L., Mitchell, K. J., Finkelhor, D., & Wolak, J. (2007). *Targeting the Right Online Behaviors.* Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine, 61: 138-145.