

6 Major Challenges Social Media Creates for Our Teenagers, and How to Parent Them

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Social media has taken over the lives of our teenagers. They spend more time interacting online than they probably spend interacting in person. It is an obsession and almost a responsibility in their lives they feel compelled to keep up with, which often pulls them away from the responsibilities in life that will promote them forward. As parents we need to help our teenagers' balance the challenges social media brings with the needs the real world requires of them.



1. SOCIAL MEDIA

The majority of teenagers are obsessed with self-promotion and comparing themselves to their friends on social media in compulsive ways. Social media provides a constant outlet for the trap of comparison which subsequently creates feelings of depression and low self-worth in many teens. Teenagers rarely have a break from the constant stream of social media because their cell phones have practically become a part of their anatomy. To separate from their phone or computer is to separate from their entire world.

As parents we need to accept that social media is a normal part of our teenager's life, the world they live in and now necessary for their development. In light of this we have to parent more intently and deliberately on nurturing their self-esteem to be based in achievements, being a good person, working hard, having in-person conversations and reminding them of the value of real life.

2. CYBER BULLYING

The cyber world provides a whole new outlet for bullying for teenagers. As parents we have seen over and over the publicized suicides on YouTube, Facebook, twitter etc. Bullying also takes on more subtle forms such as "sub-tweeting" which is a passive-aggressive, yet public, way to call out a friend or a person who isn't making you happy to everyone in your social media following. Sub-tweeting has replaced direct, person-to-person confrontation, and easily provokes sub-tweeting wars where others jump in and add on, but nothing gets resolved.

All of this has caused our teenagers to have a certain amount paranoia that people are tweeting about them, but because it's a subtweet there is really no way to find out if it is about them unless they ask. Often when they ask they are told it wasn't about them (when it was) and it becomes crazy-making.

As parents we can normalize that this type of stuff happened to us as teens, with notes being passed about us in class, but we need to validate for our teenagers how much more intense it is for them to have it happen so publically, and how hard that can be on their hearts. We have to parent them to choose courage over fear and to speak up for themselves person-to-person.

3. SEXTING

Sexting and sending indecent pictures of themselves to their love interests is common for both male and female teenagers. It is a new form of sexual flirting and communication that would likely never happen in person. Text allows our teens an outlet to say and do things they would never have the guts to say and do in person.

Because teens think mostly about the now, they do not have the skills to handle it when a naked picture of them gets circulated amongst a large group of people, like the entire football team. The consequences of sexting and naked photos can go viral in a way our teens are not prepared for. The shame, embarrassment and loss of reputation can drive a teenager to their lowest of lows.

Sexting messages and pictures are often used as blackmail or revenge when a relationship breaks up which can keep our teenager in an unhealthy relationship for the fear of any sexting or naked photos being leaked.

As parents we have to be educated on these issues and do all we can to discourage this type of communication and photo taking to help our teenagers avoid the horribly embarrassing consequences their actions can bring.

4. SELFIES AND SELF-OBSESSION

Selfies are the latest obsession, which is narcissism at its finest. Teens are naturally narcissistic, and when healthy, this narcissism is a necessary part of their development, but the world of selfies is taking our teenagers into a place of being in love with their own image or causing them to be obsessed with the image of others.

Selfies can drag our teenagers into a secret self-loathing. No matter how great their selfie is they may be measuring their worth on how many "likes" or "comments" the selfie gets. This turns the selfie into an addiction and a determiner of their beauty, worth, popularity and validity. If a selfie doesn't get a lot of likes or receives a negative comment they may assume they are ugly, stupid, worthless, not good enough or feel people don't like them.

As parents we need to encourage inner beauty, hard work, achievement and being a loving person more deliberately because our teenagers are constantly faced with the self-promotion addiction of the social media world.

5. INABILITY TO BE ALONE

Being online puts our teens in constant social communication. Our teenagers hardly get a break unless they are grounded from social media, they have parental controls or rules on their phones, or they choose to take a social media break.

The ability to be alone, in one's own quiet, is almost non-existent and it is such an important developmental task for teens to master. How can a teenager know if they are likable if they never get the chance to sit with themselves for more than five minutes?

As parents we must encourage cell-phone and computer-free time with friends and family. We can also make rules around the cell phone being handed over each night before homework and/or before bed. We must require our teenagers have some amount of alone time to experience their own emotional space, unprovoked by social media, so they can grow in their confidence of being able to be alone and feel good about themselves.

6. HELICOPTER PARENT

Parents have almost unlimited and inappropriate access to the private lives of their teenagers due to social media. All parents have to do is follow their teenager and his/her friends on the different social media outlets and they know exactly where their kids are and if their kids are being honest or not based on the social media posts of their friends.

The GPS capability of smart phones has also turned many parents into part time private investigators and/or stalkers of their teenagers. Our teenagers have little privacy with all this technology and yet it is healthy for them to have some privacy to make their mistakes. Parents are trying to jump in front of normal developmental experiences their teenagers need to have, to evolve as people, before these mistakes even happen. In some ways this may interfere with their growth.

As parents we have to embrace the validity mistakes offer our teenagers and their personal growth. It is not in our their best interest to have their parents at home following them and their friends on social media to get an idea of where they are, what they are doing and if they are trustworthy. This type of parenting almost forces our teens to lie and rebel more strongly.

As a healthy parent, require reasonable check in times from your teenagers, enforce appropriate curfews and then let go. They need some room to live unwatched.

Clearly social media provides hurdles for parents and teenagers. It has its benefits but also has proven to have some horrible costs. The most important thing we raise in our children is their self-esteem. Our teenagers need rules, discipline, balanced with freedom and independence, good values, in-person quality time and communication, love and validation.

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