



Helping Parents Understand Social Media

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## Have you talked with your kids about social media?

If you're a parent in America, chances are social media is a huge part of your kid's life. According to a recent study about teens and the Internet, 95% of teenagers use the Internet, 74% of 12-17-year-olds are "mobile internet users," and 81% are on social network sites.

If your kids are part of that 81%, don't panic; just make a plan. Doctor's orders.

I'm referring to the advice given in the most recent report from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), and I quote: "Model active parenting by establishing a family home use plan for all media. As part of the plan, enforce a mealtime and bedtime "curfew" for media devices, including cell phones. Establish reasonable but firm rules about cell phones, texting, Internet, and social media use."



Funny, this isn't a report from Focus on Family or some ultra conservative Christian group... this is a bunch of secular

doctors who understand the health of young people today. And their recommendation is to get involved in our kids media lives, dialogue with them and set some fair guidelines for entertainment media and technology.

Have you talked with your kids about social media? Do you know what social media sites they use regularly? Are you aware if they are accessing technology late at night? Do you know who they are talking with?

I don't ask these unnerving questions to frighten you, but to honestly nudge you to consider the ramifications if you don't know the answers. Believe me, I've seen the horror stories.

So let's consider our doctor's advice and be active parents.

Try these four tips on how you can become aware and involved in your kid's social media use:

### 1. Try it yourself

If your kid wants an Ask.fm profile, give it a gander for yourself. That's what I did when I heard Ask.fm was a popular social media venue where young people commonly establish an online profile so anonymous strangers can ask them anything they want. I typed in a random name (my daughter's first name) and encountered the profile of a young girl. I started reading the anonymous questions.

Question 6: Are you a lesbian?

Question 8: You're a hottie! Do you like oral sex?

Question 18: I wanna \*\*\*\*\* you!

Is this a site you really want your kid on?

Rule of thumb, it's not good to navigate applications where you talk with strangers (Ask.fm, Omegle.com, etc.). Sadly, young people are increasingly seeking apps and social media venues where they can be anonymous. Honestly, do you find this surprising: teens want a lack of accountability?

If your kids want to download an app or a social media site, don't overreact, just take a peek at the site with them and make an informed decision together.

### 2. Use privacy settings

Most responsible social media sites offer privacy settings. Take Instagram, for example, the popular photo-sharing app that was one of the fastest growing smartphone apps last year. You can easily set up your Instagram account so that only your followers can view your pictures. This is a nice feature, ensuring that some creepy hairy naked guy in his basement isn't browsing through all your daughter's pics she just shot of her friends at their recent swim party.

Take advantage of privacy settings. This helps your kids engage with the people they choose to engage with, not any random creeper.

### **3. Turn off location services**

Most social media platforms offer the opportunity to access the location of your child's device whenever they post anything. For example, if your daughter is in a late night study group with her friends at Starbucks and Tweets, "Studying for my stupid history test with Ashley and Lindsey!" ...if her location services are active, then that tweet will show exactly where she posted that message. Do you think it's a good idea for your daughter to post where she is about to walk to her car in a dark parking lot?

The solution is simple. Go into your phone settings and turn off the location services for those apps. Be careful; don't turn off location services for the entire phone. Location services are handy when you want to use the phone's "Find my iPhone" feature to find your daughter when she is out past curfew!

### **4. Have the pass-codes**

This is an easy rule to enforce when your 12-year-old is begging you for the newest iPhone and you declare, "Sure, but I'll always have the pass-codes." You still have all the bargaining chips at that point. This will be much harder to enforce to your 17-year-old five years after she has already had her phone and she believes you are violating her first amendment rights each time you walk into her room!

So start young and establish a family media use plan where parents have all passwords and pass-codes. This isn't an invasion of their privacy, this is just good parenting.

The doctors in the AAP report mentioned above recommend parents establish "reasonable but firm" rules, a bedtime "curfew" for media devices, and a mealtime where the doors of dialogue are open so kids and parents can talk about real life issues.

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#### **Questions to discuss/ponder:**

- Are you creating this kind of caring climate in your home?
- Are you seeking that balance between "reasonable" but "firm"?
- Which side do you err on? How's that working out?

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