

## Digital Citizenship 101: How to act appropriately Online

I was taught the Golden Rule: "Treat others as you wish to be treated." This is an adage that is (arguably) as old as written history. It is a core value in every religion. I challenge you to find someone who has *never* heard of the Golden Rule.

...and apparently the Golden Rule, like many of our star athletes and politicians, has an asterisk attached to it. The asterisk says, "EXCEPTION: Online, virtual communication." The Golden Rule works because *the thought* of saying, or doing something untoward to, another- **in person**- has a deterrent effect not realized when saying or doing the same thing Online.

The Internet provides a cloak of anonymity which permits people to write things they would otherwise never say in-person. It is the absent, face-to-face communication which serves to frustrate the deterrent effect.

SO we may have taught our children the Golden Rule. We may live by the Rule ourselves. I live by it and never recall having an elementary school class to learn it; I simply learned by trial, error, and observation of others. In fact, I do not recall having a class about necessary life skills, such as how to balance a checkbook and why it is important to timely pay federal taxes.

I learned these skills like countless others before me- through 'the school of hard knocks'. I figured that these classes were never created because there were not enough people who lacked these skills i.e. people learned sufficiently through cultural interaction.

...yet do you know what school-aged children are lacking in the public schools throughout our country? **NETIQUETTE**, or rather 'Online etiquette'. Pre-teens and teenagers cyber-bully, troll, and seek to wreak havoc Online as a favorite pastime. They target peer schoolmates- and sometimes to a devastating outcome- such as when we read the (sadly) often news story where a teen commits suicide attributable to negative social media attacks and cyber-bullying.

This 'unreal', digital communication can have disastrous real-world outcomes, so much so that many public schools are implementing a 'Digital Citizenship' class as mandatory curriculum. The intent is to teach children ethical, safe, and responsible technology use; how to navigate cyberbullying, Internet safety, and other digital dilemmas; and the appropriate tone and word usage in written communication.

A Digital Citizenship (type) class is created when there is a societal demand for it. The demand might **not** be a direct consumer request *per se*, yet the demand takes tangible form when there are consistent, negative real-world outcomes resulting from inappropriate and irresponsible digital citizenship. The class concept is to teach behavior and refrain, which when replicated, reduces the incidence of real-world outcomes attributed to inappropriate and irresponsible digital citizenship.

Why would someone write something Online that they would otherwise not say in-person? Because there is not an immediate, carnal reaction where thoughts, feelings, and actions are

formed based upon how the listener receives and reacts to the words. This is an uncomfortable, stressful place for many people, so they avoid situations where they would have to go to 'that place' (this is the deterrent).

A cyber-bully's actions receive **no immediate feedback**. This means that the real-world outcome, for how the reader *reacts* to the message, is **not** realized by the cyber-bully...so there is **no** disincentive to **not** continue the activity. The disincentive may vest when a cyber-bullying victim commits suicide, yet there are often numerous cyber-bullies involved (in one incident) so responsibility is largely diffused- thereby abrogating the deterrent effect.

The perception factor (my term) further substantiates why cyber-bullies should not be prosecuted. We forget that digital words are, well...simply words. Two people may read *the exact same thing* yet **perceive** its meaning differently; this is common because we filter incoming information through the sum of our life experiences and beliefs.

Words, by themselves, are subject to interpretation- whereas one may ignore cyber-bullying, another may ruminate on it so severely that the result is suicide.

...so how do we encourage the former reaction to cyber-bullying (above) where the target ignored it? Maybe by teaching children Digital Citizenship. Maybe teaching children how to appropriately act (and react), in the virtual landscape, where there is no immediate feedback to their actions. Maybe by teaching children skills that their parents **1**. Did not know are needed; or **2**. Thought the school was teaching them. Maybe by showing children there are real-world consequences for their Online actions.

I have a suggestion: Tell children to not do, say, write, post, or share anything that they would not want said, written, posted, or shared about them. Like the Golden Rule, live this by example; if children watch you model rule violations, then they have impliedly been granted permission to do the same.