

Good values guide kids — online or off

By Gloria Moskowitz-Sweet, Erica Pelavin, Mia Freund Walker | March 1, 2016

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Parents today are barraged with books, blogs, films and news reports about the “secret lives” of teens as they navigate the social media landscape. We want to offer some hope to the pioneering parents of the “always-on” generation. We can empower our kids to make positive connections and to take healthy and appropriate risks in their digital lives if we educate ourselves about how they are using social media. We just need to fear less and listen to our children more.

We’ve spent the last five years talking to the real experts: more than 15,000 kids between the ages of 8 and 18, who we interviewed about their use of technology. Here is what they are telling us:

1. “We’re not addicted to our phones, we just ‘like’ each other.” It is a common sight to see large groups of teens sitting together looking down at their phones. This isn’t necessarily a bad thing. Our kids don’t distinguish between phones and faces the way we do. Smart phones are their primary conduit for connection and collaboration, which is why they like to keep them close. Teens tell us that staying up to date with incoming texts and posts allows them to begin their face-to-face conversations where the digital ones end, and vice versa. Both contribute to their formative development,



identity and relationships.

2. “Our parents are more digitally distracted than we are.” Kids tell us it is almost impossible to get their parent’s attention. This is a clear call to action for parents. How will we notice if our children are thriving or struggling if we never look up? When we are tethered to our devices, we not only miss their cues, we miss an opportunity for conversation and connection. There is an emerging field of brain science behind parental attachment and the importance of eye contact. When we model a healthy media balance, we are sending the message to our kids that we are present, engaged and ready to give them our undivided attention. We want them to come to us before they go online for answers, support or encouragement.

3. “It’s not just about social media.” Our children were born with the world at their fingertips and there is far more going on than drama and devices. They are gamers, activists, coders, filmmakers, photographers, artists and musicians. When our children explore their passions online, they are using technology to learn about themselves and what makes them tick. We need to be curious and maybe a little humble when we ask them about their digital lives. Our children are so much more than consumers and users of social media; they are producers and creators of extraordinary content.

Our kids are living out loud in a digital culture. Social media naturally heightens the challenges associated with adolescence. Teens are telling us they want parents to trust their use of social media and give them freedom to explore, take risks and make mistakes.

Science tells us the teenage brain is not fully developed until age 25, which is why teens sometimes make bad choices. This doesn’t mean we need to hover and panic. Instead, we can lend them our frontal lobe by giving them support, tools and some breathing room to exercise their integrity, creativity and autonomy.

If we teach them compassion and kindness, we are preparing them to be good global and digital citizens. If we help them develop strategies to deal with conflict, they will be armed to stand up to social cruelty. Parents have been teaching these values to their children long before Instagram and Snapchat ever existed. We believe good old-fashioned parenting is the best defense against digital danger. There is good news about what our kids are doing

online — they are growing up.

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