What’s the issue?

We are all part of communities. Our schools, our towns, our hobbies or interests all form the centers around which we connect with other people. These communities all have codes of behavior (written or unwritten) that help everyone get along. In today’s 24/7 digital world, we are also part of online communities. These communities connect us to people we may not know.

They connect us in ways where we are known only by screen name, or where we are anonymous. They connect us to people who are sometimes very far away. Whether we’re reading or writing an online restaurant review, posting something on a Facebook page, texting a friend, or sharing a picture on a photo website, we’re participating in a world where we can be instantly connected to thousands of people at a moment’s notice.

Why It Matters

When our kids connect to each other either from a distance or through a screen name, it can impact the way they behave. Actions can be free from discovery or consequences. When something happens anonymously, it’s easier for people to behave irresponsibly, cruelly, or unethically. Kids benefit from a code of conduct for online and mobile activity just as they need a code of conduct in the real world. They should be empowered to be good digital citizens, in addition to being good citizens in general.

Our kids are creating online communities with every click of the mouse or text they send. And they will have to live in those communities. The information they post about themselves or others will last a long time and travel great distances. So parents and teachers need to help kids think about the consequences of their online actions.

Kids should learn that how they behave when they are connected really matters to them, their friends, and to the broader communities they participate in. Finally, there’s a great deal at stake. When kids misuse online or mobile technology to harass, embarrass, or bully others, they can do real and lasting harm.

Connected culture can be positive or negative — it’s what people make it. When guiding our kids, it’s important for them to understand that they have a choice in all of their online relationships. They can say something positive or say something mean. They can create great community support around activities or interests, or they can misuse the public nature of online communities to tear others down.

Some facts

Almost 80 percent of teens own a cell phone (Nielsen, 2009)

About 4 out of 10 teens ages 13 to 17 experienced some type of cyberbulying in the previous year (Harris Interactive, 2007)

About three-quarters of kids 12-17 say they have helped others while gaming (Pew, 2008)
Parent tips for all kids

» Talk about cyberbullying: It’s real. It’s everywhere. And remember that kids sometimes will tell you about a friend’s problems rather than their own experiences. Make sure your kids know how to deal with a cyberbully, and that if the situation gets serious, urge them to tell a trusted adult about it.

» Give kids a cyberbullying vocabulary. Talk about bullies, victims, bystanders (those who witness offensive behavior but don’t do anything to stop it), and upstanders (people who actively try to stop cyberbullying). It will help them understand what roles they play or could play.

» Encourage positive posting. Are your kids fans of YouTube? Have they said something encouraging about something they’ve seen and loved? Have they added knowledge to a wiki or shared their experience on a hobby or interest site? From the earliest ages, kids need to know they can add positively to the online world.

» Remind kids that texts and IMs may not persist, but they still have impact. Anything they say or do with their phones or through quick messages may seem to disappear when the devices shut down, but the impact on others remains — whether for good or bad.

» Tell kids to apply the Golden Rule online. If kids wouldn’t say something to someone’s face, then they shouldn’t text it, Skype it, tweet it, Facebook it, IM it, or post it.
Hurting someone with a simple click

Spreading rumors and bullying is nothing new. Kids have always found ways to be cruel to one another. But today’s kids are dealing with something much more sinister: cyberbullying. Kids are now using their cell phones and computers to hurt, humiliate, and harass each other. And it’s reaching epidemic proportions. They’re not just receiving nasty comments, but also getting demeaning text messages, embarrassing photos, and snide opinion polls. This type of bullying is especially disturbing because it is constant, pervasive, and very, very public.

What is cyberbullying?

Whether it’s creating a fake Facebook or MySpace page to impersonate a fellow student, repeatedly sending hurtful text messages and images, or posting cruel comments on the Internet, cyberbullying can have a devastating effect. Nasty comments, lies, embarrassing photos and videos, and snide polls can be spread widely through instant messaging (IM) or phone texting, and by posts on social networking sites. It can happen anytime — at school or home — and can involve large groups of kids. The combination of the boldness created by being anonymous and the desire to be seen as “cool” can cause a kid who normally wouldn’t say anything mean face-to-face to show off for other kids. Because it’s happening in cyberspace, it can be completely undetectable by parents and teachers.

Why it matters

Nothing crushes kids’ self-confidence faster than humiliation. And just imagine a public humiliation sent instantly to everyone they know. Sadly, hurtful information posted on the Internet is extremely difficult to prevent or remove, and millions of people can see it. Most cyberbullying happens when adults aren’t around, so parents and teachers often see only the depression or anxiety that results from being hurt or bullied. This emotional damage can last a lifetime.

Some facts

The most commonly experienced form of cyberbullying is when someone takes a private email, IM, or text message and forwards it to someone else or posts the communication publicly.

38% of girls online report being bullied, compared with 26% of online boys.

Nearly 4 in 10 social network users (39%) have been cyberbullied, compared with 22% of online teens who do not use social networks (all from Pew, 2007).
Parent tips for all kids

» **Give them a code of conduct.** Tell them that if they wouldn’t say something to someone’s face, they shouldn’t text it, IM it, or post it.

» **Ask your kids if they know someone who has been cyberbullied.** Sometimes they will open up about others’ pain before admitting their own.

» **Establish consequences for bullying behavior.** If your children contribute to degrading and humiliating people, tell them their phone and computer privileges will be taken away.

Parent tips for elementary school kids

» **Keep online socializing to a minimum.** Let your kids use sites like Webkinz or Club Penguin where chat is pre-scripted or pre-screened.

» **Explain the basics of correct cyber behavior.** Tell your kids that things like lying, telling secrets, and being mean still hurt in cyberspace.

» **Tell your kids not to share passwords with their friends.** A common form of cyberbullying is when kids log in to another child’s email or social networking account and send fake messages or post embarrassing comments. Kids can protect themselves from this by learning early on that passwords are private and should only be shared with their parents.

Parent tips for middle school kids

» **Monitor their use.** See what they’re posting, check their mobile messages, and let them know you’re keeping an eye on their activities.

» **Tell your kids what to do if they’re harassed.** They shouldn’t respond or retaliate, they should block bullies immediately, and they should tell you or an adult they trust. They shouldn’t delete the messages because in persistent cases, the content should be reported to a cell or Internet Service Provider.

» **If your kid is doing the bullying, establish strict consequences and stick to them.** That goes for cruel or sexual comments about teachers, friends, and relatives.

» **Remind them that all private information can be made public.** Posts on friends’ walls, private IMs, intimate photos, little in-jokes can all be cut, pasted, and sent around. If they don’t want the world to see it, they’d better not post or send it.

» **Don’t start what you don’t want to finish.** Chat in online games and virtual worlds can get ugly fast. Make sure your kids are respectful because hurtful retaliation happens all the time.

Parent tips for high school kids

» **Tell kids to think before they reveal.** At this age, kids experiment with all sorts of activities, many of which should not be made public. Remind your teens that anything they post can be misused by someone else.

» **Remind them they aren’t too old to ask for your help.** There are things some kids can handle on their own, but sometimes, they just need help. Coming to their parents isn’t baby-ish; it’s safe.
What Is Digital Harassment?

Digital harassment is when kids and teens use cell phones, social networks, and other communications devices to bully, threaten, and aggressively badger someone. While it’s a form of cyberbullying, “digital harassment” is a bit different because it usually takes place between two people in a romantic relationship.

Certainly, lots of young people conduct healthy relationships and use their online and mobile lives to stay connected to each other. But not all relationships are balanced—especially with teens, whose emotional lives run at peak speeds.

Some relationships can become manipulative and controlling, and teens use the digital devices at their disposal to act out. A few texts a day can turn into a few hundred. Relentless and unreasonable demands escalate. The abuser presses for things like the other person’s passwords (so they can check up on them) and sexy photos, and forces their significant other to unfriend people whom the abuser doesn’t like. They may spread lies, impersonate someone, or even resort to blackmail.

Why it matters

Digital harassment has real consequences for those who’ve been targeted. A 2009 poll conducted by MTV and the Associated Press found that targets of this kind of abuse are more likely to consider dropping out of school, engage in risky behavior, and even think about suicide.

The poll also found that kids and teens who discover digital harassment among their friends aren’t inclined to come forward and report it.

Fortunately, large public-awareness campaigns—most notably MTV’s A Thin Line and The Family Violence Prevention Fund’s That’s Not Cool—are helping teens recognize when staying connected crosses the line into digital harassment. These campaigns use kids’ idols—like Justin Bieber—and entertaining videos to give teens the language they need to identify and end digital harassment.

Parents can support their teens by understanding that relationships these days are often played out both online and in public—and kids need their parents’ guidance in establishing appropriate boundaries for healthy relationships. Young love is complicated enough without the added pressure of constant access and public scrutiny. The tips below can help you help your kids navigate these murky waters so they can avoid digital drama for themselves and their friends.

Some facts

- 50% of people ages 14-24 have experienced digitally abusive behavior.
- Nearly half of young people (45%) report that they see people being mean to each other on social networking sites.
- 61% of those who have sent a naked photo or video of themselves have been pressured by someone else to do so at least once.

Roughly 7 in 10 (69%) teens say that digital abuse is a serious problem for society that should be addressed, while 76% say that it’s a serious problem for people their age.

(All of the above are from the 2009 MTV Digital Abuse study)
Advice for Parents

If you suspect your kid is being harassed:

Start a discussion. Your teen may not tell you if it’s happening directly to him or her. But you can bring it up when you talk about online safety and responsible behavior. Tell kids about resources like That’s Not Cool and the National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline (1-866-331-9474 (1-866-331-8453 TTY).

Let them know you are always there for them. Remind teens often that you’re always available to talk to. While you’re at it, put in a plug for the school counselor, a teacher, or even a friend’s parent — knowing that they have a trusted adult to talk to may encourage teens to open up.

Help them set boundaries. Tell teens never to do anything that’s outside their comfort zone — like sharing passwords or sending sexual photos. (It never hurts to reiterate that anything you send can travel far and wide.)

If you suspect your kid may be harassing someone:

Check their Facebook page. See what kind of comments your teen sending — and whether other kids are telling your kid to back off.

Check their cell phone. What kind of texts is your kid sending — and how many?

Check in with other parents. The parents of your kid’s friends may know something you don’t.

Help your kid. Find a counselor or an organization that’s equipped to help. That’sNotCool is a great place to start.

Tips for all parents:

Check your teens’ texts, IMs, and status updates. Be aware of who your kids are talking to, what they’re saying, and how they’re saying it. If your teens won’t share their messages, look at your bill to see the quantity of texts.

Have a zero-tolerance policy. No sexting, no hate speech, no stalkerish behavior.

Teach teens to respect their devices. Explain what responsible ownership — and behavior — entails.

Teach kids to be upstanders, not bystanders. If teens see their friends getting harassed, they should report it to a teacher, a counselor, or another responsible, trustworthy adult.

Talk about the pressure to broadcast. Kids in abusive relationships are often coerced into sending scantily clad or naked pictures of themselves to “prove” their love. If this happens to your kid, that’s a big red flag.

Talk about what’s private. Kids differ from their parents in their take on what’s “private” and what’s OK to share. Explain to them the consequences of posting or sending intimate stuff. It can be copied, forwarded, and sent to thousands of kids in an instant.
**What is Facebook?**

Facebook is an enormous, free social networking site with hundreds of millions of users all over the world. To use Facebook, you sign up with your email address, name, gender, date of birth, and password. That gives you a profile page, which you can then fill in by answering questions on Facebook’s forms. The questions are designed to help you create connections with people you know — called “Friends” — as well as display things you like, such as books and movies. You also have the option to upload a photo of yourself.

Facebook is not supposed to be used by people under 13, but it’s not difficult to create a page if you are younger. If Facebook discovers a user under 13, they will delete the profile.

**Some facts**

Facebook has more than 500 million registered users (Facebook, 2010). If it were a country, it would have the third largest population in the world.

73% of 12- to 17-year olds have at least one social networking profile (Pew, 2010).

22% of teens check social networks 10 or more times per day (Common Sense Media, 2009).

54% of teens have joined an online community or social network group in support of a cause they care about (Common Sense Media, 2009).

48% of Facebook-using parents with kids under 18 are “friends” with their teens on Facebook (Retrevo, 2010).

More than 30 billion pieces of content (web links, news stories, blog posts, notes, photo albums, etc.) are shared on Facebook each month (Facebook, 2010).

In addition to displaying your profile information and likes, Facebook allows you do lots of other things, such as write “status updates” that tell others where you are and what you’re doing, play games, chat with others, comment on other people’s pages (called their “wall”), and more. You don’t need a computer to be on Facebook. You can view and update your page remotely from your smart phone or another mobile device.

**Why it matters**

Facebook. Our teens love it. But parents hear lots of negative things about it, too. Sure, Facebook has its share of sexy photos, pictures of kids drinking (and worse), cyberbullying, and even feuds that extend to the real world. But Facebook can also be a great way for kids to stay in touch with their friends and showcase their interests (and have fun).

Teens feel a lot of social pressure to use Facebook and, if used responsibly, Facebook can be a useful, fun tool for teens to stay in touch with friends. But kids can be cruel and will use any tool at their disposal to hurt, embarrass, or harass one another.

Parents often hear stories about teens misusing Facebook and become concerned that their children could get caught up in problems stemming from Facebook drama. The important thing for parents to know is that it’s not the site that’s a problem. It’s the way it’s used. That’s why talking to your kids about responsible online behavior is so important.

That said, there are still safety and privacy issues to be aware of. Kids can post their actual, physical location, stating where they are and inviting friends to join them. Even friends who don’t have Facebook can be tagged to a location. Kids and teens should disable this feature.

Facebook can also open teens up to unwanted comments from both friends and non-friends, it can spark feuds that drag on and can carry over into real life, and it can become an obsession to the point where teens fret about their online status. Perhaps the thorniest of all, it can expose photos, thoughts, and feelings that, once posted, are out of your teen’s control.
Teens using Facebook are creating a digital footprint that can live a long time online. And because teens can be impulsive, they are liable to say and do things on Facebook that they may later regret. It’s easy for your teen’s friends to forward anything that’s posted on your teen’s page — including instant-message conversations. What seemed important or funny in the moment may get teens into personal trouble now and professional trouble later.

**Understanding Facebook privacy**

On Facebook, your name and profile photo are always publicly viewable. That means other Facebook users can see your name and photo when they land on your page. You can limit who sees all of your other information, as well as who can write on your page by using Facebook’s privacy settings. You can make your information viewable to Everyone, Friends of Friends, Friends Only. You can also limit who can see photos, status updates, comments, and more. (Privacy settings control other things, too. See our video for more information.)

If your teen has a Facebook page, sit down with her and review her privacy settings. But beyond that, discuss the importance of controlling your own information. Once your child posts something, it’s out of her control and can be copied, pasted, or forwarded by other people.

By creating your own page and familiarizing yourself with Facebook’s controls, you can help your teen to use it responsibly and respectfully. Our tips can help you navigate this new territory.

**Tips for talking to teens about Facebook**

» **Talk to kids about controlling their information.**
   Encourage them to be selective about what they post. But it’s not just what they post that can get away from them. Their activities on Facebook, including the applications they use and games they play, can be viewed by others.

» **Use privacy settings.** Facebook’s default settings tend to keep information public until a user makes it private (although Facebook is a little stricter with minors’ accounts). Review the settings with your teen, and make sure they are set to “Friends Only.”

» **Disable location services.** Facebook’s Places feature lets users post their location. Kids can also “tag” their friends’ location when they’re together. These features can be — and should be — disabled in the privacy settings of kids’ and teens’ accounts.

» **Set rules about what’s appropriate to post.** No sexy photos, no drinking photos, no photos of them doing something that could hurt them in the future. They also need to be thoughtful about their status updates, wall posts, and comments on friends’ posts. Remind them that once they post something, it’s out of their hands.

» **Encourage teens to self-reflect before they self-reveal.** Teens are very much in the moment and are likely to post something they didn’t really mean. Work with them on curbing that impulse. Teach them to ask themselves why they’re posting something, who will be able to read it, and whether it be misunderstood or used against them later.

» **Watch out for ads.** There are tons of ads on Facebook, and most major companies have profile pages. Marketers actively use Facebook to target advertising to your teen.

» **Create your own page.** The best way to learn the ins and outs of Facebook is to create your own page. A great way to start talking to your teens about their Facebook experience is to ask them to help you create your own page.

» **“Friend” younger teens.** If your kids are in middle school, it may be a sound policy to know what they’re posting, since kids that age don’t necessarily understand that they’re creating a digital footprint that will long outlast the passions of the moment.

» **Talk to your high school-aged teens about whether or not they’re comfortable letting you “friend” them.** Many will be. If you are your teen’s friend, don’t fill her page with comments and don’t “friend” her friends. As it is, simply having parents is mortifying enough for some teens. Your kids’ friends don’t need evidence of your existence.

» **Choose your battles.** You will see the good, the bad, and the truly unfathomable. If you don’t want your kids to unfriend you, don’t ask them about every transgression. Keep it general.

» **Be a good role model.** Remember that they can see what you post, too. Model good behavior for your teens and keep your own digital footprint clean.
Do you give high scores to your kids’ games?

Never before have kids spent so much time (and money) gaming. Some gaming encourages creativity in wonderful ways — with music and art — or can help deepen a child’s interest in science and history. But most of the favorites consist of kill-or-be-killed action. It’s tough not to feel like an outsider when you watch your kids play some of the more advanced games.

Some facts

78% of teens play online games (Pew, 2009).

More Americans play video games than go to movies (NPD Group, 2009).

In 2009, females comprised 28% of console-game players (NPD Group, 2009).

National retailers enforced their store policies by refusing to sell M-rated video games to minors 80% of the time (Federal Trade Commission, 2008).

Teens who played games with more civic learning opportunities are more likely to give or raise money for charity and to volunteer (Pew and Mills College, 2008).

What is it?

Games come from all directions. There are the handheld devices like Gameboy, the Nintendo DS, and PlayStation Portable, as well as consoles like the Xbox360, PlayStations 2 and 3, and the Wii. Of course, there are online games on kids’ favorite websites, as well as downloadable games for the PC, the iPhone, the iPad, and smart phones.

How do you know if games are okay for your kids to play? Handheld and console video games carry age ratings from the Entertainment Software Ratings Board, as do online games that require a software installation. But online games with no software remain unrated. Multi-player online games involve communicating with other people — which raises the risk of inappropriate contact. The age ratings at the App Store can be unreliable, so use Common Sense App ratings instead. Find them online at www.commonsense.org.

Why it matters

Your kids love gaming. It is likely one of their favorite pastimes, and it brings them together with friends to play. Electronic games grow more creative and sophisticated every year. But you should pay attention for two big reasons: violence and addiction. As kids get older, games get more violent. They put young people behind the trigger and encourage them to cause as much damage as possible. The new Wii controllers work by motion sensor so your children actually make a stabbing or slicing motion to spear or slice someone on screen. This violent interaction affects kids. Studies have shown that playing violent games increases aggression and decreases sensitivity to others.

Also, kids don’t have “off” switches in their heads until their late teens, so they can — and will — play games for hours without stopping. Gaming addiction is very real and can harm kids’ health, school performance, and social maturity. If that’s not enough, gaming is not a cheap pasttime. Online games have subscriptions (or lots of ads), and console and handheld games can cost up to $60 per game.
Tips for all kids

» Make sure games are age-appropriate. Know the content of what your kids play, both at home and at friends’ houses.

» Establish limits. Be firm from the beginning about how much time kids can play. Some parents set an overall daily media usage time and let kids decide which of the many forms of media they wish to use on a given day. Of course, be very clear about what games your kids can play.

» Find good stuff. While it might seem like kids’ video games are all about shooting, you can find games that provide rich, engaging experiences that broaden kids’ horizons. Common Sense Media is a great place to start finding these games.

» Be aware of multiplayer options. Games often involve some form of player interaction, multiplayer gaming, or player-generated content that kids can upload and download. Watch out for open chat and user-generated content that isn’t monitored.

» Talk about online ads. Most online games offer lots of free giveaways and downloads that are often full of spyware and malware and will crash your computer sooner or later.

» Get screen savvy. Games are available on every device that has a screen — including phones. And screens are everywhere. Count that screen time toward your kids’ total game playing for the day.

Tips for preschoolers and elementary school kids

» Choose wisely. Look for games that are educational and stimulating.

» Be there for preschoolers. Sit alongside your preschoolers to help guide them and explain what the game is asking them to do.

» Restrict online communications. Many games for elementary-aged kids offer online components like chat. We don’t recommend these features for young children. If they are offered, you can usually disable them.

» Carefully consider game site subscription fees. Many online games charge a fee instead of showing ads. There are pros and cons to paying, but either way your kids will beg to join if their friends use the site. It’s your money, so check out the site yourself to see if it’s worth the price.

Tips for middle school kids

» Set multiplayer controls you’re comfortable with. Preteen and teen games offer additional player interaction, multiplayer action, or player-generated content that kids can upload and download. But these features can be controlled by the player, so set the controls you are comfortable with.

» Watch language. The language in multiplayer games can get pretty intense. If you aren’t comfortable with what you hear, use the parental controls that disable online play.

» Be on the lookout for violence. Violence ramps up quickly in these games. Check what your kids are playing and limit those games that you feel are excessively violent.

Tips for high school kids

» Be aware of highly addictive games. Games like Halo 3 allow kids to play against others anywhere in cyberspace. They are designed to take up tons of time, and it’s up to you to curb it. As with any battle you may have with your children, you have your work cut out for you.

» Stay involved. Continue to talk to teens about their gaming lives and look for games that help reinforce your family’s values.

» Watch spending. Games are expensive, and many offer in-game purchases. Talk to your teens about how much money they’re spending on gaming, and whether that money could be better spent elsewhere.
Faster than a speeding email

Your children’s fingers are furiously clicking away on their phone or keyboard. But what are they saying, and whom are they talking to? Kids have become more and more used to having ways to instantly communicate with their friends, and parents are often left trying to keep up.

Some facts

74% of girls aged 12-17 use instant messaging vs. 62% of boys (Norton, 2007).

40% of kids that have been cyberbullied say it happened through instant messages (Cyberbullying411.org, 2007).

28% of teens chat with people they don’t know in the offline world, and girls chat with strangers more than boys do (McAfee, 2010).

What is instant messaging?

Instant messaging, known as IM, allows for text or video talk in real time. Kids do it through AOL’s AIM, Gtalk, MySpace or Facebook IM, iChat, and now, their cell phones. Kids text chat with one or more friends in short bursts in IM slang (R U OK?). It’s shorthand that often seems like a secret code.

Kids create anonymous screen names (SNs) so that they can communicate without necessarily revealing who they are. They get “buddies” and add them to buddy lists so they can instantly see who is available to chat at any time. Newer computers come with built-in cameras enabling visual IM. Many of these services now offer video chatting, which allows users to talk to each other face to face by using webcams. This can be a great way to stay in touch with distant friends and relatives. But video chatting also makes conversations feel much more personal, and kids can get into uncomfortable situations if the person on the other end wants them to do something they might not do in person.

Why it matters

Starting in middle school, IM becomes a major way that kids communicate. It can make them feel connected to their friends, but it also can be a major time waster and homework interrupter. IM is a really powerful and fast way to spread information, and its anonymity allows kids to try on different behaviors and personalities. Cautious kids can become outspoken — which is positive. But kids can also use IM’s relative anonymity to spread cruel or embarrassing gossip. It’s easy to take someone’s confidence from an IM conversation and cut and paste it into another one and send it to the world.

common sense media
Parent tips for all kids

» **Keep them safe.** Make sure that kids know never to give out their real names, phone numbers, addresses, or the name of their schools to people online.

» **Keep it real.** Kids should know the people they are IM-ing. Friends of friends of friends can have motives you don’t know or understand. Remind your kids to feel a healthy skepticism about anyone introduced by friends (or friends of friends) — people they don’t really know. Consider reviewing buddy lists with your kids periodically to make sure they can tell you something personal about each buddy on that list.

Parent tips for elementary school kids

» **We don’t recommend that elementary school kids use IM.** They need to develop social maturity in the real world first.

Parent tips for middle school kids

» **Keep kids’ doors open.** Better yet, keep the computer in a central place. This will help kids stick to your rules about time and help you monitor their chats. And if your kids are using visual chat make sure you know the person on the other end and that your child and their chatting buddy are behaving properly.

» **Set use rules.** Set firm rules about time and place. IM can be addictive, and it’s easy to lose hours chatting with a friend when you should be doing other things. Reinforce rules about online behavior: no sexual talk, no trash talk, and no rumors.

» **Talk about digital cheating.** When some kids use IM as a virtual study group, it’s tempting and easy for them to cheat by giving or getting answers. They may not think of this as cheating, but it is. If your kids are using IM while doing their homework, it’s a good idea for you to check in to make sure they are being responsible.

» **Keep IM at home.** Minimize IM by keeping it on a computer. Once it’s on your kids’ phones, they are never going to be disconnected.

Parent tips for high school kids

» **Have standards.** However they are communicating, kids have to know what is and isn’t OK. Set rules about violent talk, sexual talk, and bullying behavior. They may not seem to be hearing you, but it’s very important that you make your expectations clear about what is and isn’t acceptable.
Staying safe and secure in a digital world

Technology makes it so easy for kids to connect and share things with friends and family no matter where they are. But these connections can come with a huge cost if kids aren’t careful. Learning to protect personal identity information, creating strong passwords, and being cautious when downloading programs and files are crucial to the safety and security of the digital devices kids use, as well as the information those devices store. Otherwise, kids can expose themselves and their families to digital threats like computer viruses, data and identity theft, and hacking.

What is digital safety?

To understand digital safety and security, you’ll need to learn some new words: phishing, malware, spyware, spam, and yes, even junk. These greedy little programs attach themselves to respectable-looking software — for example, a downloadable game that looks really cool — and then wreak havoc once installed on your computer. Security programs can block them, but one of the most important weapons is teaching kids to treat their devices and information as the truly valuable things they are.

Why it matters

If kids don’t protect their personal information, there are many potential risks: damage to the hardware, identity theft, or financial loss. But children may not realize they are putting their information in jeopardy, because the warning signs aren’t always obvious.

A friend might ask for your child’s computer password to play a game, and then access your child’s private email account. Or your child might use a file-sharing program that passes along a virus to your computer. To participate in an online contest, your tween might be asked to provide personal identity information such as a home phone number, address, date of birth, or your Social Security number, all of which opens up the family to the risk of identity theft. Just like in real life, kids have to know who to trust with information. It’s as true in the digital world as the real world.

Some facts

A 2009 Consumer Reports survey found that nearly 2 million households suffered ID theft in the previous year.

In 2009 McAfee Labs found that the number-one piece of malware detected around the world infected more than 27 million files in the course of 30 days.

52 percent of teens have given out personal information online to someone they don’t know offline, according to a 2008 study by McAfee and Harris Interactive.
Parent tips for all kids

Remind your children to follow these important security tips.

» Master the fine art of password creation. It can actually be fun to develop really good passwords. (See more details on how to do this below.) Strong passwords are a key defense against unauthorized access to your information, as well as identify theft.

» Know the difference between information worth sharing and private information. There are many ways you can share your ideas and creativity online, but personal information should remain private. Never input personal identity information such as phone numbers, addresses, or your date of birth in order to download something. And never, ever give Social Security numbers or credit card information.

» Be very careful with what you download. Don’t download free games or videos to your computer. These programs often come with spyware and viruses that will land your computer in the shop — and you in hot water.

Password protection

» Protect yourself — and your stuff — with strong passwords that safeguard your digital data. Use these tips to help you do it:

» Don’t use passwords that are easy to guess — such as your nickname or your pet’s name. People who know you well can guess these kinds of passwords.

» Don’t use any private identity information in your password. Identity thieves can use this information to pretend to be you.

» Don’t use a word in the dictionary as a password. Hackers use programs that will try every word in the dictionary to guess passwords.

» Do use combinations of letters, numbers, and symbols. These are harder to crack than regular words because there are more combinations to try.
Sure you trust a purple dinosaur. But what about a green penguin?

How do you know when a Web site for kids isn’t just a marketing gimmick or a meaningless time-waster? It can be hard to tell. But with Web games replacing Cabbage Patch dolls, Barbie, and Legos as some kids’ favorite toys, parents need to know how to manage these online games.

What are online worlds for young kids?

Club Penguin, Webkinz, Neopets, Dizzywood, Millsberry, and others are online playgrounds for kids ages 6-8. They’re called virtual worlds, because they create entirely new and different environments for your children.

Some facts

In 2008, an estimated 8 million U.S. kids visited virtual worlds on a regular basis (eMarketer, 2009).

In May 2009, children aged 2-11 made up nearly 10% of the active online universe (Nielsen, 2010).

18% of 8- to 10-year-olds spend time on some kind of social networking site daily (Kaiser, 2010).

There were 700,000 registered users on Club Penguin in 2007 (Disney, 2007).

Typically, your children will create an avatar (a cartoon character of themselves), which they can dress up and play with in the game. Then they create their own “room,” which they can decorate and where they store all of the items they win or buy with virtual money.

Most online worlds have mini-games and “hangouts” where kids can use their imaginations, test their skills, and interact with others. They chat with other players using pre-scripted phrases, and can compete against other players’ game scores. Most online worlds have rules regulating behavior on the site, including the ability to flag players who misbehave. Many also have guidelines for parents and may even send you an update on your child’s online activities.

To keep these worlds safe from predators and free from advertisers, many virtual worlds charge a subscription fee for access to all of their premium features. Some require you to buy a toy that has a code that unlocks the site for your child.

Why they matter

Online worlds are great places for kids’ imaginations to run free. They can create different characters and try on different personalities. The challenge for parents is letting their children enjoy these other worlds without getting carried away. Some of the gaming worlds are really addictive and draw kids in for long periods. And even though virtual worlds have rules about behavior, some kids can find ways around these rules.

Also, most of these sites revolve around racking up virtual money. You win cash at games, then earn it by completing activities or even by spending a certain amount of time on the site. Some of these virtual worlds even have in-game purchases, which will entice kids to buy — with actual money — things to use on the site. In this regard, virtual worlds teach kids that they get rewarded for spending lots of time (and sometimes lots of money) online. The “free” virtual worlds rely mostly on advertising, so your child will be exposed to many commercial messages designed to build brand loyalty. In these games, kids usually aren’t able to tell what’s an ad and what’s not.
Parent tips for young kids

» **Most of these sites are for 7-12 year olds.** Younger kids shouldn’t play. If kids can’t read or write, they shouldn’t be in online worlds. There are perfectly fun sites aimed at pre-school kids that are more age-appropriate.

» **If you wouldn’t let your children have an unsupervised play date, don’t let them online by themselves.** Remember, the social skills they bring to online worlds are the same ones they have (or don’t have) in real life.

» **Do your homework.** Make sure you check out sites before you let your kids go online. And don’t just have your children stop at the most popular social ones. There are also great sites that are educational.

» **Set non-negotiable time limits.** And make sure online play is balanced with real-life play.

» **Establish codes of conduct.** A good rule of thumb: If your kids wouldn’t say something to someone’s face, they should not say it in cyberspace.

» **Show kids how to flag inappropriate conduct.** It’s easy for parents to learn how to use the flagging feature and it’s important to show your kids how to use it, too. Explain that this is a healthy way to keep social networking sites safe and fun for everyone.

» **Make sure your children never share their passwords.** Often kids will give another child a password for help in a game. Explain that giving away a password is like giving someone your identity.

» **Talk about money and what it means to your family.** These sites rely on currency for buying extras. Don’t let a social network site that needs customer loyalty in order to be profitable teach your kids about earning, saving, and spending. Explain your values.

» **Keep the computer in a central place.** This will let you monitor your child’s online life.
What’s the issue?

Our kids live in a culture of sharing that has forever changed the concept of privacy. In a world where everyone is connected and anything created online can be copied, pasted, and sent to thousands of people in a heartbeat, privacy starts to mean something different than simply guarding personal or private information. Each time your child fills out a profile without privacy controls, comments on something, posts a video, or texts a picture of themselves to friends, they potentially broadcast themselves to the world.

Some facts

Approximately 3 out of 4 teens on social networking sites use privacy controls on their profiles

About 40 percent of kids have posted something on their social networking pages that they later regret

A little less than 20 percent of teens report that they’ve had private material (IMs, texts, emails) forwarded without their permission

Why It Matters

Digital life is both public and permanent. Everything our kids do online creates digital footprints that migrate and persist. Something that happens on the spur of the moment — a funny picture, an angry post — can resurface years later. And if kids aren’t careful, their reputations can be harmed.

Your child may think he or she just sent something to a friend — but that friend can send it to a friend’s friend, who can send it to their friends’ friends, and so on. That’s how secrets become headlines and how false information spreads fast and furiously. The stakes only increase when we remember that all of this takes place in front of a huge, invisible audience. Kids’ deepest secrets can be shared with thousands of people they’ve never even met.

common sense media
Parent tips for all kids

» **Help kids think long term.** Everything leaves a digital footprint. Whatever gets created may never go away. If they don’t want to see it tomorrow, they’d better not post it today. Explain to them that nothing is really private online — no matter what they think. Privacy settings aren’t infallible. Others can pass on information that is supposed to be private. It’s up to kids to protect themselves by thinking twice before they post anything that could damage their reputation or that someone else could use to embarrass or hurt them.

» **Teach kids to keep personal information private.** Help kids define which information is important for them to keep private when they’re online. To start, we recommend that kids not share their addresses, phone numbers, or birth dates.

» **Make sure your kids use privacy settings on their social network pages.** Encourage kids to think carefully about the nature of their relationships (close friends, family, acquaintances, strangers) and adjust their privacy settings accordingly.

» **Remind kids to protect their friends’ privacy.** Passing along a rumor or identifying someone in a picture (called “tagging”) affects other people’s privacy. If your kids are tagged in friends’ photos, they can ask to have the photos or the tags removed. But beyond that, there’s not too much they can do.

» **Remind kids that the Golden Rule applies online.** What goes around comes around. If kids spread a rumor or talk trash about a teacher, they can’t assume that what they post will stay private. Whatever negative things they say can and probably will come back to haunt them, in more ways than they can imagine.
Stranger smarts and safety

Kids love connecting with others online. Most young people talk online with their friends and family rather than strangers. But as a parent, you might be concerned that a stranger with bad intent could contact your child.

Some facts

According to a 2006 study by the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire:

- 13% of youth ages 10 to 17 received unwanted solicitations in 2006; this decreased from 19% in 2001
- Most youth handled unwanted solicitations easily and effectively by doing things like ignoring or blocking solicitors or leaving the site

According to a report by the Internet Safety Technical Task Force in 2008:

- Youth report that solicitation occurs more frequently by other minors than adult strangers
- Solicitations online may include flirting and sexual harassment, but 69% of solicitations have no attempt to initiate offline contact

What’s the issue?

Predatory behavior is when people contact your child on the Internet (mostly through instant messaging, chat rooms, or through a social networking site) and attempt to “groom” your child for a relationship. These people try to win children’s trust by hiding their true identities.

They may try to get kids into creepy or dangerous situations by pretend to have similar interests, giving them compliments, and letting them talk about anything they want. They typically tell children to keep the friendship secret, and they may even threaten kids if they tell anybody. As the relationship develops, the predator may send pictures, ask a child to send them pictures, and ask to meet face to face.

Teaching your child to be alert about how predators groom their targets is crucial to keeping your child safe.

Why it matters

Personal safety is extremely important. Young people need to be vigilant about who is contacting them, and avoid responding to people they don’t know. As a parent, it’s probably not realistic to block your kids from talking online. And remember, children don’t need a computer to talk with others online. They can do it from their phones and other mobile devices. That’s why it’s so important for parents to be involved in their children’s online lives.
**Parent tips for all kids**

» **Discuss responsible online behavior.** Talk about who it’s okay to chat with and what it’s okay to talk about. Establish rules for appropriate instant messaging and chatting online, and explain that you’re enforcing those rules because you care about their safety. You may want to involve an older sibling who can model good online behavior and can stay involved in their younger siblings’ online lives.

» **Establish rules for who’s okay to talk to.** Online talk should generally be with people your children know, like family and friends.

» **Set boundaries for what topics are okay to discuss.** Kids shouldn’t answer questions online that make them feel uncomfortable. They also shouldn’t talk about adult topics with strangers.

» **Make sure your child feels safe telling a trusted adult.** If something creepy or inappropriate happens, kids need to know they won’t get in trouble if they tell an adult they trust. And avoid banning them from the computer. Kids are less likely to tell parents if they experience a problem on the computer if they think they’ll be banned from using it.

» **Remind your kids to never give strangers private information.** Kids should never give out their name, address, school, phone number, email, pictures, or anything that could identify who they are.

» **Block, ignore, or leave.** Most kids know to brush off unwanted contact. Encourage this behavior.

» **Watch out for strangers.** Kids should never plan a meeting with someone they met online without taking along a trusted adult.

**Tips for middle school and high school kids**

» **Flirting with disaster.** Face-to-face flirting with peers is normal, but flirting with strangers online is risky. Remind kids that they don’t know anything about a stranger they talk with online. Also remind them not to do things online they wouldn’t do in real life.

» **Look for warning signs.** Does your child seem withdrawn, emotionally distant, spend endless hours online, or seem to be hiding something? The kids who get sucked into inappropriate online relationships often show warning signs. They might be hiding an online relationship they don’t want you to know about. If you think this might be happening, ask your child about it!
What’s the issue?

In the offline world, unless it’s Halloween it’s pretty clear who you are. But online, your kids can be penguins, zombies, or ninjas. Their screen names can be SexyKitten or AngryBoy. The fact is in digital life kids can be anyone they want to be. They can make up screen names, create fictitious profiles, or look any way they want by designing an avatar (a cartoon alter ego) that is only restricted by their imaginations.

Why it matters

Because so much of the way kids interact in the online world revolves around creating personal profiles and avatars, identity starts to take on a new meaning. Playing around with creative identities can be a safe and imaginative way for kids to explore who they are. And having an alter ego can be a real gift for a kid who’s particularly shy or who fears rejection.

On the other hand, a digital identity can be a way for kids to dodge personal consequences. When kids are disguised as anonymous, they can push limits and act in ways they wouldn’t in the real world. Some may explore antisocial or harmful identities — from being a thug to an anorexic. Others simply over-share and create reputations that might come back to haunt them. Either way, if there’s a large gap between an online and offline identity, it can fragment a kid’s sense of self (especially when the online identity gets a lot of feedback and the kid becomes dependent on it). Add in the potential of a huge audience, and kids’ natural desire for attention and recognition can turn into something less than healthy — perhaps a quest for “15 minutes of fame.”

Some facts

73 percent of teens who use the Internet have a profile on social network sites such as Facebook or MySpace (Pew Internet Life, 2010)

47 percent of online teens have posted photos in which others can see them (Pew Internet Life, 2009)

80 percent of teens own a game console (Pew Internet Life, 2010)
Parent tips for all kids

» **Talk to your kids about anonymity.** Just because your kids are disguised doesn’t mean they can’t be identified. They must be responsible for their actions, whether they’re portrayed as a penguin or a person.

» **Remember that exploration is part of growing up.** Ask questions about your kids’ online identities. Why did they make the choices they did?

» **If your kids’ avatars or screen names concern you, talk with them.** Ask questions about their choices. And don’t be too quick to worry or judge. Their identities can mean something deep, or be the result of a whim.

» **Identities grounded in hatred, violence, illegal activities, or risky sexual behavior should be avoided entirely.** No child needs to be associated with unhealthy or unethical behavior.

» **Ask your kids to think about who they want to be in their online life.** Is the digital identity they’re creating currently how they want to be perceived? How about in 5 years? In 20 years? Remind them that they have the power to present and control their identities and reputations.
That picture’s not as private as you think

Most teens today are comfortable with documenting their lives online. Posting photos, updating their status messages, sharing rapid-fire texts, and being a click away from friends are the new normal for teens. But this “always on” culture also creates an environment where teens can make impulsive decisions that can come back to haunt them. One example of this has been in the news a lot lately: sexting.

Some facts

22% of teen girls and 20% of teen boys have sent nude or semi-nude photos of themselves over the Internet or their phones.

22% of teens admit that technology makes them personally more forward and aggressive.

38% of teens say exchanging sexy content makes dating or hooking up with others more likely.

29% of teens believe those exchanging sexy content are “expected” to date or hook up.

(All of the above are from CosmoGirl and the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2009.)

What Is “Sexting”?

When people take and send sexually revealing picture of themselves or send sexually explicit messages via text message, it’s called “sexting.” While experts differ on statistics, a 2010 study conducted by Pew Internet & American Life Project confirms sexting is a teen reality that’s here to stay. Kids “sext” to show off, to entice someone, to show interest in someone, or to prove commitment.

Sending these pictures or messages is problematic enough, but the real challenge comes when this content is shared broadly. As far too many teens have found out, the recipient of these messages is in possession of a highly compromising image or message that can be easily posted on a social networking site or sent to others via email or text.

Why sexting matters

In a technology world where anything can be copied, sent, posted, and seen by huge audiences, there’s no such thing as being able to control information. The intention doesn’t matter — even if a photo was taken and sent as a token of love, for example, the technology makes it possible for everyone to see your child’s most intimate self. In the hands of teens, when revealing photos are made public, the subject almost always ends up feeling humiliated. Furthermore, sending sexual images to minors is against the law, and some states have begun prosecuting kids for child pornography or felony obscenity.

There have been some high profile cases of sexting. In July 2008, Cincinnati teen Jesse Logan committed suicide after a nude photo she’d sent to a boyfriend was circulated widely around her high school, resulting in harassment from her classmates.

Fortunately, networks with large teen audiences — MTV, for example — are using their platforms to warn teens against the dangers of sexting. And the website That’s Not Cool.com uses teen-speak to help resist cyber peer pressure. Hopefully, these messages will get through.
Advice for Parents

» Don’t wait for an incident to happen to your child or your child’s friend before you talk about the consequences of sexting. Sure, talking about sex or dating with teens can be uncomfortable, but it’s better to have the talk before something happens.

» Remind your kids that once an image is sent, it can never be retrieved — and they will lose control of it. Ask teens how they would feel if their teachers, parents, or the entire school saw the picture, because that happens all the time.

» Talk about pressures to send revealing photos. Let teens know that you understand how they can be pushed or dared into sending something. Tell them that no matter how big the social pressure is, the potential social humiliation can be hundreds of times worse.

» Teach your children that the buck stops with them. If someone sends them a photo, they should delete it immediately. It’s better to be part of the solution than the problem. Besides, if they do send it on, they’re distributing pornography — and that’s against the law.

» Check out ThatsNotCool.com. It’s a fabulous site that gives kids the language and support to take texting and cell phone power back into their own hands. It’s also a great resource for parents who are uncomfortable dealing directly with this issue.
It’s all about hanging with friends — online.

It’s 8:30 on a school night — do you know where your child is? Sure, he’s at his computer, but if he’s like most kids, he’s on a social networking site. Do you know what he’s doing? It’s a whole other world and we’ll help you understand (instead of worry) where your kids are hanging out.

Some facts

Sites like Facebook and MySpace have privacy controls.

Some sites require kids to be older than 13 to have a profile, but younger kids set up accounts anyway.

Social networks keep kids connected to friends and provide a space for self-expression.

There are no guarantees of privacy (even with settings) — anything can be cut, pasted, and sent.

Inappropriate pictures, posts, or messages can result in damage to a kid’s reputation.

Kids can “tag” (or identify) their friends; this can violate their friends’ privacy.

What are social networks?

Social networks are places where kids can hang out together online. These networks range from Club Penguin and Webkinz (for young kids) to MySpace and Facebook. The sites work pretty simply: people who sign up get a profile to post pictures, artwork, and links to songs; write about what they enjoy; and connect with friends. Social networks have become extensions of kids’ social lives and wonderful places for self-expression. Social network sites are major communication hubs providing ways for kids to use instant messaging, “friend” one another, and “write on walls” to share public and private thoughts and comments. Social networks also have games, quizzes, and applications that let you do everything from give a virtual hug to buy a friend a virtual beer.

Why social networking matters

Young people today feel a lot of social pressure to use social networking sites. Connecting with friends, creating and sharing photos and videos, and playing games on these sites have all become important parts of kids’ lives.

Unless your child uses privacy controls, everything he says about himself in pictures or words will be available for all the world to see. And people do see these pages — strangers, college admissions officers, even potential employers. Kids are savvy enough to post things, but not always mature enough to understand the consequences of doing it.

Even if your kids think they have figured out their privacy controls, there are different ways to get into people’s pages. That’s why revealing personal information is worrisome.
Parent tips for young kids

» **Stick with age-appropriate sites.** For kids 5-8, there are sites with strong safety features that help kids play without risking inappropriate content or contact.

Parent tips for middle school kids

» **Facebook and MySpace won’t let kids have sites if they are under 13.** That said, kids simply do the math to figure out what year to put so they’ll seem 13 — or older. Check your computer browser histories. If you see either site, then assume your kids have an account.

» **Tell your kids to think before they post.** Remind them that everything can be seen by a vast, invisible audience (otherwise known as friends of friends of friends). Each family is different, but for middle school kids it’s a good idea for parents to have access to their kids’ pages, at least at first, to be sure that what is being posted is appropriate. Parents can help keep their children from doing something they will regret later.

» **Make sure they set their privacy settings.** Privacy settings aren’t foolproof, but they’re important. Take the time to learn how privacy settings work on your kids’ favorite sites, and teach your kids how to control their privacy.

» **Remind them of the golden rule.** If your children wouldn’t want someone saying it to them, they shouldn’t say it to anyone else.

» **Kindness counts.** Lots of sites have anonymous applications like “bathroom wall” or “honesty boxes” that allow users to tell their friends what they think of them. Rule of thumb: If your children wouldn’t say it to someone’s face, they shouldn’t post it.

» **Go online.** Get an account for yourself. See what kids can and can’t do.

Parent tips for high school kids

» **Talk about the nature of their digital world.** Remind them that anyone can see what’s on their pages — even if they think no one will. Potential employers and college admissions people often surf these sites. Ask your teens to think about who might see their pages and how they might interpret the posts or photos.

» **Set some rules for what is and isn’t appropriate for your kids to communicate, play, and post online.** Posts with photos or comments about youthful misbehavior may come back to haunt them.

» **Let them know that anything they create or communicate can be cut, altered, pasted, and sent around.** Once they put something on their pages, it’s out of their control and can be taken out of context and used to hurt your teens or someone else. This includes talk and photos of sex, drugs, and alcohol. Tell them that online stuff can last forever. If they wouldn’t put something on the hallway in school, they shouldn’t post it on their pages.

» **If they meet someone, it had better be in a public place, preferably with a friend.** We would all like to think that kids wouldn’t meet strangers — but sometimes they do. If your kids want to meet an online friend, let them know that you want to meet that friend, too.

» **Watch the clock.** Social network sites can be real time suckers. Hours and hours can go by — which isn’t great for getting homework done.
Common Sense on Text Messaging

Texting is becoming the #1 form of communication

If you’ve ever stared in awe at your child’s thumbs moving furiously over her phone’s keyboard, you’ve probably wondered how she does it so quickly, and why it’s her favorite form of communication. Kids text because it lets them feel connected and feel as if they can have a private moment with a friend, no matter where they are or what else they’re doing.

Some facts

Texting is the #2 use of cell phones — after checking the time.

Teens send an average of 3,146 texts per month, and kids ages 9 to 12 send 1,146 (Nielsen, 2010).

75% of 12 to 17 year olds own cell phones and 88% of them use text messaging (Pew, 2010).

64% of parents look at the contents of their child’s cell phone and 62% of parents have taken away their child’s phone as punishment. (Pew, 2010).

43% of teens who take their phones to school say they text in class at least once a day (Pew, 2010).

Billions of text messages are sent every year from our kids’ mobile phones. While most kids use messaging responsibly, it’s still a powerful and extremely private communication tool that can be used irresponsibly. With texting, kids can’t see the reaction of the person receiving the message, so their actions can be separated from the consequences. Young people can be cruel, and their judgment and impulse control are not yet fully developed. If a text exchange becomes unpleasant, it can be very hurtful or even dangerous to their well being.

Why understanding texting matters

Texting is totally portable, private, and immediate. Kids can send messages to anyone from anywhere at anytime. In other words, they have no boundaries unless we help them to establish some. Almost no research has been done on the impact of immediate communication on kids’ social development.

But the instant gratification factor of getting immediate responses from friends has to have some affect. Any parent who has been at the dinner table or on a hike with a child only to hear a pocket buzz with an incoming message knows that texts take your kids out of the moment they are in and connect them to distant friends.

Texts can be used to keep friends close, help parents figure out family logistics, and offer a wonderful way to share experiences. But, as with any powerful tool, texting can also be used to bully or humiliate people. An embarrassing or upsetting image or video can quickly be transmitted or uploaded to an online video sharing site like YouTube. Sexting is a form of texting where kids send or receive graphic images or messages. According to a study from CosmoGirl, 22% of teen girls have sent or posted these kinds of images. And, sadly, the use of texting in school cheating is on the rise as answers can be swiftly passed from student to student.

Kids need to know that abusing the privilege of texting has consequences.
Parent Tips for all kids

» Carefully evaluate whether or not your kids need texting on their cell phones. Just because other kids in their class have it doesn’t mean your child needs it.

» If your kids do text, get an unlimited texting plan. Otherwise the charges mount up swiftly.

» Make rules around when and where. No texting during meals, during class, on family outings. Oh, and turn the phone OFF at night!

» No texting while they should be concentrating on something else. This includes driving — nearly half of teens admit to texting while driving — walking, and having a conversation with someone else. Firm rules about this will ensure their safety as well as their social skills.

» Establish consequences for misuse. Cheating, inappropriate messages, sexual communication. These are all no-go’s. Want to make your point? Take your kid’s phone away for a week.

» Watch your own behavior. Parents are still models for their kids. If you text your child during class and then turn around and tell that child that he or she can’t do that, you’re sending mixed signals.

» If you suspect your kids aren’t texting appropriately, you can always look at their messages. Yes, it feels like snooping, but our first job as parents is to ensure that our kids use powerful technologies safely and responsibly.