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# Understanding A Child's Virtual World

*A handbook for parents and guardians*

By Dr. Linda Young



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**Linda R. Young, Ph.D.**

## About The Author

Linda Young is a senior staff psychologist at Seattle University, where she provides individual, couples and group counseling, psychotherapy and crisis intervention for undergraduate and graduate students. She also develops and delivers campus outreach programs on a variety of mental health topics and offers organizational consultation to academic departments and Student Development staff. In addition to her university work, Dr. Young maintains a private practice in Bellevue, Washington, specializing in relationship issues.

Through her work with couples and students, she has seen the topic of online safety emerge as a prominent one over the past few years. As a public service, Qwest is making it possible for Dr. Young to provide insight on how the Internet is changing the fabric of families. The public will be able to learn more from Linda at [www.incredibleinternet.com](http://www.incredibleinternet.com).

Dr. Young has written several publications and has extensive educational, research and consulting experience. She has been interviewed as a guest psychologist by National Public Radio, NBC and various network affiliates.

Her past experience includes work as a staff psychologist at the University of California, San Diego, assistant professor of psychology at National University and counseling instructor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice of the City of New York.

Her accolades include being the recipient of an Outstanding Staff Award at UCSD, a Ford Foundation Predoctoral Fellowship in 1993. She graduated Magna Cum Laude in 1974 from Hofstra University and, in 1996, her dissertation on Young Adult Sexual Decision Making ranked among the top 10 percent at Columbia University.

## DEAR PARENTS AND GUARDIANS:

These days, it's not uncommon for children to be more tech-savvy than the adults in their lives. As a result, adults often find it difficult to understand or relate to what kids are doing online.

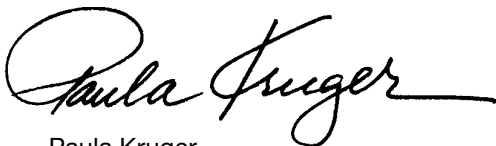
At Qwest, we believe informed parents and guardians are better equipped to create a positive online experience for their families. That's why Qwest's Incredible Internet program provides up-to-date Internet safety and security information in an interactive format that's available from any Internet connection.

To deliver these robust resources, we've partnered with the best local and national safety and security experts, including the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® as well as influential government, education and community leaders. Qwest and these experts agree that parental education is critical to minimize the risks children face online.

Linda R. Young, Ph.D., a family therapist with more than 15 years of counseling experience, is one expert whose work is featured on IncredibleInternet.com, and in this handbook. Dr. Young provides a professional perspective on the ways advancing technology is affecting our daily lives, and how adults can better understand a child's virtual world.

As a parent, I found the topics covered to be both relevant and compelling, and I hope you will, too. I invite you to visit IncredibleInternet.com to learn more from Dr. Young.

Sincerely,



Paula Kruger

Executive Vice President  
Qwest Communications



## How Technology is Changing Relationships: Connections That Bring You Closer



**USING THE LATEST TECHNOLOGY** can be a double-edged sword for relationships. It helps all of us stay more connected, but has the potential to isolate us more.

Today's children were born into a digital age, and they've developed the ability to move seamlessly between online and offline environments. Their online worlds are part of their real lives, but it's important to ensure that time on the computer is balanced by offline relationships and activities.

## GOOD NEWS

### 🕒 **Good connections online often mean good connections offline.**

The vast majority of chatting on social networking sites occurs between young people who already know each other rather than with strangers. It is a form of “hanging out,” no more inherently debilitating or dangerous than hanging out at the corner soda fountain of yesteryear or the mall of today. In fact, the heaviest users of online social networks also tend to be the most socially active offline (Lenhart & Madden, 2007).

### 🕒 **Introverted kids gain social confidence and support online.**

Introverted teens and those who are especially sensitive to other’s (real or imagined) non-verbal signs of rejection find online communication less intimidating. For these kids, research shows online social networks have aided social confidence and social support (Ellison et al, 2006; Valkenburg et al, 2006). Creative self-expression through posting music, graphics, videos, poetry and blogs on social networking sites can level the social playing field, help like-minded individuals get to know each other better and deepen genuine friendships offline.

### 🕒 **Wired kids are better-prepared for today’s professions.**

In a connected world, fluidity between online and offline communications will serve kids well in future careers in which teams of people work together remotely.

### 🕒 **Exposure to diversity is easier.**

Communicating with peers around the world from different cultures used to be limited to pen-pals who waited weeks for letters. Now people can communicate in real-time and learn about each other’s lives with video, audio, satellite maps and text. An entire classroom can maintain contact with a similar grade in another country, facilitated by the teacher or librarian.

## MIXED NEWS

### 🕒 **Baring the soul.**

People tend to disclose more personal communication when they can’t see each other, and when they believe they have a supportive audience. Kids today have a very different sense of privacy than prior generations because they were born into a culture of public exposure. They often don’t care who reads the juicy, emotional or meaningless ramblings in their blogs (like online diaries). They may even get a charge out of knowing others are reading their words – it makes them feel more important, validated and interesting when others comment about their revelations. It’s good to feel others’ support and interest, but kids face risks from predators who prey on exposed personal vulnerabilities. Even if posts are limited to online friends, too much disclosure can lead to harassment from peers.

### 🕒 **Reaching out for emotional support.**

Some children with emotional problems have been helped tremendously as a result of reaching out to others on blogs, social networks and self-help websites. But stigma remains around some mental, physical and sexual health issues. Shame, denial or societal prejudices can make it difficult for kids to turn to their families or real-life resources for help.

## BAD NEWS

### 🕒 **Using Internet communities to support pathology instead of healing.**

The flip side to online self-help is access to communities that encourage and enable dangerous or unhealthy behaviors. The Internet has become a haven for these kids, who can easily locate special websites dedicated to the encouragement of eating disorders, self-mutilation, and many other issues.

### 🕒 **Compulsive online use.**

Overuse of the Internet can create serious life imbalance for any child. Kids with attention deficit disorders may, ironically, find it easier to focus for long stretches of time on the constantly shifting stimuli provided by computer games and other online activities. Kids with obsessive-compulsive disorders are very vulnerable to overuse of the Internet. Kids with depression can use the Internet to withdraw completely from family. Online gaming is particularly seductive for overuse.

### 🕒 **Status-seeking objectification by ratings and rankings.**

For those with fragile self-esteem who measure their worth by who they know and how they rank, the Internet offers superficial value through artificial measures such as number of friends on online networks, hits on one's profile, website or video, photo ratings and "hot-or-not" rankings. Kids (and vulnerable adults) can over-rely on superficial connections to feel good about themselves.

"As parents, we need to learn about our child's cyber world and set up the expectation that we will be auditing it frequently. We have to be informed so we can guide them."

**DAVE DEFOREST-STALLS  
BIG BROTHERS & BIG SISTERS**

## WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

1. For your child to be able to come to you with their emotional struggles, a genuine, non-judgmental stance is essential at home. Your willingness to provide help and support and the best professional resources instead of punishing them for an out-of-control issue they disclose is invaluable. Many kids shut down or seek help from potentially inappropriate places if they don't feel their parents are really there for them.
2. One of the best ways for parents to find out whether their child can relate well to others face-to-face is to spend quality time with their children. Eating together whenever possible, playing games together and checking in with highs and lows or questions of the day provide good opportunities. Notice changes in your child's mood and behavior and read our two-part download on "Communicating with Teens in Ways That Change Behavior."
3. If parents are worried that their kids may be losing their ability to read non-verbal cues, a fun and interesting test of ability to read the genuineness of smiles can be found at [www.bbc.co.uk/science/humanbody/mind/surveys/smiles/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/humanbody/mind/surveys/smiles/). Parents may be surprised at who is better at this!
4. Use online resources to identify and find help for compulsive computer overuse. One good source is "The Center for Internet Addiction" at <http://netaddiction.com/>
5. Nurture your kids with values that are unrelated to status and commodities. Give them kudos for their effort on a challenging task, generosity with friends, charitable contributions, and taking risks that require some messing up before mastery.

## REFERENCES

**Ellison, N., Steinfie, C. & Lampe, C.** *Spatially Bounded Online Social Networks and Social Capital: The Role of Facebook*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the International Communication Association(ICA), June 19-23, 2006, Dresden, Germany

**Lenhart, A., & Madden, M.** *Teens, Privacy & Online Social Networks: How teens manage their online identities and personal information in the age of MySpace*. Pew Internet and American Life Project. April 18, 2007.

**Valkenburg, P., Peter, J., & Schouten, A. (2006).** *Friend Networking Sites and Their Relationship to Adolescents' Well-Being and Social Self-Esteem*. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*. 9: 584-590



## 7 Reasons Good Kids Do Bad Things on the Internet



**PARENTS OFTEN WONDER** how children who were raised well can end up engaging in hateful, illegal, sexually provocative, bullying or harassing activities on the Internet. Any child may be a victim or perpetrator of bad behavior on the Internet. It's dangerous to assume that your child is immune just because he or she gets good grades or is polite to adults. Here are seven factors that can help explain why good kids do bad things online.

### 1. It's easy and fast.

As a parent, you have probably witnessed the strong and changeable emotions of pubescent kids. On the Internet, strong emotions can be released at the speed of a keystroke, but the ripple effects can last much longer. It's especially common for teens to post whatever they're feeling, thinking or doing whenever the impulse comes up, because the part of the brain that is in charge of impulse control and long-term consequences is not fully developed until somewhere between 20 and 25 years old. Teens aren't thinking about the future when they post nasty comments to--or about--someone online, or present themselves in embarrassing, degrading or sexually provocative ways.

### 2. The illusion of privacy.

When kids are on the Internet in their own rooms and the audience is invisible, they begin to feel like they are in a private space. They get bolder because they can't see or hear the people who are reading their messages or viewing their embarrassing or provocative photos. They don't pause to realize that even if they only send pictures to a select group of friends, they can't control to whom their friends send them, or who is downloading them and saving them forever.

### 3. The paradox of parental expectations.

No one is all good or all bad. Yet parents, teachers and peers often label kids to fit their first impressions and stereotypes (e.g., "the good one," "the smart one," "the problem child," "the shy one," "the athlete," etc.). Living up to being "good" brings love and attention, so kids who have been labeled this way may feel great pressure to conform to these expectations in real life. Rather than feeling genuine and understood, they begin to feel like shiny objects on display for others. The "good one" is the public face, while wishes and attitudes that they have been taught are wrong or shameful get buried deep inside. Resentment and frustration may build up in the child until an opportunity arrives for privacy and anonymity. The Internet has the potential to become the perfect outlet for the expression of "bad" thoughts that have been hidden away.

### 4. Emotional and physical distance.

The child who bullies or harasses someone online doesn't witness the emotional and physical reaction of his or her target. This makes it much harder to feel compassion, and easier to ignore or discount the victim's pain, suffering and anger. The child who bullies or harasses on the Internet is also safer from physical retaliation. Because of the physical distance from the target, a small or fragile child who has been the victim of bullying in real life may then be tempted to become a verbal bully online.

### 5. Loss of self-awareness and "groupthink."

An anonymous member of a large group of supporters feels less responsible for his or her actions and less likely to question whether the behavior is getting out of control. Bad group behavior can seem less bad, and even seem like the right thing to do at the time. This is true in real life as well as online – think about jeering crowds egging on a fight. Adults and kids who start hate groups on social networking sites and get lots of people to join the group create the impression that they have a lot of support. This emboldens them to make increasingly mean-spirited comments about others.

"Kids think the Internet is so huge that they can say and do whatever they want without anyone knowing who they are."

SGT. KIRK HON  
DENVER POLICE DEPARTMENT

## 6. Fallout from super-parenting.

Many kids today are showered with attention and accolades from their parents and guardians. Often, these super-parents run interference for their children. As a result some of these kids have a stronger sense of entitlement, and weaker sense of personal responsibility, which allows them to think they deserve to get away with bad behavior.

## 7. Today, bad behavior can bring anyone 15 minutes of fame.

It's normal for adolescents to be self-absorbed as they develop their own identities. It's also normal to model behavior that gets attention and peer acknowledgment. Bad deeds draw big audiences on reality television, and a bad deed captured on video can quickly be seen around the world by millions online. Infamy and tasteless, derogatory humor get more attention than acts of kindness. Sadly, bad behavior sells!

## TIPS FOR PARENTS AND GUARDIANS

- ▶ Don't label or pigeonhole your kids: Check your "endearing" nicknames for them, and the ones their siblings use. Are the names kind, or are they embarrassing, one-dimensional or demeaning in some way?
- ▶ Think about how you praise your kids and how you talk about them to others. Do you brag about their accomplishments but not their character?
- ▶ Talk with your children about the illusion of privacy on the Internet
- ▶ Be your child's moral compass. Don't get caught in "Do as I say, not as I do."
- ▶ Books that can help:
  - *Parents Do Make a Difference: How to Raise Kids with Solid Character, Strong Minds, and Caring Hearts*, by **Michele Borba** (for pre-teens)
  - A wonderful one for all ages to read together is: *Internet & Computer Ethics for Kids: (and Parents & Teachers Who Haven't Got a Clue)*, by **Winn Schwartau**

# Communicating With Teens in Ways That Change Behavior Part 1: How to Engage a Tuned-Out Teen



## GETTING A TUNED-OUT TEEN TO TALK

**DO YOU HAVE AN ADOLESCENT** who talks up a storm with friends on their cell phone or online but barely nods or grunts when you try to find out what's going on? Do you ask even more questions out of exasperation that get you nowhere?

If you pressure your child to talk when you are feeling anxious, agitated or angry, you are most likely to sound accusatory, hysterical or like an interrogator. As a result, your child is even more likely to shut down, become evasive or lie to escape you. Try these four steps if what you've been doing hasn't been working:

- ▶ **Step 1.** Try limiting questions about what your teen is thinking or feeling, or how school or social life is going for a full week. (Beware, this may be easier said than done.) Unless you have reason to believe there is some immediate threat to your adolescent's safety, resist the urge to inquire about their every thought for a few days. If you have been pushing your child to talk without realizing it, this step will help put things back on the right track.
- ▶ **Step 2.** Let your child know you are there to support her if she wants to talk. Instead of asking questions during this time, notice when his or her mood or behavior shifts and make simple, compassionate observations instead of asking lots of questions. For example, avoid a barrage of questions like, "Is something bothering you? What's going on? What happened at school?" Instead, say, "It looks like something's been troubling you lately. I'm here if you want to talk about it."
- ▶ **Step 3.** Prioritize time together by finding simple activities to share. Make something together. Take a drive. Share something you know your child already enjoys, or that he or she can teach you how to do. Do a chore together.
- ▶ **Step 4.** Tell a few stories about times in your own adolescence when you felt confused, anxious, left out or misunderstood, and how you came out of it eventually. You might be surprised to find that with patience and persistence, your teen will eventually begin to open up to you on his or her own!

## HOW TO LISTEN EFFECTIVELY WHEN YOUR TEEN IS READY TO TALK

- ▶ Listen with full attention. Stop what you are doing (unless it's a simple task you're already doing together) and focus on your child. This doesn't necessarily mean making eye contact the whole time he's expressing himself. It may be easier for him to talk about something embarrassing or disturbing if you simply sit close by with eyes down and ears cocked – especially with adolescent boys.
- ▶ Don't interrupt or start giving advice unless he or she requests it.
- ▶ Ask short, open-ended questions, such as: "Can you tell me more?" or "Then what happened?"
- ▶ Encourage him or her to continue by nodding, saying "ooh" or "uuumm," or repeating the last bit of what he or she just said and then waiting for more.
- ▶ Don't become agitated or start yelling, even if your heart is pounding as he tells you something that shocks you.
- ▶ Acknowledge your adolescent's feelings and concerns as valid, even if you think he or she is over-reacting to a minor incident. Nothing feels more invalidating than hearing, "Oh, it's not that bad," or "Don't worry, you'll be fine," when your teen is describing something upsetting.

## IT'S NOT JUST WHAT YOU SAY, IT'S WHAT YOU DO

🕒 Take inventory of your own behavior. If you want your child to be ethical, polite, careful and safe, are you modeling these values in your own life?

- Do you use rude or foul language with or around your children?
- Do you break promises?
- Do you gossip about others?
- Do you take dangerous risks?
- Do you drink excessively?
- Are you consistent with family rules and consequences?
- Do you prioritize time with your family?
- Do you explode or shut down when you're upset?

As parents and guardians, you must change your own behavior or seek help for yourself before you can expect your child to be open and responsive to you.

Now that you have the basics for engaging in open dialogue with your teens, find out more about how to structure specific conversations about Internet safety and “netiquette”. Download our free tip sheet on Courageous Conversations About Internet Safety and Netiquette at [IncredibleInternet.com](http://IncredibleInternet.com).

## READING SUGGESTIONS

*How To Talk So Teens Will Listen & Listen So Teens Will Talk* (2005), **Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish**

*Totally Wired: What Teens & Tweens are Really Doing Online* (2007), **Anastasia Goodstein**

[www.IncredibleInternet.com](http://www.IncredibleInternet.com)

[www.Netsmartz.com](http://www.Netsmartz.com)

## Communicating With Teens in Ways That Change Behavior Part 2: Courageous Conversations About Internet Safety and “Netiquette”



**MOST OF US ARE FAMILIAR** with the online activities that are popular with teens and tweens, like social networking on MySpace or other sites and using cell phones to text message their friends. We've all seen in the news that unwise use of these technologies can compromise kids' safety or harm others. Now comes the harder part: how do you connect with adolescents in ways that get them to change an activity that they enjoy and can participate in safely?

It's common for parents and guardians to struggle to communicate with their teen. And, with the advent of new communication technologies like text messaging and social networking sites, it's equally as important and challenging for adults to try and connect with their children about what's going on in their virtual world.

It doesn't help to spy on their every move and mete out harsh punishment when you catch them doing something wrong or risky – they'll just learn to be devious, rebel and disconnect further from you. So how do you give your teen or tween guidelines for online and offline behavior such as bullying, harassing others or becoming targets of predators?

**1. Read “Communicating With Teens in Ways That Change Behavior Part 1: How to Engage a Tuned-Out Teen”** if you haven't already done so.

**2. Start off generally.**

- 🕒 First, find out how your teen spends time online by being open and direct. Ask your child to show you the sites he or she likes to visit most.
- 🕒 Let him or her teach you how to use the technology if you are unfamiliar with it.
- 🕒 If he or she belongs to online social networks, go to one of the websites and begin a discussion by first viewing some pages of people neither of you know (so it doesn't feel like you're invading your teen's privacy).
- 🕒 Compare photos, comments, music or groups that you and your child find cool, funny, tacky, rude or too provocative.
- 🕒 If your teen plays online games, set aside time to learn the basics of a favorite game. Invite him to share what he finds enjoyable about it.

This approach helps give you a sense of your child's virtual world without putting him or her on the defensive.

**3. Get more specific.** Move to a more personal discussion about Internet activities that threaten privacy or safety, or are offensive, illegal or unethical. First ask your child what he or she already knows about these issues. Listen fully and attentively without interrupting. Suggested discussion topics are below.

**Important Topics:**

- Talking to strangers online about sex or agreeing to meet them without parental permission. This is a very different situation from talking with online peers about music, politics, culture, etc. The age of the online “friend” and the content of conversation are the flags. Although, it's important to remember that predators often misrepresent themselves online and will sometimes pose as a peer. **(Ybarra et al, 2007)**
- Saying mean, hateful, false, bullying or harassing things to or about others.
- Posting too much personal information.
- Posting or downloading sexy or pornographic photos or videos.
- Spending too many hours online (more than around two hours per day for other than school work), especially late at night. This behavior can become compulsive and interfere with life offline.
- Downloading materials illegally.
- Plagiarizing material (copying other people's work that you found online without citing them or getting permission).
- Buying anything online without a parent or guardian's permission.



**4. Talk about the above topics one at time.** After gathering your teen's input, applaud their prudent thinking (if they demonstrate some). Then clearly and completely explain anything they've missed about why each behavior above isn't okay. It is important to explain how these behaviors put your child at risk for harming themselves or others. Come from a position of caring and concern instead of repression. Your teen may disagree with you, but you still have the final authority for setting guidelines for online behavior.

“It’s important for parents to use technology as a tool to open discussions and develop children’s decision-making skills, not as a tool to make decisions for their kids.”

PHILLIP ENKE  
MINNESOTA PTA

**5. Don't automatically take away Internet privileges.** If you find out your child has broken one of your guidelines; select the consequences to fit the situation. Fear of losing Internet privileges is the most common reason kids hide or lie about their online behavior.

**6. What consequence best fits the situation?** If your teen has used the Internet for illegal purposes, it probably is fitting to take away the Internet service. But sometimes it's more appropriate to find ways to deal directly with the issue rather than cutting privileges.

**Example 1. Your 16-year-old was looking at inappropriate material online.**

- If the material is pornographic in nature, let your 16 year-old know that pornography is age-restricted material and it is illegal for a 16 year-old to download it.
- Talk about the risks of getting infected by computer viruses or other “malware” as a result of downloading files of this nature
- When having this “courageous conversation” you may want to consider having a broader discussion of sexuality. Ignoring the topic altogether does not make it go away or equip teens to make safe, healthy choices. Let your child know your own values around all kinds of sexual practices, whether in the real world or in cyberspace.
- Explain to your child that viewing pornography can make it harder to have a lasting, close, satisfying relationship with a life partner down the road. (Philaretou et al, 1995)

**Example 2. Your 15-year-old was talking to an adult she met online about sex.** You discover they have been talking for months. She says he understands her and she's in love with him.

- First, preserve as much evidence as you can, such as IM transcripts, e-mails, texts and URLs. Report it to law enforcement.
- Instead of becoming upset with your child, it's a good time for a serious discussion about what might be really going on with her. What needs does she believe were being met that she doesn't think she has another way to express or gratify?
- The teens who are most vulnerable to sexual exploitation often feel unloved, ignored, unappreciated, unattractive to others or misunderstood. They may lack social skills, be depressed or have experienced sexual abuse. It's very important to get to the hidden pain and deal with those issues.
- It's also important to explain how manipulative and charming adults can be -- and that they might use this power to prey on vulnerable teens. Abuse of power is not love. It may be necessary to seek help from a counselor or therapist in this situation.

## **7. Use online resources to help you have a courageous conversation.**

NetSmartz.org offers a very effective group of videos that can help you have conversations with your teen or tween about bullying, harassment, online predators and threats to privacy. Take a look at

[www.netsmartz.org/resources/reallife.htm](http://www.netsmartz.org/resources/reallife.htm).

## **REFERENCES**

**Ybarra, M. L., Mitchell, K. J., Finkelhor, D., & Wolak, J. (2007).** *Targeting the Right Online Behaviors.* Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine, 61: 138-145.

## Always-On Technology: Do You Have Tethered Kids? Establishing Balanced Family Communications Habits



### PLUGGED-IN PARENTS

**TODAY'S TECHNOLOGY PROVIDES** families with more ways to keep in constant communication with each other. Parents and guardians can use technology to help ensure their children's safety and well-being. In some ways it's paying off – more teenagers say they want to spend time with their parents and value their input than they did a generation ago.

But there's a flip side to this good news. Modern technology makes it so easy to stay in constant contact with parents and peers that our kids are missing some important growth experiences. Technology makes us all more accessible, but it's important for all family members to strike a balance with their communication habits.

## THE NEWEST 24/7 CONNECTIONS

Not only are online social networks here to stay, the latest version is mobile social networks, which inform users on their mobile phones (by text, e-mail or voice) every time anyone in any of their online social networks is posting new information. Lots of kids are pinged incessantly with these “newsfeeds” on their social network pages. So, when Justin breaks up with Jennifer, Casey gets a new haircut or Sonya downloads a new tune, kids receive every detail instantly.

Other mobile social networks allow users to report their location and have a text message (and photo) sent to the phones of everyone in their social network, letting them know their exact location. It also lets users announce their locations to any “friends of friends” or “crushes” within a 10-block radius with an automatic text message such as: “Danny is at Roy’s Pizzeria. You know him through Angelique.” The user may have never met these friends of friends before.

Mobile “GPS” (global positioning devices) are installed in many phones and cars and linked with a subscription locator service. Parents and guardians can track their children’s whereabouts and get an e-mail or text message when they arrive at a pre-determined destination or leave a boundary that you have designated. Some parents and guardians are excited about the possibility of monitoring their children more closely, while some kids and even adults are using these systems for malicious or illegal purposes.

## CAUSES FOR CONCERN

- Ⓛ **Difficult to Establish Identity.** It’s more difficult for kids to establish their own stable identities with a chorus of commentary from peers, parents or guardians surrounding every move they make. They begin to rely on others to know what they think, feel, believe and want to do next.
- Ⓛ **Reduced Opportunity to Build Confidence.** Being tethered to parents and guardians by phone, even when out on their own, reduces opportunities for adolescents to take healthy risks. Those risks build confidence, assertiveness and resilience.
- Ⓛ **Missed Decision-Making Opportunities.** Kids are missing some problem-solving and decision-making opportunities that help them correct their own courses of action through trial and error as they learn to take responsibility for their choices.
- Ⓛ **Potential to Limit Diversity.** It’s easy to communicate only with like-minded people who are linked into online and mobile cliques. This trend could diminish opportunities and flexibility for dealing with diverse people and ideas.
- Ⓛ **Development of Helicopter Parents.** Universities are seeing unprecedented numbers of “helicopter parents” of freshmen, who are accustomed to helping their kids navigate every decision and run interference for them. Some parents even check out a prospective roommate’s social network profile and deem the roommate inappropriate for their children before they’ve ever met!

## TIPS FOR PARENTS AND GUARDIANS

How much communication is too much? And what type of communication is the most effective? Depending on your family norms and what you are comfortable with, the degree of communication will vary.

- ▶ Talk about family communications preferences and norms first.
- ▶ Set some parameters for total amount of time allowed for chatting and texting with friends and family each month.
- ▶ Discuss when, how and for what purposes the mobile phone is to be used. Set some guidelines and boundaries for yourselves and your kids to follow. Parents can be good role models for this. (How often do you check your e-mail?)
- ▶ Determine who will be responsible for paying cell phone charges. Discuss what the consequences will be if phone and online limits are exceeded. Being in charge of their own phone bill can do wonders for a teen's responsibility!
- ▶ Discuss personal safety and courtesy-related calls such as calling on arrival at events away from home, or to let parents know when kids are running late.
- ▶ Review which situations and decisions are urgent rather than intervening in decisions your child may be old enough to make on his or her own without your immediate assistance.
- ▶ If you're wondering if you and your child are too tethered, and you live under the same roof, do an experiment for a week. Have every family member track face-to-face family time vs. combined (recreational) minutes on the Internet and phone. If your time with technology far exceeds face-to-face time, brainstorm ways to reverse this! Prioritize dinners together, family cultural and recreational outings and games.
- ▶ For kids going off to college, have a routine time – such as right after dinner on Wednesday – from once a day, to once a week, to check in by phone. Resist the urge to constantly rescue or make all their decisions for them as they try their wings in college – even if they sometimes fail or get (temporarily) hurt by some of their choices. This is how they grow! Teach them the values, critical thinking and decision-making tools that allow them to discern well for themselves before they leave home. Then be their strong background support instead of their tethered parent.
- ▶ Call, e-mail, IM or text message? These days, kids usually prefer to communicate with friends via text messages, instant messages and posts to each other's social networking websites. They reserve e-mail and, increasingly, the mobile phone for communicating with parents and guardians. Separating communication tools helps kids preserve a feeling of having (digital) spaces to call their own.

## RESOURCE PAGE

1. NetSmartz provides online and offline learning activities for parents to facilitate discussions with their children and teens about Internet safety. Visit “Parent FAQ” to learn more about how and why parents should use NetSmartz.

[www.NetSmartz.org](http://www.NetSmartz.org)

2. NetSmartz411.org provides parents and guardians with unprecedented, free access to experts from the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children who will answer online safety questions within 24 hours. Popular online safety questions and answers also are posted for public viewing.

[www.NetSmartz411.org](http://www.NetSmartz411.org)

3. Project Safe Child has developed better systems to provide more accurate, longer lasting protection for children and families.

[www.projectsafechild.org/](http://www.projectsafechild.org/)

4. If your child receives rude and harassing e-mails, messages, and postings, make a report at [www.cybertipline.com](http://www.cybertipline.com). Also contact your Internet Service Provider (ISP) or cell phone provider.

5. Most Web browsers include a feature that allows parents to control what sites their children can visit. Learn how to setup this feature in MSN Premium using this short video courtesy of Microsoft.

[http://membercenter.msn.com/loc/en-us/stay\\_safe\\_online.html](http://membercenter.msn.com/loc/en-us/stay_safe_online.html)

6. Are you already an identity theft victim and don't even know it? Become aware of the risks of identity theft and understand the steps you can take to protect yourself.

[www.fightidentitytheft.com/](http://www.fightidentitytheft.com/)