10 Things I Wish Parents Knew...

...about the online world.

by Anastasia Goodstein

If you are the teacher or parent of a tween or teenager, you know you are helping to raise a generation of totally wired children. They have grown up with the Internet, cell phones, and other technology and are using that technology at increasingly younger ages.

While spending the past year speaking with parents and educators across the country about what teens are really doing online and with their phones, I heard the same concerns over and over. Here are 10 things I wish every adult knew, which will hopefully help you to be less panicked and more involved in your teenager's digital life.

1. TEENS ARE DOING THE SAME THINGS TEENS HAVE ALWAYS DONE—JUST DIGITALLY. Most adults tend to use the Internet in a functional way. We pay our bills, send e-mails for work, or book a plane ticket. Teens grow up online: They hang out and socialize with their friends on social-networking sites and use the technology to meet their developmental needs. They figure out who they are, express themselves, and try on different identities in the virtual world. They flirt, fight, break up, and make up digitally as well as in person.

Essentially, websites are a virtual food court. Kids spend hours IMing (instant messaging), texting, or leaving each other online comments in the same way we spent hours talking on the phone. Today's parents ask, "What could they possibly be texting their friends all the time?" Our parents asked the same question when we talked on the phone for hours to our best friend.

2. THE PREDATOR ISSUE HAS BEEN SENSATIONALIZED BY THE MEDIA. As a result of the relentless airings of *Dateline's* "To Catch a Predator," attention-grabbing headlines about high-profile predator cases, and well-meaning Internet-safety presentations by law enforcement officials, we have succeeded in creating a climate of fear around the Internet.

The reality is that most predators (95 percent) don't pose as children or teens and are up front about wanting to talk about sex. Out of the very small number of actual abductions reported, 75 percent of the teenagers had already met the perpetrator in person more than once, often characterizing the relationship as a romance. Many of the teens involved had been victimized before or have other emotional problems, making them vulnerable to a predator's advances. The vast majority of teenagers ignores and blocks adults who contact them on social-networking sites.

3. TEENS WON'T TALK ABOUT CYBER-BULLYING OUT OF FEAR THAT YOU'LL "TAKE THE INTERNET AWAY." Cyberbullying is bullying gone digital. The difference is that technology amplifies the effects by spreading the nasty comment

faster and making it public—and permanent. The anonymity of online communication also means bullies can be crueler, because their actions aren't hindered by the visual and emotional social cues of face-to-face contact.

Just as kids who are being bullied offline don't want to tell their teachers or parents, cyberbullying victims are even less likely to talk out of fear that their Internet access will be cut off. One way to keep the lines of communication open is by offering them amnesty and telling them that whether they are being bullied or are involved in bullying, you won't take the Internet away. (There can be other consequences, however, if a child is doing the bullying.)

4. PRETEENS WILL LIE ABOUT THEIR AGE IN ORDER TO JOIN A SOCIAL-NETWORKING SITE. There is no perfect way of verifying age online. People are supposed to be 14 to join MySpace and 13 to join Facebook. Many other social-networking sites require users to be 13 and up, but most kids under 13 already know how to get around this, especially on MySpace. They will often say they are 99 or 35 and married with kids in order to do what their older siblings or friends are doing on these sites. According to research on kids in England, more than a quarter of eight- to 11-year-olds claimed to have a profile page on a social-networking website.

5. TEENS HAVE A DIFFERENT PERCEPTION OF PRIVACY THAN YOU DO. Having grown up with reality television, this generation of teens is generally more comfortable sharing their lives publicly than previous generations. That said, they often don't realize that adults can find what they post online and are surprised when they get in trouble for it. Most teens have made their MySpace profile private or believe their Facebook profile is more private than it actually is. Teens often don't change their default privacy settings (especially on Facebook) and don't realize that anything can be copied and pasted from their profile by their friends.

6. MULTITASKING MAKES CONCENTRATING HARD—EVEN FOR TEENS. It may be that this generation of teens is better than most adults at multitasking, but that doesn't mean they can concentrate or study for a test with five browsers open, IM blinking, phone buzzing, and music blaring. All of the research I've seen says nobody can do several things simultaneously and do them all well. Teens need your help to set limits and need to be told when to turn it off.

7. THEY SPEND MORE TIME ONLINE FOR SCHOOL THAN YOU THINK. Nickelodeon did a study where it took the Internet away from teens for 10 days and asked them what they missed the most. Surprise! It was that they could not do their homework. Students are amazingly fast at finding information online, but they still need adult help determining whether these sources are credible.

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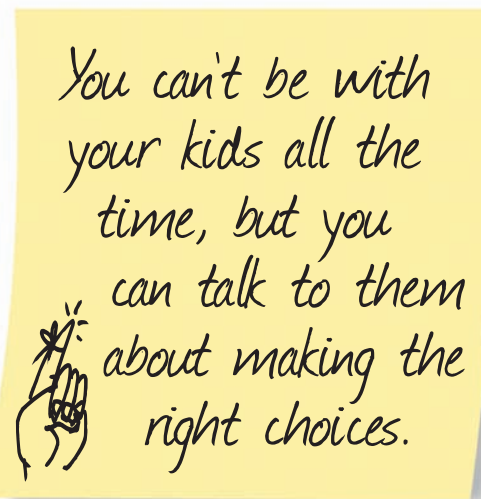
8. TEENS ARE CREATING MEDIA. Teens can make websites, videos, and podcasts, and post them for the world to see. While we hear mostly about teen dramas and cyberbullying, we don't hear enough about sites like Random Shapes, a network of teen bloggers, or Teen Podcasters Network, which are examples of teenagers harnessing the power of the Internet in positive ways to express their views on topics from computers to video games to music.

9. BLOCKING, FILTERING, AND MONITORING MAY WORK FOR YOUNG CHILDREN, BUT NOT FOR TEENS. Many parents are looking for a technological solution to the challenges raised by the Internet. Once children are 11 or 12 years old, they will most likely find a way to get around whatever technology parents install to monitor or control their usage.

No technology can replace being engaged and involved with teens and having conversations about what they may encounter online, as well as how to use the technology appropriately and ethically. Just as in real life, you can't be with your kids all the time, but you can talk to them about making the right choices.

10. THERE ARE NO EASY ANSWERS. Everyone would love 10 easy ways to parent our teens in the digital age. What limits you decide to set depend on your relationship with your teen, whether or not they've exercised good judgment in the past, and how much time they spend online versus with their friends IRL (in real life) or participating in other activities. ::

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