

# Social Networking: Blessing or Curse?

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I cannot begin to imagine where technology will be in the next five or 10 years. To say that technology has changed our culture and way of life is probably the understatement of the century. Some of the communication devices we watched on "Star Trek" in the '60s are part of our everyday life today. Our world has become even smaller because of the Internet. Family photos and videos are sent through thin air from all over world in a matter of seconds. So what is next? Where will we be? How will we live? And, most importantly, how can we make sure our children are benefiting from technology rather than suffering because of technology.

What a blessing Facebook, MySpace and the other social networking sites have been. We've been able to connect, and reconnect with family and friends that we have not seen or heard from in years. We actually get to meet family members we have never seen through the power of social networking photo programs.

A term that was created by social networks is cyberbully. Cyberbullies hide behind their computer to promote deliberate hostile behavior toward another person. Cyberbullies have been blamed for physical confrontations and even suicides of teenagers across the country.

Children as young as 9 years old carry cell phones and have Facebook pages. I have had parents and children tell me about the brutal filth and profane language some of the children are using on their sites and via text messaging. Some of the messages I've read are shocking. Children who experience hurt feelings and have a destroyed self-esteem come to my office asking for help. The free availability of social networking has become a curse for children.

So what can we do? Whose responsibility is it to monitor the sites and cell phones? Someone has to protect our children. It all has to begin in the home. Parents have the ability to protect their children from the curse of social networks and teach them proper computer etiquette. Following are some suggestions for helping your children use technology in positive ways.

1. Monitor your child's cell phone texting, e-mails and social network pages. Some parents are concerned that they are invading their children's privacy. Think of it as protecting them and teaching them responsibility. You wouldn't allow them to go to a dangerous place, so protect them from the dangers of the Internet. Even teenagers need rules and boundaries on the Internet. Limit their time on the computer. Don't allow computer usage in the privacy of bedrooms; keep computers in a family room or living room.

2. Teach your children to block people who are inappropriate or offensive. Sure children don't get along from time to time, but if someone is persistently inappropriate, delete that "friend." Who needs negative pressure? No one wants to hang out with people who don't like them, so don't hang out on the Internet with them.

3. Make sure your children and you personally know everyone they are in constant contact with on the Internet. Sexual predators know exactly what they are doing and give children the attention they are seeking. They are tricky, manipulative and dangerous.

4. Talk to your kids. Know their friends, their interests, their feelings. Be involved in their lives. Be a parent, not a friend. Friendship will come later. Understand your role as a parent. No one is perfect. There are a lot of resources available to help you make sound parenting decisions. If you need help finding some, talk to your child's school counselor.

5. Communicate with other parents and try to politely and appropriately fix relationship problems on the Internet. They may not be aware what their children are doing or saying online. Be firm but considerate. If a threat of any kind is made, contact your local authorities. You may prevent a terrible tragedy.

Parenting has never been easy. The Internet is making it even harder. We must take an active role to protect those we love.

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