SOCIAL NETWORKS: CHILDREN AND PARENTS

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Abstract: It's clear that digital technology in now integral part to young people's lives. It's not just about having useful or fun gadgets, it's part of how they define themselves. And their use of technology is very much the same and absolutely different to that of adults. For parents the challenge is enormous. A description of how interactive generation teenagers are, what they do online and how mediation is performed by the family.

Keywords: Social networks, Facebook, Instagram, online behaviour, threats, inappropriate content, preventive measures, predators, sex-offenders, groomers, victims, parent –helicopter.

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Introduction

For young people who have always been surrounded by screens, being "always on" and multitasking are simply part of daily life. Digital technology is part of how young people see themselves. It's not just about having useful or fun gadgets, it's part of how they define themselves. And their use of technology is very much the same and absolutely different to that of adults.

Most parents of teenagers are concerned about what their teenage children do online and how their behavior could be monitored by others. Some parents are taking steps to observe, discuss, and check up on their children's digital footprints. But this is not an easy task.

The reason of concern

When we were growing up, our parents were able to monitor our social activity by observing our interactions: listening to a phone call, or watching a social interaction at a house or gathering. Fast forward to present day. Now we are parents, and monitoring our children's social interactions is a whole lot more complicated than listening to the conversation they are having on the phone in the next room.

Social networks like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter etc., can introduce an overwhelming learning curve for anyone new to the scene. When online, children are talking, sharing and engaging with friends, family and strangers. Not knowing how your child uses social networks, what information they are sharing online, and whom they are talking to can be a dangerous mix. The danger lies in the transfer of information, how easily that information can be obtained and how easily it can be hidden.

According to a new survey by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project:

- 81% of parents of online teens say they are concerned about how much information advertisers can learn about their child's online behavior, with some 46% being "very" concerned.
- 72% of parents of online teens are concerned about how their child interacts online with people they do not know, with some 53% of parents being "very" concerned.
- 69% of parents of online teens are concerned about how their child's online activity might affect their future academic or employment opportunities, with some 44% being "very" concerned about that.

– 69% of parents of online teens are concerned about how their child manages his or her reputation online, with some 49% being "very" concerned about that.
– Some of these expressions of concern are particularly acute for the parents of younger teens; 63% of parents of teens ages 12-13 say they are "very" concerned about their child's interactions with people they do not know online and 57% say they are "very" concerned about how their child manages his or her reputation online [Mlot, 2012].

Qualitatively significant portion of the indicators given above coincide with results of polls conducted in Russia. Research made by the EU kids-on-line-Russian branch show that children 3 times more often get on sites of the inappropriate contents than their parents think. When it comes to websites related to weight loss, this figure rises to 6 times [Safeinternet, 2010].

Parents possible involvement

Having realized the challenge adults are becoming more and more attached to digital media, they are making necessary adaptation effort and they already show many of the peculiarities of this new generation. Parents even though we can not consider them digital natives because of their age, must make the effort to integrate digital and interactive media into their lives. This effort will be rewarded when they find out that they have been closer to our children.

Sex offenders, pedophiles, groomers and just plain bad people create fake online profiles to gain information about users all the time. One can easily do an online search and find unfortunate information on those who have fallen victim to these people. It is important to recognize the vulnerability that can occur online with a simple conversation with a stranger. Kids are gullible, and they haven't been exposed to many of the evils of the world. Someone tells them, "Hey! I'm your friend!" and kids will believe them. That's where the danger lies. You have to be teaching your child to be conscious of their interactions and the information shared online

– Home address;
– Phone number;
– Full name (especially in Usernames);
– Name of school;
– Names of close friends;
– Pictures or videos of themselves;
– Passwords – should never be given to anyone online.

These simple preventive measures can help lay a foundation of safety as you explore the online world with your child. Social networking sites present your child and his friends with the opportunity to connect with others when they are focusing on educational topics, sharing resources, working on assignments, and engaging with school activities. This connection between students via social networking sites appears to inspire collaborative learning and promote student engagement.

Can your child distinguish the difference between a friend or foe online? It is crucial to share with them the importance of understanding not everyone is who he or she says they are. The person on the receiving end of your child's online interaction might be another kid, an inmate, your insurance agent, you just don't know.

You might think to yourself, "I'm just not going to let my kid on to these sites so I don't have to worry". Wrong answer. You drive your car on the highway during rush hour traffic, do you go your own speed, or move with the traffic? Rather than restricting your child's access to these networks (they will find a way whether you like it or

not), there are solutions to help you maintain your sanity and peace of mind as your child plays in the "digital sandbox".

It's a matter of knowing your options and asking the right questions:

- Does their account prevent them from sharing specific information?
- What sites provide preventive and profanity filtering?
- Do you have control over the filter?
- Does the site provide online moderation?
- Will it alert me when specific information is shared?
- What sites offer these tools or provide these solutions?

No matter how many times cartoon characters and celebrities warn kids and teens of the dangers of the Internet, they still post personal photos and information online – despite the 73.5 % of parents who trust their kids to follow the rules of the Web.

It's parents' responsibility to be the one willing to walk along this path with your child. To learn, engage, promote and instill the qualities and characteristics that you wish to see in them as they progress. The digital world is ubiquitous, and with that, so is your child, online.

"The fact is that allowing teens to participate in unmonitored online activity exposes them to real dangers with real consequences," the McAfee report said. "And these dangers are growing exponentially with the proliferation of social networks" [Mlot, 2012].

What kids do online and parents are not aware of

According to McAfee's study, 43 % of teens have accessed simulated violence online, 36 % have connected to sexual topics online, while 32 % copped to checking out nude content or pornography.

It's not just about checking out inappropriate content once in a while, though. McAfee reported that about 15 % of teens have hacked a social network account, while more than 30 % access pirated movies and music. Almost 9 % of teens have hacked into someone's email, and less than 15 % of parents are aware.

Almost 50 % of kids have found test answers online, the study said, but about 77 % of parents said they were not concerned about their kids cheating online, which McAfee said showed the disconnect.

McAfee online safety expert Stanley Holditch said in the report that it is not shocking that kids are engaging in this sort of behavior, but it is surprising how unaware parents are about the activity. There is a major increase, since the company's 2010 survey, in the volume of teenagers finding ways to cover their online tracks, he said.

"This is a generation that is so comfortable with technology that they are surpassing their parents in understanding and getting away with behaviors that are putting their safety at risk" [Mlot, 2012].

But despite many parents' "not my kid" syndrome, McAfee found that a number of them are taking more responsibility in their kids' online lives. Almost half have of those surveyed said they have installed parental controls on the Web, while almost 45 % know their kids' email and social network passwords.

Fewer parents are punishing their children by taking away computer and mobile devices, the study said, while some are keeping track of their teens via location-based devices.

There are still plenty of adults, though, who have little understanding of their kids' various iDevices and electronic notepads and ballpoint pens that can record audio. Twenty-three % of surveyed parents admitted to just throwing their hands up in defeat, overwhelmed by the technology [Mullins, 2012].

Other notes from McAfee's study: Teens are spending two more hours online everyday than their parents think; 12 % of teens don't think meeting online strangers is dangerous; half of teens admit to spending most of their time on social networks observing others, rather than sharing about themselves; more than 62 % of teens have witnessed cruel online behavior, while more than 23 % claim to have been a victim of cyber bullying.

Specialists recommend parents to sign to social networks used by their children. Thus they can build solid relationship that allows for frequent back and forth conversations instead of one way lectures. Using the same social media platforms they use enhances parental ability to provide meaningful and constructive suggestions and allow them to monitor them too.

But there has to be a balance. We should not turn into helicopter parent that many of us do. Children can find a solution to protect their privacy.

According to McAfee, these are the top 10 ways Internet-savvy kids are fooling their helicopting parents:

– Clear browser history (53 %);
– Close/minimize browser when parent walks in (46 %);
– Hide or delete IMs or videos (34 %);
– Lie or omit details about online activities (23 %);
– Use a computer parents don't check (23 %);
– Use an Internet-enabled mobile device (21 %);
– Use privacy settings to make certain content viewable only by friends (20 %);
– Use private browsing modes (20 %);
– Create private email addresses unknown to parents (15 %);
– Create duplicate/fake social network profiles (9 %).

47% of American adults used social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Classmates.com in 2012, up from 26% in 2008. On social media sites like these, users may develop biographical profiles, communicate with friends and strangers, do research, and share thoughts, photos, music, links, and keep eye on their children's activities. Up until now there are discussions if social networks are good or bad.

Social networks pros and contras

Proponents of social networking sites say that the online communities promote increased interaction with friends and family; offer teachers, librarians, and students valuable access to educational support and materials; help students do better at school; facilitate social and political change; and disseminate useful information faster than any other media.

Opponents of social networking say that the sites prevent face-to-face communication; waste time on frivolous activity; alter children's brains and behavior making them more prone to attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder; students who are heavy social media users tend to have lower grades; expose users to predators like pedophiles and burglars; spread false and potentially dangerous information; criminals use social media to commit and promote crimes.

Conclusion

Each party has reasons to say what is said. But it is beyond doubt that the quality of future society will very much depend on how current children use all these information, communication and entertainment technologies. In order to achieve that our children will use them safely, responsibly and healthily, it is necessary that they have an

education of solid values and that parents together with educators share space and time with them in front of the screens [Fernandez, 2010].

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Major Fields of Scientific Research: e-learning, digital learning objects, E-safety