



Becoming MediaWise

Don't let technology replace the human connection

Raising Kids in an Email World



Kids long for connection, and technology is fulfilling that desire by allowing them access to worlds beyond their own neighborhoods. But with this vast expansion of opportunity comes a need for balance and consciousness. If your child is exploring nature through vividly graphic internet sites without running barefoot in the backyard or spying on birds building their nests, there is no balance. When teenagers connect with cyber pals thousands of miles away but don't take the time to toss a few balls with the kids next door, they don't have the experiential opportunity to know people in all their complexity. Rather than condemning and fearing the power of today's technology, however, we can accept its potential for good and craft a plan to use it in ways that enhance (rather than shrink) human connections.

The following ideas can help you begin:

Examine your own use of technology. Do you rush home from work to check your email and phone messages before sitting down to hear about your child's day? One father was devastated to receive this email from his 6-year-old daughter: "Dad, I know how busy you are, but do you think you would have time to read me a story tonight?" He was on his laptop in the family room, and she was on her computer upstairs in her bedroom.

Find websites that enrich your child's life rather than those that encourage spending or contain insipid content. Explore them together.

Whenever possible, make computer use a social experience: Put the computer in a central place in your home, and put two chairs there to encourage sharing. Get to know what programs interest your child and join him. An added bonus: older kids are apt to use technology more responsibly when it is out in the open rather than in their bedrooms.

Make sure your kids are connecting with friends in real time, not just through the computer. Encourage them to invite friends to your home.

Be available to listen to your child's worries and questions. According to a recent national survey by Kaiser Family Foundation, 39% of preteens are getting information about their big questions via television or the internet. Wouldn't you rather your kids come to you?

Talk to your kids about what you believe in when it comes to media. "We only allow programming into our home that treats people respectfully—that goes for websites, CDs, video games, and TV shows." Then discuss why you feel the way you do, rather than handing out rules and consequences.

Come up with ways to extend computer interests your kids have into real-world interests. For instance, if your child loves sending greeting cards online, stock up on art supplies so he can create some by hand.

Don't let screen time substitute for lap time with your young child, and don't expect books on CD-ROM to substitute for a loving parent's voice.

Take time to connect as a family. Dazzling technology can diminish human worth, but coming together through a shared activity grounds and unites us. Just have fun together, or learn something new with your kids.

Mimi Doe is the author of *10 Principles for Spiritual Parenting—Nurturing Your Child's Soul*. Her online newsletter, "Spiritual Parenting Thought for the Week," has thousands of subscribers from around the world.

Are you managing technology - or is technology managing you?

It's easy to fall into the trap of constantly responding to emails and voicemails at work and at home...ending the day feeling like you didn't accomplish anything. Instead of responding to them throughout the day, try to "batch" them. For example, answer them first thing in the morning, after lunch, and at the end of the day. That way, you're not constantly stopping and starting things or losing your focus.



Family Minute with Mark Merrill at www.FamilyFirst.net (adapted)

iPods may be the latest "must-have" for pre-teens and teens, but smart use involves guidelines. First, as a parent make it clear that you have the right to spot-check anything on their device, but that you will not delete any songs without talking to them about the reason. Second, set a volume threshold for headphones. When loud tunes are pumped directly into the ear, the consequences can be devastating. Embrace technology, but don't



let it ruin your child's soul... or their hearing.

www.AllProDad.com

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at www.common sense media.org
and www.mediafamily.org



“Hanging Out” in a Virtual World: What You Need to Know

Kids have always looked for places to gather to talk, be seen, listen to music and “hang out.” This isn’t new. What *is* new is where these gathering places are and who else is around. *MySpace.com*, and other social networking sites, have quickly replaced local restaurants, shopping malls, and parks as places for young people to hang out. For a generation of media-savvy kids that are used to looking into cyberspace for everything from ring tones to help on homework, it is not surprising that making friends and socializing is taking place online—especially given that websites like *MySpace.com* offer expansive, creative, and enticing worlds.

A *MySpace* profile is actually a lot like an online version of a teenager’s bedroom—plastered with posters and pictures of friends, blaring popular music, and hosting a variety of notes and messages from a long list of *MySpace* “friends.” Kids spend hours chatting and blogging, listening to music, posting photos of themselves, and searching for other people to catch up with online.

The pressure to fit in, be cool, and have a lot of friends is no different in the virtual world than it is in the real one. In fact, as more and more kids pour onto sites like *MySpace*, the distinction between “real” and “virtual” becomes less and less important. Although *MySpace* seems like a “kids only” site, adults should pay attention, because online social sites have just as many—if not more—opportunities and pitfalls as “real-world” teen hangouts.

There are other popular online hangouts for teenagers and young adults, like *Friendster* and *Facebook*, but *MySpace* is winning the race by a landslide. *MySpace* recently passed *Google* in terms of numbers of hits and the number of pages viewed monthly, and is the fourth most popular website on the internet today. Most of *MySpace*’s almost 50 million users are under the age of 22.

Websites like *MySpace* offer incredible opportunities for teenagers to express themselves and have fun connecting with friends. Unlike a teenager’s real bedroom, *MySpace* can be repainted, redecorated and given a new feel in just a few mouse clicks. It allows teenagers to express themselves in new ways and socialize. It’s no wonder that it is such a popular phenomenon among youth. With parent involvement, social networking sites can be fun and safe.

The same risks associated with any unsupervised environment are true for social networking sites. Teachers and parents across the country are dealing with “cyberbullying”: the effects of mean-spirited messages and photographs posted online. Bullying can seem easier and consequence-free in an online, anonymous environment. In addition, lewd language and pictures are accessible. It is also common for posters to have numerous online “identities.” Many kids post very personal, accurate information on their site, including their school, neighborhood, age, and interests, which makes *MySpace* a cruising ground for online predators. This isn’t to say that social networking sites can’t be fun teenage hangouts but **it is important that parents set rules for what is acceptable, and continue to talk with their kids about where they’ve been and who they’re hanging out with, whether they’re out in the real OR the virtual world.**

www.mediafamily.org (adapted)

Dealing with Spicy Lyrics



Do your homework:

Before you buy a CD for your kids or let them download music on iTunes, read some reviews to get a better idea of the content. It’s up to you to decide whether to forbid certain music or just talk over your concerns with your kids.

Check in with your kids: Ask your son to plug in his iPod on the next family road trip, or sit down for a sampling of MTV. Not only will you get a better idea of what your kids are being exposed to, but by showing an awareness of their world, they’ll be more open to your opinion.

Ask questions: Find out why they’re interested in the first place. Questions like: “Do you think this album glamorizes violence?” and “How do you feel about the way this song portrays women?” can get kids to think about what they’re hearing, and will help develop their own good judgment. The goal, of course, is for them to become respectful individuals, critical thinkers, and intelligent media consumers.

Does keeping up with your kids’ online activities feel like a daunting task? Learning more about popular sites helps you talk to them about their cyberworld—so you both can make informed decisions.

Visit www.mediafamily.org to take a MediaWise Tour of MySpace.com.

Tips for Social Networking Website Use

Learn about the site and its features. If you decide to allow your child to have an account:

- * Limit your child’s screen time as you would for other sites
- * Set ground rules and consequences
- * Talk to your kids about cyberbullying
- * Encourage them to tell you if they see anything inappropriate
- * Remind them that EVERYONE they meet online is a stranger—teach your child not to divulge personal information
- * Trust, but verify: tell your child you’ll be checking in—and do so