BEST PRACTICES FOR TEACHING TEENS TO BECOME SAFER, SMARTEST SOCIAL MEDIA USERS

Some teens learn about online privacy and safety on their own through experimentation and hearsay. Others learn best practices from knowledgeable parents, guardians, and other trusted adults. Still other teens take part in formal online safety classes in schools and libraries. Based on our research with teens across the U.S., we recommend the following guidelines for improving the quality of both formal and informal online safety education in schools and libraries.

1. TEACH TEENS ABOUT RISK-BENEFIT ANALYSIS

Social media use can provide teens with a range of social, emotional, and cognitive benefits, but the popular media often characterize Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc., as places where young people encounter dangerous strangers and engage in a wide range of unsafe activities. In reality, the risks of social media use are about equal to the risks of most offline public activities, such as going to the mall. Adults should teach teens to become thoughtful, reflective social media users and to consider the possible benefits and harms of their actions before posting anything online. Instead of dismissing the entire social media world as frivolous and dangerous, providing teens with a balanced view shows them that you respect their desire to interact online and trust in their ability to become responsible users.
2 BUILD ON STRONG ADULT-TEEN RELATIONSHIPS

 Teens respond best to lessons and advice from adults they trust, especially when dealing with sensitive issues such as online privacy and safety. This is especially important in larger schools and libraries, where technology specialists might have strong knowledge of best practices, but they might not have trusted relationships with all of the teens they serve. Adults who lack these trusted relationships can work together with homeroom teachers, teen librarians, and others who work with target audiences on a daily basis to co-teach online safety lessons, thereby building on existing trust.

3 OFFER HAND-ONS LAB SESSIONS AND LIVE DEMONSTRATIONS

 In our work in several high schools across the country, students have told us that online safety curricula are often delivered in the form of stock videos about the potential harms of the Internet. They tell us that they would find hands-on, interactive online sessions a more engaging, more compelling, and more effective way to learn. Even teens with considerable online experience and several existing social media accounts have much to learn about selecting privacy and safety settings, guidelines for intelligent information sharing and reuse, and more.

4 AVOID SCARE TACTICS; FRAME LESSONS IN POSITIVE TERMS

 Students also dislike the negative terms in which school curricula often frame social media use, suggesting that all social media use is dangerous, or that nearly any social media use can be construed as cyberbullying. Students tend to react negatively to scare tactics and threats and to perceive negative framing as school administrators’ efforts to protect themselves from lawsuits or other possible negative ramifications of students’ risky behaviors. Framing lessons in positive terms sends the message of genuine concern for teens’ well-being and sincere interest in teaching them to become better-educated users.
5. Use Personal Stories/Testimonials

Students we have worked with also tell us that personal testimonials, especially stories from fellow students or trusted adults who have had risky encounters online, are much more effective in teaching them about the potential dangers of careless online behaviors than lessons delivered via videos, lectures, or other less personal means. Schools and libraries can poll staff members to find volunteers to tell their personal stories or look to teens themselves for meaningful stories to share.

6. Take Advantage of Teachable Moments / Incidents

Just as personal connections make lessons more meaningful and have a stronger impact on teens, taking advantage of teachable moments and incidents as they occur in real time also impresses upon teens the real-life implications of online safety lessons. For example, at one school where we conducted research a student had been caught hosting a social media account for posting cruel comments about other students. Rather than using the incident as a springboard for school-wide discussions about the appropriate use of online language, the school expelled the student and barred the student body from discussing the incident in school, losing out on a potentially valuable teaching opportunity, and as well as an opportunity to promote community healing.

7. Be a Social Media Role Model

Students we worked with reported that their parents or teachers did not know how to “properly use” social media, oftentimes not following the best practices of each social media site. They also complained that schools restricted their use of social media, yet some teachers had circumvented the restrictions by creating their own sites for homework help or for posting class assignments and schedules. Teens can be confused by the mixed message this practice is sending. Parents and teachers should review the best practices of the social media sites being used by teens and work with librarians to develop ways to integrate social media into positive learning experiences for teens. Parents, teachers, and librarians should routinely work with school administrators to review current online use agreements to determine if there are ways to permit student use of social media in positive educational contexts.
Favor Education Over Restriction

Lastly, banning teens entirely from social media might seem like a way to keep them from experiencing risk, but doing so deprives them from participating in an important part of youth culture, and many teens will still find ways to use social media. It is much more beneficial and realistic to teach teens best practices and to help them become educated, intelligent social media users, preparing them to be successful digital citizens now and throughout their futurelives.

“Best Practices for Teaching Teens to Become Safer, Smarter Social Media Users” was written by Denise E. Agosto, Ph.D. (Drexel University), and June Abbas, Ph.D. (University of Oklahoma), based on research funded by a 2014 OCLC/ALISE Library and Information Science Research Grant (LISRG). It draws upon research conducted with 98 high school seniors in two U.S. highschools. For more information, see: https://onlineprivacysafetyteens.wordpress.com/. Infographic by Anna Rose Cozad.