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Daniel: Social Networking Pros and Cons

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Social media is entrenched in all our lives, especially those of our teens and even our young children. With the popularity of Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, parents have heard warnings about frightening issues regarding social media. However, new research is emerging that claims the importance and benefits of social media in our children's lives.

- The Pew Internet Project reports that 73% of teens are now on some kind of social media site. And the growing popularity of social media gives parents a whole new set of concerns for their kids.
- However, it is important to remember that this technology isn't going away anytime soon, and we're now starting to see researchers and psychologists talk about the benefits of these sites.

Knowing the Risks:

First and foremost it is important for parents to understand the risks social networking sites can present to their kids.

- Most of the sites do ask for personal information when users register. For example, on Facebook users must check a box validating that they are at least 13 years old. However, the sites have no means of validating this information. Online predators can hide under any identity they chose to make "friends" and find victims online.
- Cyber bullying is another risk to beware of. Social media site can be just like an online playgrounds where kids can say hurtful things about one another and spread rumors and social media makes doing so more far-reaching and permanent.
- Finally, what kids are posting on their own profiles can be dangerous. Inappropriate pictures, picture captions, and comments could come back to haunt kids as they grow up and start applying to colleges or looking for jobs.

Protecting Your Kids:

There a few simple steps parents can take to help protect their kids in the online world:

- Learn about the technology firsthand. Get on these sites and make your own profiles. The best way to know what your kids could be doing online is to get on the site and do it yourself. Understanding how the technology works is the first step in knowing how to protect your kids.

Most parents don't know that even if you are friends with your children on Facebook, they can still control what you can and cannot see. Facebook allows for private messaging between individuals and groups, and new privacy settings allow users to control who sees certain information on their profiles.

This means your child could block you from seeing almost all aspects of their Facebook page. Understanding how these sites and their privacy settings work is crucial to being able to truly know what your child is doing online.

- Talk about YOUR social media use with your kids. Open up dialogue about someone you reconnected with through Twitter or an interesting post you saw on Facebook. Encourage your kids to share the same information with you. Making your kids comfortable discussing their social media use with you will help you monitor what they are doing on these sites and give you warnings for potential danger
- Explain that anything posted online can live forever. Kids may not think that a few inappropriate pictures or comments on their profile are a big deal. Let them know that anything online can potentially be seen and saved by anyone. Tell them to delete anything they wouldn't want a future boss or their grandmother to see.

The Positive Side of Social Media

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Parents need to know that social media does not always need to be seen as a threat. Mashable.com is a website devoted to social media, and its creators say it is important that kids become media-literate because they will become the next generation of content creators.

There are many benefits we can see from kids' use of social media:

- **Social Skills:** Social media sites allow kids to keep up with current friends, reconnect with old friends, and make new friends. On Facebook, your teen may rediscover her best friend from elementary school. Or on Twitter, your son may be "tweeting" about the same topics as another boy his age, allowing them to connect.
- **Self-Expression:** Social media gives kids their own platform to talk about their interests and what is important to them. They can join groups in support of TV shows, books, or political candidates.
- **Digital Competence:** Using these sites trains kids to use computers, websites, and search engines that can equip them with important skill sets for their futures. Most companies today use computers and social media in some form, and the future generation needs to be savvy with this technology to succeed in the workforce.
- **Educational Development:** It turns out that children are also using these social sites to talk about school. 59% of students with access to the Internet report that they use social networking sites to discuss educational topics including career and college planning, and 50% use the sites to talk about school assignments.

Links:

<http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/video/youth-social-media-9741165>

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/jan/28/social-networking-benefits-validated/>

<http://mashable.com/>

<http://www.aap.org/advocacy/releases/june09socialmedia.htm>

<http://socialnetworking.procon.org/>

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