

Parenting *ideas* INSIGHTS

Building parent-school partnerships

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Facebook - friend or foe

Parents as primary caregivers and at home educators have an important role to play in helping kids navigate the social media landscape.

There is a nothing more divisive for parents today than a discussion about Facebook. With close on 11 million Australians now using Facebook, it has a participation rate like no other product or service.

With around 75% of 15 to 65 year olds using Facebook there must be some redeeming value. There are more Facebook users than there are taxpayers. Facebook is the most significant communication device since the telephone, so why the hysteria?

We digest our information via the media, which just loves a controversy. You'll never see an article that reads, "Grandparents stay in touch on Facebook with travelling grandchildren" or "Teacher connects with old U.K colleagues after 20 years – found them on Facebook".

Instead we see articles such as "Australia The World's Facebook Bullying Capital" (news.com.au January 18). Yes, there are dangers but like the gun lobby's catch cry "Guns don't kill people, people kill people", in the hands of the naïve or evil it can also be destructive. The interactive form of communication that is Facebook is so new. A culture of use is developing and kids are leading the way

The single biggest issue stemming from inappropriate use of Facebook is that kids don't realise they're now global publishers. And in this space there are rules and laws. However we are in an era where online law is lagging but

it is quickly catching up. In the future highly inflammatory and derogatory publishing that some people engage in will be reigned in, but in the meantime, we need to help our kids.

Schools will need to play a big part in creating this new Facebook culture. It can start with schools getting their own Facebook pages. This will go a long way to setting a tone for proper use and allow schools to keep pace with this evolving landscape. Parents as primary caregivers and at home educators also have a role to play in helping kids navigate this new landscape.

Here are a few tips about how to guide kids through social media:

1 Teach appropriate language

Kids need guidelines regarding the language they use online. Here's a simple guide for kids of all ages: "Don't use language online that you wouldn't use in front of your grandmother". Language does get bluer as kids get older but Facebook seems to have lowered this threshold dramatically. Talk to kids about the appropriateness of the language they use on Facebook.

2 Limit friend acceptances and limit exposure to strangers

Young people collect Facebook friends like swap cards, which is not good practice. Being indiscriminate as to whom they befriend leaves

kids open to the potential of being targeted by undesirable adults. It is more appropriate that their Facebook friends mirror their 'real' life friends.

3 Photos can last forever

More than 250 million photos are uploaded each day on Facebook, making sharing pictures the most popular activity. Some young people do place risqué pictures of themselves on Facebook. The central issue here involves the protection of the user's reputation, which can be wrecked by one inappropriate photo spread around cyberspace via Facebook.

4 Time on Facebook – encourage moderate use

We want our children to have a balanced life with a variety of activities both indoors and outdoors. We also know that they need plenty of face-to-face interactions so they can maintain social connections. The addictive nature of social media means that some kids spend far too much time on Facebook. Late night log-ins on a school night are not in kids' long term best interest and require parent discussion and negotiation to help kids find a balance.

It's difficult as parents to work out our role when kids use Facebook. Being their 'friend' is not the answer. Neither is letting kids do as they please online. Our kids need our sensibilities and wisdom as parents to help guide them in the social media world, and create a safe culture of use.



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