

Is social media ruining our kids' social skills?

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By Tom Antis

There's no question that social media, or more specifically social networking, has radically changed the way we communicate. In just over five years, the opportunities and advantages for those who use it properly have exploded. However, a less positive change comes with a breakdown of interpersonal skills in young people – those we euphemistically refer to as "digital natives."

From my perspective, my kids – at 9 and 10 years of age – are really too young for social media. Facebook thinks so too, restricting membership to ages 13 and above. But I know at least a handful of kids in our neighborhood with profiles on that particular social network, and talk on the street indicates that the pre-teen set is active in other venues as well.

For these children, hanging with their friends is more often a virtual activity than actually getting together in person.

We've always encouraged our kids to be friendly and make friends. Now, thanks to social networking, the opportunity to "friend" hundreds of people all around the world is simple. No one has to leave their own room, let alone do the hard work of developing deep, honest relationships.

Counselors and social science experts argue that a balance needs to be found between online chatting, tweeting, video chat, and actual face-to-face interactions. They fear that some kids are letting the internet take control of their social lives, and slowly the desire and ability to socialize face-to-face is decreasing.

University of Oxford Professor Susan Greenfield said the culture is "enthusiastically embracing the erosion of our identity" through social networking sites. In testimony before Parliament's House of Lords regarding internet regulations, Greenfield said children who use these sites can lose sight of where their personalities finish and the outside world begins.

According to Greenfield, children's sense of identity is being eroded by "fast-paced, instant screen reactions," so that members of their generation will define themselves more by the responses of others than by their own sense of self-worth.

Greenfield fears that because of social network sites, the mid-21st century mind will be characterized by "short attention spans, sensationalism, inability to empathize and a shaky sense of identity."

Important social skills develop from face-to-face conversations, says professional counselor Jared Pizzitola.

"If used in excess, communicating via cyberspace can inhibit communication skills, but if used in moderation, can help young people become more comfortable communicating with their peers if they are too shy to do so in person," Pizzitola told the online magazine NVate. "The key is to make sure your kids know that real living takes place offline."

How can parents help their children limit online interactions and develop stronger social skills?

Like our family, your children may be just testing the waters with supervised social networking (video chat with Grandma, texting a favorite cousin about vacation plans, etc.), but these tips may help set the stage for when they earn additional online privileges.

Moderation is the key. Overuse and overreliance on cyber channels can erode social skills. A moderate amount of online chat is OK, but it's important to strike a balance with real, face-to-face conversation.

Politeness counts. Teach your children that good manners count online as well as face-to-face. Texting may seem fast and impersonal, yet courtesies like "pls" and "ty" (for please and thank you) are common text terms, or should be.

Watch your words online. Along with outright cyberbullying, many online interactions step beyond the limits of what is appropriate. Just because the other person in a conversation is simply an avatar on the screen, everyone should learn and remember to obey boundaries. Feelings, personal dignity and relationships matter even in a virtual environment.

Practice. As with anything else, developing good social skills requires practice. That means you and your kids spending time interacting with others — in person, not online. By meeting new people, talking with them and getting to know them, you gradually become better at interacting and building a connection with them.

Take risks. Some conversations are difficult, but social skills grow stronger when put to the test. Don't allow fear to stop honest face-to-face conversations.

Know what your kids are doing. About 41 percent of U.S. teens claim their parents have no idea what they are looking at online. Building good social skills can begin with open, straightforward communication between you and your children. Establish the expectation early on that your children's participation in social networking is subject to your access and monitoring of their accounts. You control their time online, and keep an eye out for those "teachable moments" when lessons in responsible social interaction are required.

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conditioning young people out of the leadership and communication skills they need to lead – or follow – any change at all that requires personal risk."

Tom Antis has been a communications specialist with the Capital Region BOCES Communications Service since January 2008. Despite using social networking and digital multimedia tools in his work, Tom prefers real film for his camera, an honest-to-goodness ink on paper book to read, and conversations over coffee rather than cyberspace. He and his wife, Julie, hope to pass along their "old-fashioned" ways to their children.