



CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Parents need to help kids navigate tech

By Jane Sutter

With recent media reports that some teen girls suffer mental health issues from using Instagram, parents may be feeling confused and fearful about their own children's interactions on social media.

A Cornell University researcher offers a more balanced view: "We are at an interesting juncture with our relationship with technology, and it's definitely fraught with some peril as well as some opportunity," said Janis Whitlock, research scientist and the director of the Cornell Research Program on Self-Injury and Recovery in Ithaca.

Whitlock said that while there have been many studies trying to answer the question of what using social media does to mental health of users, especially young users, there is no conclusive answer. In fact, studies create a "speckled picture," Whitlock said.

There is no clear evidence that using social media damages mental health in a "big picture" way but when studies drill down, there are vulnerable users, Whitlock said. It all depends on "what people bring to the platform. If a person, a young person or not, brings a certain kind of vulnerability and certain kinds of needs that they are trying to have met there—that really just can't be met there—then it's not good for them." For example, some teen girls may use Instagram to see images of people with bodies that these teens can never attain, and that can be damaging to their mental health, Whitlock said.



"When people bring a more balanced persona and the ability to filter out messages, the sub-messages, the wish that 'I could look like that' or 'not like this,' the more they can deal with that, the more good they can get out of it," Whitlock said.

That means parents should talk with their kids about how they interact on the Internet, how much they interact and where they are going on the Internet. Parents should help their kids be conscious of whether their interactions on social media are starting to make them feel bad, Whitlock said. A lot of times kids don't have an awareness that they are "starting to feel yucky" about themselves when they spend time interacting online.

However, research also shows that there's a lot of good that social media does. "It connects a lot of teens—who otherwise might be isolated—with people who help them feel connected in one way or another," Whitlock said.

Coaching your child

When Laura Tierney was a teen-ager and then an award-winning student-athlete at Duke University, she heard many lectures from adults that harped on the "don'ts" regarding using her cell phone. "Don't text this, don't share that, don't download that app," etc. But she found technology helped her follow positive role models, stay in touch with friends around the world and even assisted her in landing jobs including creating social media campaigns for big brands such as ESPN, Disney and Coca-Cola.

Tierney's experiences motivated her to create The Social Institute (TSI), an organization that partners with schools nationwide to empower students, families and educators to positively navigate social-emotional health, social media and technology. According to its website, TSI provides a gamified, online learning platform that empowers students to navigate their social world—social media and technology—to fuel their health, happiness and future success.

The rule of three:

Laura Tierney, CEO of The Social Institute, recommends a "rule of three" framework for parents to use in working with their kids on how to navigate tech successfully.

1. Be a positive role model for your child in how you use technology. Your child is watching you from a very young age. Tierney said that it's common for kids to tell her that they see their parents texting while driving. Kids also have told her that although their parents have taught them to look an adult in the eye when they are speaking to them, their own parents keep their heads focused on their devices in speaking to them.
2. Do tech together to ease a child into it. For example, have a shared social media account on TikTok and record a dance video together.
3. Empower the child to do it on his or her own.

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As CEO of The Social Institute, Tierney spends a lot of time talking with kids, parents and teachers. Tierney understands parents hear a lot of negativity in news reports when it comes to technology and social media.

"Naturally parents harp on 'don't do this, don't share this' but I think it's never been more important to take a more positive approach to helping our kids navigate social media. It's not going away any time soon, whether we wish it would or not," Tierney said, chuckling.

Being well-acquainted with the world of sports, Tierney offered this analogy: "Similar to sports, any great coach coaches you on how to throw the ball or how to kick it or how to pass it, and I think social media education should be no different. We should be focused on helping kids to know what to do, not just 'don't do this, don't do that.'"

Parents need to fulfill that role of coach, Tierney believes, and she advises parents to ease their child into technology. "Think of it as helping your child practice before they go pro." If "pro" is defined as allowing a child to use social media with limited or no oversight and allowing a child to use his or her device in their bedroom or at school, then there is a lot of work for parents to do get their child used to tech, she said.

Start with sharing

For example, a parent can start by sharing a social media account with a child before the child gets one on his own. (Most social media platforms require kids to be at least 13 years old, yet children often lie about their birth date to get around that.)

Another technique is for parents to invest in a device that doesn't have a full data plan, for example a watch that a child can use to call or text people but it doesn't allow access to apps like a regular phone, Tierney suggested.

"There are so many steps that parents can take before we just throw our kids into Instagram or TikTok or having a smart phone. It builds their mental muscles to make positive decisions," Tierney said.

Write it down

Another useful technique suggested by both Tierney and Whitlock is to have a written agreement about how the family uses technology. TSI offers a "family social standards agreement" that can be downloaded from its website. This can be especially useful to avoid the power struggles that can happen between an adult and adolescent, both Tierney and Whitlock said.

"I really recommend that parents stay as far as possible from power struggles; I know it's

Where to learn more:

The Social Institute

The Social Institute, founded by Laura Tierney, offers free webinars on topics such as "Expert tips to help teen girls build healthy relationships on social media." To view previously recorded webinars or sign up for a future webinar go to <https://thesocialinstitute.com/webinars/>

The Social Institute offers a downloadable Family Standards agreement created with input from thousands of students, parents, counselors and researchers. It's a new, one-of-a-kind tech contract with 14 customizable standards about social media, tech, and everyday student experiences. When families create and sign the document, they promise to help each other live up to high standards.

<https://thesocialinstitute.com/download/family-social-standards-agreement/>

Common Sense Media

Both Laura Tierney and Janis Whitlock recommend parents utilize Common Sense Media. It has free resources to help parents learn about topics related to technology including apps and games. Go to <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/> and click on the "Parents Need to Know" tab at the top of the website.

really easy to go there," Whitlock said. "We really need to try to find ways to establish both open lines of communication and educated communication. Parents really need to know the world their youth inhabit and think strategically about the communication they need to have, such as agreements they can make as a family, and things that as a parent I'm just going to mandate."

Having a written agreement is much more effective than having the parent own their kids' passwords, Whitlock said, as kids can find a way to get around that.

Whitlock said parents need to educate themselves about parental control options on the household Wi-Fi system and with phone carriers. She recalled using those when her kids were teens (they are now in their 20s). Yes, her kids were mad at her for several days about the controls and rules, Whitlock said, but she stayed firm with rules such as phones going off at 10 p.m.

"A lot of parents don't (use parental controls) because they don't even know they exist or because it feels too cumbersome to try to figure it all out, but that's the job of the parent," Whitlock said.

Fear of conflict

Tierney noted that many parents are fearful of talking to their kids about technology or social media because the parents know less than their kids, or they worry the conversation is just going to be another cause of friction because they disagree with their teens' use of certain apps, etc.

It might surprise parents to know that a Penn State University study found that teens want to talk to their parents about potentially risky online experiences but don't because they worry that their parents will overreact and

confiscate their devices or limit use of certain apps, Tierney noted. She advised that parents keep their cool, ask questions, and try to understand what their children are feeling and why. Such interactions can help build trust so the child will come to the parents "when the going gets tough because it will on certain platforms."

Tierney said her favorite strategy for parents who need to learn about the apps their kids use is to invite the child to "coach up," that is for kids to coach their parents on different apps or settings or different devices. For example, if a teen wants to use TikTok, ask him or her what are the three pros and the three cons of using it, and what are the steps parent and teen can take to help avoid the cons.

"There's no better way for people to learn something than to have them teach it to others," Tierney said. "You're really taking an empowering approach when you're inviting your child to focus on what they can do to navigate social media and tech positively."

Part of a parent's responsibility is to understand where the risks do and don't come from on the internet, Whitlock said. Concerns about the impact on a teen girl's self-esteem from using Instagram or the effects of cyberbullying on an adolescent should be at least as high as concern about unknown predators, she said. Kids mostly use the internet to socialize with people they already know.

The bottom line for issues regarding kids and technology based on what Whitlock and Tierney said is that parents need to educate themselves about social media platforms, apps and parental controls on devices, and parents must be willing to partner with and learn from their kids. It won't always be smooth sailing but parenting never is.

Jane Sutter is a Rochester-area freelance writer.

Watch for These Warning Signs of Abuse in Minors

No longer wants to see a **particular person** they had been close to

Declining **academic** performance

Tries to hide use of **technology**

No longer interested in **activities** they used to enjoy

Changes in **personality**

Demonstrates **aggressive behavior** or constantly angry

Tries to get minors **alone**



Commits physical and emotional **boundary violations**

Withdraws from family or friends

Keeps **secrets** with minors

Gives lavish **gifts** to minors

Allows or encourages minors to **break laws** or rules

Has **inappropriate** or suggestive conversations with minors

Is overly interested in **spending time** with minors

Does not believe the **rules** apply to them (or, does not follow rules or protocols)

Takes **photos** without approval, or asks minors to send them photos

... and These Warning Signs of Perpetrators



ROMAN CATHOLIC
DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER

Creating a Safe Environment Newsletter

is published quarterly by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester with the aim of helping all of us keep children and vulnerable adults safe at home, at church and in all places in our community.

Comments can be directed to:

Tammy Sylvester,
Diocesan Coordinator
of Safe Environment Education
and Compliance,
585-328-3228
or Tammy.Sylvester@dor.org.

Victims of sexual abuse by any employee of the Church should always report to the civil authorities.

To report a case of possible sexual abuse and to receive help and guidance from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester, contact the diocesan Victim Assistance Coordinator:

Deborah Housel
(585) 328-3228, ext. 1555;
toll-free 1-800-388-7177,
ext. 1555
victimassistance@dor.org.

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ADDITIONAL SAFETY RESOURCES

ONLINE SAFETY RESOURCES

CHILDREN & TEENS' SAFETY SITES:

Webonauts Internet Academy:

<http://pbskids.org/webonauts/>

PBS Kids game that helps younger children understand the basics of Internet behavior and safety.

NSTeens:

<http://www.nsteens.org/>

A program of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children that has interactive games and videos on a variety of Internet safety topics.

FOR PARENTS:

Common Sense Media

<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/parent-concerns>

A comprehensive and frequently updated site that is packed with resources. Dedicated to improving the lives of kids and families by providing information and education

Darkness to Light organization:

www.d2l.org

Darkness to Light is a non-profit committed to empowering adults to prevent child sexual abuse.

Family Online Safety Institute:

<http://www.fosi.org/>

iKeepSafe:

<http://www.ikeepsafe.org/>

Resources for parents, educators, kids and parishes on navigating mobile and social media technologies

LOCAL RESOURCES AND CONTACT INFORMATION

Bivona Child Advocacy Center

(Monroe, Wayne counties):

www.BivonaCAC.org

585-935-7800

Chemung County Child Advocacy Center:

607-737-8449

www.chemungcounty.com

Child Advocacy Center of Cayuga County:

315-253-9795

www.cacofcayugacounty.org

Finger Lakes Child Advocacy Program

(Ontario County):

www.cacfingerlakes.org

315-548-3232

STEBEN COUNTY: Southern Tier Children's Advocacy Center:

www.sthcs.org

716-372-8532

NYS State Central Registry

(Child Abuse Reporting Hotline):

1-800-342-3720

NYS Child Advocacy Resource and Consultation Center (CARCC)

866-313-3013

Tompkins County Advocacy Center:

www.theadvocacycenter.org

607-277-3203

Wyoming County Sexual Abuse Response Team:

585-786-8846

Yates County Child Abuse Review Team:

315-531-3417, Ext. 6