

# Discernment and Kindness

## A CALL FOR PARENTS TO HELP TEENS REDEEM THEIR USE OF TECHNOLOGY



■ by Jessica Parks, MSW, LCSW



We see them everywhere: teens on their phones. They appear glued to them, seemingly unable to put them down. After all, kids 18 and under represent 1 in 3 internet users worldwide (UNICEF, 2017). Parents often worry as they see their children enter the silent world of social media. It's a world they may not fully understand or be able to access. What does it mean to parent an adolescent in these modern times, where much of teen social interactions take place in a virtual world?

### Opportunity to foster discernment and kindness

As parents, we have an opportunity to foster technology use in our teens that honors God and furthers his kingdom. It

turns out, teens are typically drawn to social media because of the social connection, community, independence, learning, and leisure needed for their development. Although social media are notorious for being fertile ground for bullying, sexual behavior, and magnifying stresses, social media are also places where teens can go to do what teens must do: connect with one another, challenge one another, and grow together. Parents can help their children to connect in healthy ways and engage in fruitful discussion online and offline through fostering a spirit of discernment and kindness.

### How do we engage with our teens in growing in online discernment and kindness? Here are some ideas:

- Model kindness in your behavior toward others, online and offline.
- Model good boundaries with your technology. Put your phone away during meals and conversations. Put your phones in a separate (non-bedroom) room to charge at night. Discuss ways that you use social media to connect with others.
- Ask them to show you how to use the privacy settings on Facebook or other social media sites. Allow them to be the expert. You will likely learn something new, and you will get a sense of whether they understand how to protect their privacy.
- Allow for continuous, open, frank discussion about their social media use. Ask about their online lives as you do the other areas of their lives. For many teens, their online lives are an extension of their offline lives and are extremely important to them. By asking about their online lives, you may connect with them about their friendships, interests, and struggles.

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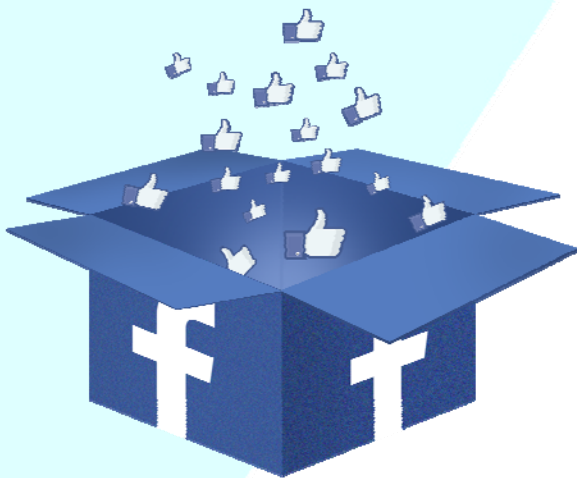
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- Monitor their social media use (there are many apps for that). Delay access to social media. Limit the amount of time they spend. They will not like this. Talk with them openly about your expectations for responsible use of the internet and social media, and BE HONEST with them about how you will encourage this. The internet is a big place, and there is a lot of good in it. However, there are many areas that present challenges that are especially difficult for the adolescent brain (whose prefrontal cortex – required for complex decision-making- is still developing) to navigate. Impulse control is limited for teens, and they may post pictures or information online that they later regret. Monitoring is collaboration between parent and teen to limit these kinds of mistakes.
- Run social media scenarios with them and ask them what they would do. Some examples: when someone posts pictures of a party on Instagram to which a classmate was not invited; when someone calls a person names on Facebook; if they view inappropriate content; etc. Jump in and collaborate with them. Highlight ways they could show kindness and love in those scenarios.
- Encourage face-to-face communication over online communication. Model and help your child hone the social skills necessary to communicate respectfully with others in person.
- Talk with them about the ways they can live out their faith online, in the spirit of Colossians 3:17 “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (NRSV).”
- Keep this dialogue going.



### Redeeming your teen's use of technology

Fear keeps many parents from allowing their teens to engage in social media use. It is up to individual parents to decide what is right for their children. However, social media use presents a unique opportunity to engage teens in development of the discernment and empathy that will be required of them lifelong. As Romans 12:2 instructs, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect (NRSV).” If our teens are going to use social media, let us equip them to use social media in ways that look radically different - radically loving, kind, and pure. ■



UNICEF. (2017, December 11). UNICEF: Make the digital world safer for children – while increasing online access to benefit the most disadvantaged [Press release]. Retrieved from [https://www.unicef.org/media/media\\_102303.html](https://www.unicef.org/media/media_102303.html)

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