

Common Sense on Digital Life

What's the Issue?

We may think of our kids' online, mobile, and technological activities as "digital life," but to them, it's just part of life. Their world is as much about creating media as it is about consuming it. Media devices have converged and become extremely powerful and portable. Phones aren't simply for phone calls anymore but for listening to music, sending texts, filming videos, snapping and sharing photos, and accessing the Internet. Our kids use their computers to do their homework, but they also use them to socialize, stream video, and create movies and songs. And they can connect and communicate 24/7 from just about any location.

Why Does It Matter?

We want our kids to make good decisions so they can take advantage of the powerful technology that fills their lives. But in order to make good choices, kids must know how the digital world works. The very nature of the constantly connected culture means kids must understand the concept of privacy, so that what they post and create won't hurt or embarrass them at some point in the future. The fact that much of digital communication is anonymous means that consequences can be separated from actions, which can lead to irresponsible or disrespectful behavior. Much of the task of childhood and adolescence involves figuring out who you are. But in digital life, anything said or posted can live on indefinitely and create undesired consequences.

The stakes are high because our kids' technological abilities can be greater than their maturity and judgment. Having unrestricted access to information and people can result in gaining a wealth of information and experiences. But it can also mean accessing inappropriate contact and content. The difference between a great experience and an iffy one lies in the decisions kids make. Just as kids learn to eat properly, swim safely, or drive a car carefully, they need to know how to live in the digital world responsibly and respectfully. Their ultimate success depends on their abilities to use digital media to create, collaborate, and communicate well with others. Those who master these skills in using digital tools will be able to harness the digital world's awesome power.

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Teach kids the skills they need to use technology wisely and well. It's hard to be a gatekeeper in a world with no fences. Parents have little control over the flow of information to their kids, who see too much, too soon. We no longer hear conversations or see what our kids create and share with others. Since we cannot cover their eyes, or shadow them everywhere they go, we need to teach them how to behave responsibly in the digital world.

Keep an open mind. We don't see the world the way our kids do. And we don't help our kids when we judge their lives through the lens of a non-digital world. It's important for us to understand that our kids will spend much of their lives in a connected world, where everyone creates and communicates.

Don't be afraid. Parents can't afford to be technophobic. Our kids adopt technologies faster than we do. That means they're often way out in front of us. This fact can upset the parent-child relationship. So get in the game. Have your kids show you how to do something online if you don't already know.

Share wisdom. Kids often don't understand the implications of their actions. But we do. So we have to remember to extend our basic parenting wisdom to the digital world. We teach kids to choose their words carefully, play nicely with others, and respect their teachers. Now we have to extend those lessons to a vast, invisible world.

Pass along your values. One of the most important jobs of parenting is instilling in your kids the values you cherish. But in a digital world where actions are often divorced from consequences, where kids can be anonymous, and where they aren't face to face with the people they communicate with, they can lose their way. As parents, we have to be able to translate our values into the digital world and help kids understand the implications of their actions.

Seek balance. It's hard to know how much freedom to give kids. We want them to explore, enjoy, communicate, and create. We also want to be sure they are protected, or know how to protect themselves. If our kids are going to thrive with digital media, we must balance the negative with the positive, privacy with protection. As our children grow, they need more independence and privacy. But parents have to be sure their kids know how to be safe and responsible before letting them loose. Kids need to see both the possibilities and the perils of digital life, so they can act responsibly and seize all that is wondrous about digital media to enrich their lives.