

What Impact Does Social Networking Have on Teens?



With the surging popularity of social-networking sites, chances are that your teenagers spend the bulk of their online time connecting and chatting with friends. (Chances are that you've jumped on the bandwagon, too.)

At Facebook, the most popular social-networking site, users make and keep in touch with friends, post pictures, and update their online "profiles." Other social-networking sites include MySpace, Friendster, and Xanga. Twitter, another fast-growing network, combines interconnectivity with "microblogging." Users write frequent, short bursts of information (also known as "tweets") to keep up-to-the-minute current with one another.

All this online friend-forming is affecting teenagers' development, according to experts. Researchers say social-networking sites are shortening attention spans, encouraging instant gratification, and making young people more self-focused. A British neurologist warns that extended use of the sites actually rewires the brain, causing teenagers to require constant reassurance that they exist. Other dangers are more subtle. Kids may no longer spend time completely alone, enjoying the benefits of reflection and solitude. Yet they may feel isolated because they're less likely to be communicating with the real humans in their homes, schools, and churches. Finally, teenagers may focus even more on all the worries that accompany adolescence. So instead of escaping from their problems, kids dwell on them even more.

Use this issue of "The Parent Link" to start exploring your teenagers' social-networking habits.

Teenagers longing to be loved and admired may find comfort in having large numbers of online "friends." But they also need authentic friendships with people who can help them grow. The small-group curriculum *Guy Talk, Girl Talk* (from Simply Youth Ministry) offers these insights:

It's important to be known in a personal and meaningful way. The world sends the message that more is better, but God's Word says that "many companions" won't lead to anything good. The outcome is much different for the person who has a friend that is closer than family (see Proverbs 18:24). To make friends that last, teenagers should...

- 1. Be wise in choosing friends.** Friendship can't be rushed. Pick a friend you can trust.
- 2. Be authentic in your friendships.** You can only be as close to your friends as you're willing to allow them.
- 3. Be willing to be held accountable.** A friend can provide helpful perspective. Truth can hurt, but it can also help us grow.



Here's a snapshot of online social activities:

- Teenagers spend an estimated 40 hours online each week (or 5.7 hours each day).
- 65% of online teenagers have profiles on social-networking sites.
- 31% of social-networking teenagers have "friends" on their profiles whom they haven't personally met.
- The average number of "friends" in a Facebook network is 120.



Great Questions to Ask Your Kids

Start a conversation with your teenagers about their communication habits.

1. How much time are you online each week? How many online friends do you have?
2. How many genuine friends would you say you have? Is social interaction easier for you on-screen than in person? Why or why not?
3. Do you have friends who keep you accountable, and vice versa? How well does that work?
4. How up-to-date is God about your life? If you talked to God more, how might your relationship with him change?



Focus on Prayer

PRAY THAT:

1. God will protect your teenagers when they're interacting online.
2. Your teenagers will be prudent about their online socialization and will reflect their faith in everything they do and say.
3. Your teenagers will make authentic, meaningful friends who help them grow as people and as Christians.
4. Your teenagers will stay connected to their families, a church, and other real-life support systems.

Verse of the Month

"Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches.... There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command." (John 15:5, 13-14)

Through faith in Jesus, we have the ultimate "connection" and the ultimate friend. Jesus showed friendship by giving his life for us. We, in turn, obey him out of love and share the good news of salvation with others. The best thing we can do for our friends is tell them about Jesus.

What's Up With Kids

At SimplyYouthMinistry.com, youth-culture expert Walt Mueller chats up social-networking sites.

Millions of teenagers now expose themselves, their feelings, and their thoughts in personal blogs (web logs) posted on one of the many social-networking websites. Public online journals have replaced hidden, locked private diaries. Today, both teenage girls and their male peers are openly sharing their "secrets" for anyone in the world with Internet access to see. Kids use blogs to vent and share commentary about every aspect of teenage life. They also post pictures of themselves, artwork, and personality profiles. Self-expression is encouraged, and the sites are highly interactive. Here are suggestions for dealing with this phenomenon:



First, know what your kids are doing online. Ask if they have their own blog page and if you can see it. Otherwise, spending some time online can usually get you to their online home. Register for free at the homepage of Facebook.com, Xanga.com, or MySpace.com. Then use the site's "search" capability to find your town or school. You'll be flying through a Web of local kids' sites with familiar names and faces. Eventually, you should find what you're looking for.

Second, read carefully without overreacting. You'll probably find some things on these sites that are surprising and alarming. While some of it might be marked by exaggeration and embellishment, most depicts what's going on in kids' lives. Look for clues that will help you discover their problems, challenges, concerns, and struggles. Remember, you're looking through a window into their world.

Third, carefully and prayerfully prepare your response. Warn teenagers about Internet predators. Discuss what you've read with your kids. Assure them that your concern is motivated solely by your love and care for them. Most importantly, bring the light of God's Word to bear on kids' issues and struggles.

MUSICSPOTLIGHT



Mainstream Artist

Background: Green Day has been around for almost 20 years. Their sound remains as pop-punky as ever, but the lyrics have deepened—tackling issues such as war, politics, and organized religion. Green Day has sold 22 million records in the United States and has won three Grammy Awards.

Albums: *21st Century Breakdown* (2009), *American Idiot* (2004), *Dookie* (1994)

What Parents Should Know: Green Day's angry-punk attitude sounds tired, now that band members are middle-aged multimillionaires. Their new album is about a young, disenfranchised couple who feels left behind by the church, the state, and adults. The band's pessimistic outlook believes in self, leaving no room for God.

What Green Day Says: Singer Billie Joe Armstrong reflects on the state of pop culture: "People want blood. They want to see other people thrown to the lions."

Discussion Questions: When have you felt abandoned by someone, and how did it affect you? Read Deuteronomy 31:6-8. Can God's love and presence replace that of a human's? How might God's promise in these verses make it easier to deal with abandonment by others? Explain.

Christian Artist

Background: FM Static is a pop-punk side band started by two members of the Christian hardcore group Thousand Foot Krutch. Two of the band's YouTube videos have become huge Internet hits, garnering millions of views.

Albums: *Dear Diary* (2009), *Critically Ashamed* (2006), *What Are You Waiting For?* (2003)

What Parents Should Know: *Dear Diary* is an interesting comparison to Green Day's latest release. It's also a concept album about two teenagers who are dealing with big issues. The difference is that on *Dear Diary*, these questions ultimately lead to God. FM Static is a positive alternative to Green Day, while addressing some of the same tough issues.

What FM Static Says: Singer Trevor McNeven discusses the album's autobiographical roots: "There are a lot of...things that I remember thinking. Things like big life questions, and also things that seem so big when you're in high school and then you look back at them now and think, 'That's hilarious, it totally didn't matter.' "

Discussion Questions: Read Psalm 37:1-9. Why should we trust God? Is that hard or easy for you, and why? What "big life questions" do you struggle with the most right now, and how can God help?

FILMWATCH

Movie: *Star Trek*

Genre: Action-Adventure

Rating: PG-13 (for sci-fi action and violence, and brief sexual content)

Synopsis: Director J.J. Abrams is at the helm of this fun, much-needed reboot of the beloved science-fiction series. Captain Nero, a Romulan madman, blames just about everyone for his family's death. He is seeking revenge, and that's the framework for introducing us to the young new crew of the USS *Enterprise*.

Discussion Questions: Kirk has problems with authority in this film. Is it ever okay to push back against authority? Explain. Read Romans 13:1-5. What do these verses say about the source of authority? What should a Christian do if people in authority are corrupt or cruel? What if their actions go against biblical teaching? What does rebellion say about how much we trust God?



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