Teaching Teens to be Safe on Social Media

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(Adapted from "Safe Socializing: Educating Teens about the Risks of Social Networking")

Teens are attracted to social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Youtube, which give them a virtual space to interact and share with their peers online. For young users especially, these sites can pose risks. Sharing information on the internet means that without protection, it is out there for anyone in the world to view. Teens who use social media need to be aware of the risks that exist, but it is not reasonable to expect them to stop using these tools. Instead, the focus should be placed on giving more education about staying safe while using social networking sites. Libraries are an ideal venue for this type of education. Social media is highly popular and teen programs built around safety online can be made appealing to both teenagers and their parents.

Social media includes sites and platforms where users can create and share their own online content such as photos, videos, blog posts, and status updates. Some popular examples of social media are sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Flickr, Reddit, as well as many others.

Social networking effectively replaces, or at least supplements the physical space that teens interact in (boyd, 2014). Teenagers especially rely on social media to communicate with others, but living so much of their lives online does not come without risks. However, if teens are educated about how to deal with these risks, their online time will be much safer. Sites like Facebook and Twitter not only make it easy to share personal information, but they encourage it using prompts for a user to update their network on what they are doing or how they are feeling (Staksrud, Ólafsson, & Livingstone, 2013). These prompts push users to share a lot of personal information with their social networks. Teens especially may not recognize the consequences and risks attached to this type of information sharing. Users of these sites also cannot always control what about them is shared online. For example, a user may share a picture and tag their friend in it, without having that person's express permission (Marwick & boyd, 2014). Sharing minute-to-minute updates and photos of each other can be fun and rewarding for teens, provided they are aware of how to participate in these activities safely.

It is more surprising today to meet a preteen or teenager who is not a user of

social media than to find one who is. What may be more difficult to find is a teen who has learned how to use their privacy settings correctly. Teens do not always describe their privacy settings accurately, perhaps showing that they

(Vanderhoven, Schellens, Valcke, & Raes, 2014). It is important to note that teens do not necessarily care less about privacy than adults, and that participation in online social networks is not equivalent to wanting to share every

do not understand how these work, or that they wanted to seem more educated on this topic. Upwards of 63% of teen's Facebook profiles can be found by searching Google for their real first and last name. Most teenagers do use real personal information online like their name, contact information, and photographs of themselves

aspect of their lives with their peers (Marwick & boyd, 2014). A lot of teens may participate online just to keep up to date with their peers, but not share a lot of information themselves because they are uncomfortable or do not know how to do so safely.

A lot of what has been written about teens' use of social media focuses on

scare tactics to try and get young people off of these sites. Social media, however, does have its benefits for teen users. Social networking has not completely replaced face-to-face time for this generation; in fact, it can actually be seen as improving the way teens socialize by giving them another way to communicate. It also gives young people the opportunity to become more critically literate in ways that can transfer over to their education. Being part of an online community can also foster a sense of belonging for young people that they may not necessarily find offline (Thompson, 2013). Online social networks give teenagers opportunities that may have been difficult for them to find within the confines of their peer groups.

Often, parents and caregivers will make attempts to get their children to leave social media altogether or not sign up in the first place in an effort to protect them from the dangers they believe to exist on the internet (boyd, 2014). Instead of a completely negative attitude encouraging youth to stay away from social media, the focus should be placed on educating teenagers about the risks that exist online and teaching them how to use these networks in a safe way. It is not always easy for anyone, let alone youth, to make sense of the built in tools that exist to help protect privacy on social networking sites. Education around this topic should centre around teaching teens to cope with the unexpected risky situations that may occur online, as well as showing them how to avoid becoming part of these situations in the first place (Wisniewski, Xu, Rossen, & Carroll, 2014). Giving teens the tools they need to participate online safely will help them to be able to protect their privacy, both by avoiding potential dangers and by lessening the need for caregivers to so closely monitor their online activity.

Education around the use of social media could be structured around Rheingold's five social media literacies. These standards provide users with the basic tools they need to be able to safely and actively participate in social networking. The first is attention, which explains how users must be able to decide how much of their focus to place on the social media being consumed. Participation and collaboration help a user identify when and how to engage in social networks, as well as whether or not they should participate alone or become part of a group. The final two standards, network awareness and critical consumption, are the most important for social media education for teens. Network awareness has to do

with having knowledge of how social networking sites function, while critical consumption identifies the importance of being able to analyze information viewed on these platforms and decide whether or not it is valid (as cited in Bridges, 2012). If young people are taught to have a deeper understanding of how sites like Twitter and Facebook allow them to share information, or network awareness, they will be able to make better decisions about how they want to use these sites. Critical consumption can be applied to helping youth decide how to interpret the things that they see online. This can apply to status updates that may just be there to cause drama (boyd, 2014) —being able to analyze these posts critically will help teens to know when it is and is not a good idea to join the conversation. These standards do not clearly cover another concern that should be included in any sort of social networking education, which is being able to identify risks and protect privacy. Teens should be taught how to find and use the privacy settings on their profiles, as sometimes these can be complex. They also should be taught how to analyze what is and is not safe to post online in order to take charge of their own privacy. This may sound like two other separate points that need to be covered,

but both are essential to keeping teenagers safe online and thus go hand in hand.

Libraries are an ideal venue for this type of education. Teen programming is popular within public libraries, and a program structured around how to use Facebook or Twitter would surely be popular. This type of program could easily be educational as well, without being too preachy. Librarians are perhaps the ideal people to educate about the risks and how to cope as they are trained to have "extensive knowledge about information literacy" (Bridges, 2012, p. 56). This knowledge easily translates to the skills required to be social media literate. Many libraries and librarians are avid users of social media already and are comfortable connecting with young people through this platform (Bridges, 2012). Librarians can help teens become more social media literate by showing them the positive aspects of these tools as well as using avenues like Twitter and Instagram to create an online presence for the library itself (Kranich, 2007). By using the library as a space for teens to learn about social media, librarians can be an available resource to guide teens if they run into problems.

Social media and online information sharing do not come without risks, and it

is important that young people are educated about how to handle these situations when they arise. Education that is structured around helping teenagers learn how to control their privacy and manage risks online would be beneficial to both the youth themselves as well as their parents who are concerned about them. Social media has too many benefits for it to be expected that teenagers will change their attitudes and stop using these tools. At this point, checking Twitter and Facebook is completely engrained in daily life. The concern should not be how to get teenagers off of the internet, but how to teach them to safely use these online platforms in order to fully reap the benefits.

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