

Risky Online Behavior: How Teachers Can Help Students Set Boundaries and Stay Safe

As adults, we rely on our smartphones to communicate, to navigate, to search, and to work. How students use smartphones—and any other of a host of Internet-ready devices available in today's loaded tech marketplace—can be substantially and inherently riskier.

Online safety for children and teens is of paramount concern, especially considering the prevalence of acts such as sexting by minors, cyberbullying, and chronic oversharing of personal information. To prevent these unfortunate events, there are steps educators can take to help students learn to harness the power and connectivity of the online world responsibly.

Teens and Inappropriate Online Activity

A [2015 Pearson study](#) found that overall, 72 percent of students in grades 4-12 use a laptop, 71 percent use a smartphone and 62 percent use a tablet. As the ages of the respondents increased, so did their reported device usage: For example, 82 percent of high schoolers reported regular use of a smartphone compared to 53 percent of elementary students. From these statistics, it's obvious that online access is ever-present for today's youth, and that access starts early.

Stories of risky online behavior and today's youth pepper the news, but what do the numbers really look like? Here are a few observations worth noting:

- A [2014 Drexel University study](#) found that more than half of the anonymous respondents (54 percent) said they engaged in sexting—either sending or receiving—as minors.
- Only two percent of minors [reported](#) alerting a parent or teacher after receiving an unsolicited sext.
- [U.S. News & World Report found](#) that the overall bullying and cyberbullying rates reached a record low in 2013, but female students were still victimized at higher rates than male students.
- Although the cyberbullying rate is declining, it's still substantial. In 2014, the [CDC reported](#) that 19.6 percent of students had been bullied in school and 14.8 percent were bullied online.
- [Pew Research Center reports](#) that teens are sharing more than ever on social media sites like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram—including photos (91 percent), city/town information (71 percent) and cell phone number (20 percent). Today, many posts to social media automatically include location information.

What initiates some of these risky online behaviors is undoubtedly peer pressure and the urge to fit in, both social factors prominent in relationships formed in adolescence. Another possibility is that students simply are not aware of how to properly manage their privacy online—or, moreover, the implications of failing to do so.

What Teachers Can Do to Help

Teachers do more than follow textbook lesson plans—they are uniquely poised to deliver lessons that apply outside of the classroom as well: Positive, safe online etiquette is one such lesson. Giving students the intellectual and emotional tools and empowering them to make the right decisions on their own can have a lasting impact on their self-esteem and feelings of self-worth in the long term. In the short term, it can help them avoid the consequences that come from making poor online choices.

Here are a few tips for teachers:

- Set clear boundaries and expectations for students' behavior online, complete with detailed consequences for the misuse of technology.
- Have open conversations about how online platforms work, especially social media, and how quickly private information can reach others.
- Seek student input when creating guidelines about technology use, including language about what constitutes cyberbullying and what to do when it occurs.
- Inform students about the laws that apply to minors who choose to sext. Make sure the school has a user-friendly reporting system and encourage students to speak up.
- If students truly navigate to inappropriate content accidentally, diffuse the situation calmly and explain how to avoid similar content in the future.
- Include parents in discussions about online safety through newsletters and meetings. Encourage them to continue to reinforce at home those same safety principles taught in the classroom, and to remain active in monitoring any online interactions their children may have with outside parties.

The Internet is a powerful tool that, when utilized properly, can help to inform, inspire and innovate. And I think we would all agree that the more comfortable and confident our children feel when online, the better. Educators can help students achieve that level of comfort and self-confidence, and guide students in the use of online tools in a safe and mature manner so they're better able to navigate the web now, and in the future.