Parents need to learn social media dangers

Emily Parkinson

If you thought the birds and the bees is awkward territory for parent and child, spare a thought for mums and dads today who have to broach such things as “sexting” with their teen.

Growing up in a digital world means parents need to educate themselves in the language of social media and familiarise themselves with the sorts of issues that may be ahead, particularly when a child starts secondary school.

“High school really represents a child’s entry into the digital world,” says Nerina Pretlove, a deputy principal and president of the Professional Teachers Council of NSW.

“It’s at that point parents really need to have a conversation with their kids about how to manage their online presence, social media and familiarise themselves with the school’s website and social media policy.”

Cyberslapping, trolling and grooming are some of the more sinister realities of the online world, and a world away from the sorts of adolescent issues parents may have faced, but psychologists and teachers urge parents to be upfront with teens on the problems of social media and talk openly to their children about how they expect them to act in their digital lives.

“We are raising children in an entirely different culture nowadays and, as parents, it is difficult to get our heads around how significant that change is,” says Jill Healey, who has daily exposure to social media issues among teens in her role as executive principal across three campuses at Flinders Christian Community College in Victoria. The college enrols 2150 students from prep to year 12.

“Social media is the world our young people live in: it’s absolutely the air they breathe.”

“We, as teachers, need to equip parents to the best ability we can, and parents need to equip themselves to navigate it with their child.

“They need to ask themselves, ‘What are our core values as family?’ It is by asking themselves those sorts of questions and building those values into their lives so when their child engages with social media they have a strong values base from which to use as the basis of that engagement.’”

She says the best way to tackle that discussion is from the standpoint of values: teaching young people to respect others and deeply value other people and other people’s feelings; social media can be very misused and can cause hurt and children need to understand that hurt can in fact lead to some very serious outcomes.

Robert Luzza, psychologist and director of Victorian Counselling and Psychological Services (VCPS) advises schools and parents on social media use. He says the phenomenon of social media, by making young people aware of how they project themselves to their peers and the world, can be a source of intense anxiety for kids, many of whom feel the need to constantly update or police their online selves.

“What people are creating online is a space which is theirselves and there’s a certain amount of upkeep and anxiety that goes with maintaining that space, and that upkeep requires a lot of emotional energy,” says Luzza, who also advises schools on how to create appropriate social media policies.

He often counsels parents struggling to deal with their child’s addictive online behaviours. The most effective advice he gives to these parents can be as simple as making them realise they still hold control over their child’s online activity, just like any other activity in their child’s life.

“Having technology-free family time is just a normal part of a usual household routine and that means phone and other devices are put away. This may be dinner time, the last hour before bed and certainly when chores and household activities are being done.”

Parents have a critical role in educating their child in these behaviours and the best way of teaching is through example, he says.

“If the first thing that mum or dad does when they come home from work is check their own emails and voicemails and then become quite consumed with these and then they try telling their child on the other hand that online activities need to be restricted to certain times of the day it ends up being quite a futile discussion.”

Parents should always seek open and honest discussions with children about their child’s online activity, says Luzza, to raise awareness of potential issues, but also to regularly check in and learn from their kids about what they’ve been participating in while they’ve been online.

He recommends parents look at the proportion of time their child spends online versus other activities and make adjustments in the family routine to reinstate face-to-face communication where it may be lacking.

“Social media is a wonderful way of helping young people to share their thoughts, but nothing beats some real face-to-face communication, and that really starts in the family home.”

Principal Jill Healey’s advice to parents concerned about their child’s online activity is, first, to observe where their child is using devices around the home, make sure it’s not in secret and
make an effort to sit with your child when they are engaging with social media via a device.

"Try to be interested and involved with what they are doing.

"It is a parent’s duty to make their child aware that whatever they write is there permanently. That fact has caught a lot of young people by surprise. Help young people to learn to really value their privacy. Anything they put there cannot be erased."

From a psychologist’s point of view, Luzza says the world of social networking and its relentless, 24-hour presence in our lives, and our children’s lives, has created the conditions under which feelings of anxiety and fear in children can take root and flourish.

"Those fears are no different from usual anxieties or fears that we see in children but what we've noticed now is that previously, in a social-media-free world, those fears might have been constrained to a certain part of the day. For instance, a child who feared being left out - that would be just constrained to the morning tea break at school or the lunchtime break - now these fears extend to possibly 24 hours a day because they are participating in online forums where they are part of a social network all day. And that social network is extending into every part of their day and for some people, there’s little escape."

He says children who might ordinarily never have become bullies sometimes display bullying tendencies with access to social media.

"These children take to online to assert themselves in a environment where they don’t have to use the range of emotions they use in face-to-face communication, so they might resort to some derogatory behaviour in an online setting."

Cyberbullying, by anonymous text message or posting on social media sites, is the most common form of social media abuse, according to Rosalie O’Neale, a senior adviser with ACMA’s CyberSmart Program. Ms O’Neale has more than 15 years’ experience researching how children and young people use the internet and social media, and as one of the architects of the government’s CyberSmart policy, has interviewed hundreds of parents and kids about their social media use.

"Cyberbullying is the most pervasive problem because, even if a child is not directly the target of it themselves they are likely to witness it happening to someone around them," she says.

Parents and children should report cyberbullying where it occurs, keep a record, make sure you don’t reply or retaliate, and, where possible, attempt to block the perpetrator, she says.

It helps, she believes, if parents can learn about how a service works ahead of time and find out about its reporting mechanism. Parents should read the terms of service to learn the minimum age for membership or registration.

She advises parents and children to talk to their school about any incident because, often, she says, "these behaviours are not occurring in isolation and it can be a spillover from face-to-face bullying that is occurring in the schoolyard. Schools can play a vital role in helping to mediate that."

"As a parent, talking about social media is not a discussion you can have once and say, 'That's done.' As a child grows up and uses new services and new technologies it just goes on and on. It's a part of parenting nowadays."

**Participating in online forums, they are part of a social network all day.**

Robert Luzza, psychologist
Nothing beats some real face-to-face communication, and that starts in the family home. PHOTO: ROB GUNSTONE