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Teens on the Internet

The Internet is a source of fascination for teens. Put yourself in their shoes for a moment. Remember when you were that age, and the world lay at your feet, or you thought it did. Really, it was just your neighborhood or your high school.

Teens today really do have a world at their feet. It is a virtual world, granted, but that doesn't make it any less influential. It is a supreme challenge for parents to get up to speed on the Internet. Teens do not have that problem, the Internet moves at the speed of teens—that is, much faster than the average parent. This is a disparity that needs addressing because the Internet is not only like the world in your living room, but it contains all that is dark and threatening about that world, and that is a threat that you are going to want to remove from your living room. And your teens are probably not going to come forward and ask for help, unless you create a climate where that feels appropriate.

One of the first steps towards this climate is a parent that actually knows something about how the Internet works. An unworkable power imbalance exists in the family where the parents are Internet virgins and the children are anything but. This means that we parents are going to have to roll up our sleeves and get in there, at least deep enough so that we become conversant on the ways of cyberspace. By making ourselves aware of what the Internet is all about we reinstate ourselves as useful guides for our teens. If we don't they will wonder this alternately marvelous and sinister landscape alone, without protection.

So, now, when we roll up our sleeves and head purposefully towards the computer station, it is important that we leave behind our inner policeman. We need to come as friends or our teens will respond by going underground and there they will meet unsavory characters that we would not approve of. Resist the temptation to kit out each of your teens with their own little desktop. I know this view is unpopular but, like separate TVs in each bedroom, it fragments a family, dissipates the nucleus of the home and makes it extremely difficult to know what is going on without having to effect random bedroom raids.

Try to restrict yourself to a computer station in the common area of the house. This means that the family is together in their virtual endeavors. While you're about it, one TV in the common area is also a positive step for family interactions. I like to call it family surfing. This is what you have to do to create an environment where you and your teen will be able to discover, together, the good and the bad and the ugly that all live on the Internet. Your teen is unlikely to sit at your feet and ask for an informative lecture on the possible dangers of the Internet.

Like everything about parenting teens, you are going to have to forge new levels of subtlety. Crowded around the computer with an air of exploration is the ideal atmosphere to begin your unofficial lecture, cannily disguised as choice little tidbits of information casually dropped in the course of conversation. This works better than sitting rigid on the computer chair, gripping the edge of your seat and imparting bullet points on the Terrible Dangers of the Demonic Internet. Begin, as always, by accenting the positive. Look at how the Internet brings the wonders of the whole wide world into our living room. Isn't it wonderful?

Today's teen can Google any question they can think of. Fabulous. Sure they have all these nasty, heinous sites out there as well. Sinister sites that revolve around bigotry, perverse sex and how to make bombs. "It's not any different to the world out there," you can say, casually. "with the same balance of good and bad, angels and crooks..." That should get their attention. And it's true. Teens love that; the truth. It appeals to their newborn radicalism. Parenting on the Internet is really not that different to parenting in the real world. You'll need to give warnings while appearing not to.

Chat rooms are revolutionary. Teens love them. It's like real life but with one very important difference. It is easier for things to be not what they seem. This can be said about the entire Internet. It mimics life in many ways but it has a great capacity for deception and awareness is the only defense against this.

Help your teens become aware of this aspect of the Internet and create a climate that will allow them to consult you without hesitating. This means that you are going to have to become less frightening and more approachable, not to mention just the tiniest bit 'cool'. Teens are into radicalism. Brandish a bit of your own. It provides a great disguise for parenting guidelines.

Gail
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