

5 ways parents can help kids balance social media with the real world

By Adrienne Wichard-Edds

Check your kid's phone. “Particularly in middle school but also in high school, kids should know that parents can ask for their phones at any point and be allowed full access,” Homayoun says. While some parents take a more hands-off approach because, they say, they want to respect their kids’ privacy, it’s important to make the distinction between privacy and safety. “Twenty-four-hour access doesn’t mean 24-hour snooping,” she says. “It means that a parent is still responsible for monitoring what a minor does online.” Homayoun points to the recent incident where [Harvard revoked admission for 10 incoming freshmen](#) because of offensive memes they posted in a private Facebook group as an example of why parents should monitor their kids’ use of social media. And it’s not just what they put out there, it’s also what they’re receiving. “If you find something you don’t like, talk to your kid about why you find it inappropriate — and then ask them what they think. Once they verbalize their thoughts, it allows them the opportunity to think things through and come up with their own set of values.”

Be app-savvy. “If your kid is on it, you should be, too,” Homayoun says of apps and social media platforms. “You don’t have to have an account, but at least try it out so you can have informed conversations about it. If your kids know that you understand the social media they’re using, they’re more likely to come to you to talk about issues that pop up.” And when those issues do pop up, Homayoun suggests helping your kids come up with a crisis communications team of three “support people” and three “clarifiers” to help them deal with the problem. “When something happens online that makes them uncomfortable, who are your kids going to reach out to? It can be Mom and Dad, but it can also be a trusted family member, teacher, coach or even the [Crisis Text Line](#).”

Help kids understand their “why.” Inspire kids to act out of internal motivation instead of fear, Homayoun says, by helping them build their own filter. “Encourage your kids to ask themselves ‘Why am I picking up my phone? Am I bored, am I lonely, am I sad? Am I just uncomfortable because I’m in a room where I don’t know anyone?’ Or ‘Why am I posting this? Does spending time on this app make me feel energized or drained?’ It helps them make decisions that reflect their own values and choices and separate their online experiences from in-real-life ones,” she says. Asking themselves “why” also slows down impulsive online communications, and encourages kids to make smarter choices.

Set clear ground rules. Talk to your kids about appropriate social media use before you give them a phone or allow them to download a new app, says Homayoun. “Once you hand it over, they’ll be too excited to focus on your instructions.” Clearly state rules and expectations, and stick with them as much as possible. In our family, this includes not putting anything online that you wouldn’t want your friends’ parents to read (because several of them will); getting permission before downloading a new app; and checking phones into my office at bedtime. Homayoun also encourages parents to involve kids in creating a family mission statement about responsible technology usage.

Create opportunities for digital detox. “Give kids a budget to plan their own screen-free adventures — don’t just say, ‘Okay, kids, get offline and come do some chores,’ ” Homayoun says. She also points out that kids need to learn how to be okay with being offline. Parents can start by modeling that behavior: No phones at the dinner table, for example, or no checking texts while you’re talking with your kid. And while most kids won’t admit it to their parents, an enforced break from technology could be just what they need. “Research shows that 24 percent of our teens feel like they’re online all the time,” Homayoun says. “When parents put restrictions on how much and when kids can use technology, it can be a relief.”