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Guard Children from Dangers Online

by

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Last week, another child died. She was 13, described as lovely, athletic and popular. She fell victim to the dangers our children face as more and more of their lives are lived online, from cell phones to laptops.

Her mother attributed the suicide to a one-time mistake called sexting. Sexting involves sending a nude or semi-nude photo over a mobile device. This begins innocently enough, however, in this digital age, the photo is both instantaneous and viral. Literally within minutes, an embarrassing photo may reach thousands of unintended recipients.

We teach our children about seat belts, safe driving, and the dangers of drugs and alcohol. Yet how many of us actually discuss the risks of their life online? How many educators include good digital citizenship in the curriculum?

We should because at least 10 states are prosecuting sexting as criminal, and one young woman faces a jail sentence.

We wonder how a child could even contemplate suicide. Yet consider the taunts of classmates, stares or shouts from strangers in a mall, and malicious e-mails from those you once considered friends — incredible pressure for any of us, much less an adolescent.

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There is no “delete” button to stop this type of communication. The nude photo and messages last forever and may be viewed by a future college admissions officer, employer or fiancé. Thankfully, this issue is being addressed at policy levels from the Secretary General of the United Nations to presidents. The International Telecommunications Union just issued child protection guidelines for policymakers, parents and educators.

Hearings in Washington have begun to address the need for curriculum in schools so that we are not merely teaching keyboarding and research skills, but we are also teaching good digital citizenship. A recent study underscores the need to enhance this conversation with our youth: 29 percent said their parents would disapprove of some of what they were doing on the Internet, and 64 percent said most teens do things online they wouldn't want their parents to know about.

The good news is that there are excellent resources to help parents understand these new behaviors as well as how to launch a family conversation regarding all types of technology and media. These include starting a dialogue with your children as soon as they first go online regarding positive behavior, establishing rules for age-appropriate use, securing private and financial information, and setting strict time limits.

Discuss peer pressure and cyber bullying, and if you feel your child is at risk, seek help from your private physician, counselor or mental health provider. If you are a parent — no matter how young your children are — get tech savvy yourself. It is never too early to start a conversation about the risks and dangers in your child's online world, just as you would in the offline world.

Some places to find help:

- Child Online Protection Initiative is available for free at www.itu.int/cop.
- Centerstone is the largest not-for-profit provider of community-based behavioral health care; www.centerstone.org; 615-460-4357 or 1-800-681-7444.
- Common Sense Media is a nonprofit organization that provides parents tools and information regarding media; www.commonsensemedia.org.

We know that what kids put in their brains is as important as what goes into their bodies. Be the parent. This is no longer just a virtual world, this is the very real world in which our children live, study, play and, very sadly, sometimes die. And you need to be a part of it.

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