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Children's Use of Technology Demands Our Attention

by

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Last week, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) issued a historic report recommending for the first time that pediatricians ask questions of their patients about their use of technology — especially time spent with social networks.

Why would a doctor who deals with earaches and the flu need to know about Facebook or Club Penguin? Because the use of the Internet, and social media in particular for teens, can be a major factor in health problems such as obesity, sleep deprivation, depression, and worst of all, suicide.

The AAP report cites a recent poll showing that 22 percent of teenagers log onto their favorite social media site more than 10 times a day. Seventy-five percent of teens have cellphones, and 54 percent of them use them for texting. Our children spend about 57 hours a week with media — more time online than in school and certainly more than with their family.

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No matter what we as parents do, adolescence comes with a dose of mental health challenges: from self-esteem problems to more serious issues such as alienation, victimization and isolation from "cyberbullying." Today's parents must recognize that the bullying they recall from the schoolyard playground has been transformed and magnified by the Internet and mobile technology.

And along with expanding social networks has come an increase in cyberbullying, "sexting," privacy violations and marketing targeted to youngsters. Recent studies show that as many as 1 in every 3 children will be cyberbullied in their teen or pre-teen years. Another survey says that 20 percent of teens have sent nude or seminude photos or videos of themselves to others.

Lessons for parents

Scientific studies have found that cyber-victimization is associated with an increase in depression, thoughts of suicide and suicide attempts among teens. And, sadly, such online behavior has even led to tragic suicides of teens over the past few years. The key for parents to win this battle is preparation. The AAP advises pediatricians to "increase their knowledge of digital technology in order to help patients and families better navigate the new digital world of teenagers."

A first step to arming yourself with information would be to attend "Raising and Protecting a Digital Native," a community forum at 7 p.m. Tuesday at Lipscomb University's Ezell Center. At the forum, I will lead a discussion with local and national experts on this growing problem among our youth and point out ways that families can avoid unhealthy Internet use.

Medical and technology experts from Centerstone, which has been recognized by the Tennessee Association of Mental Health Organizations for its violence and bullying prevention program, will provide advice for parents on talking to their children about their Internet use, developing their own family online use plan and teaching them methods to deal with bullying in all forms.

In addition, Jim Steyer, CEO of Common Sense Media, one of the nation's most respected media-rating and child-advocacy organizations, will provide comments on the latest research in online privacy, cyberbullying and other online risks to every child. In my role as executive-in-residence at the Nelson and Sue Andrews Institute of Civic Leadership, I will host additional forums exploring how the Internet has affected not only our children, but also our health care, our local communities and even our First Amendment rights. Our children are growing up in a digital age, light-years away from the world we parents experienced as youth. We have a responsibility to empower, protect and educate our children in both the real world and the virtual world as they grow into the future.

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Foundation and a former Federal Communications Commissioner. She now serves on the national board of Common Sense Media, and was awarded the 2009 WTISD Laureate for her work regarding child online advocacy. The Free State Foundation is a nonpartisan Section 501(c)(3) free market-oriented think tank in Rockville, Maryland.