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**Schools Enter Digital Conversation:
Educating Kids on Social Networking Is Best Solution**

by

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With the beginning of a new school year, our children face new situations, from moving to a different location to meeting new teachers or deciding who to invite to homecoming. In this digital, high-tech, always-on world, they also face a whole new set of challenges of cyberspace. Our children increasingly live their lives online: 93 percent use the Internet, 75 percent have a mobile phone, and 73 percent use social media.

Just what is social media? For kids, it is a place to hang out, talk, share photos and music, write about events, post art — in effect, an extension of their social life on a screen. At the same time, parents and schools are also struggling with social networking and its impact on education. Educators are being called on to be everything from online referees to cybersecurity experts. Most teachers are now teaching a subject that was not even part of their college training, across mediums that had not even been invented, to prepare our children for competing in a global job market.

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Just like the Internet, social networking has changed our interaction with media, government and journalism; it will also change education.

Tech tools affect how our children connect socially, explore new worlds, collaborate on projects and basically learn the skills they will need in a digital world. Classrooms can connect with scientists or experts on other continents, use OpenCourseWare, or tweet with youth demonstrating in Egypt. Innovative teachers have found that technology may be the key to keeping some students in school or engaged in after-school activities and off the streets.

At the same time, we have seen students who have been bullied to the point of suicide, and teachers who have used these new communications tools in inappropriate ways with students. Facebook has also been used to embarrass teachers or administrators publicly.

Courts have begun to address some of these “digital downsides,” including through criminal prosecutions, lawsuits involving emotional distress and proposed codes of conduct. But legal efforts in this space involve complex issues including free speech, discrimination and jurisdiction.

Most cases have determined that schools do not have authority over students’ social networking outside school. Principals, school boards and legislatures are implementing rules, with the Missouri legislature banning all teacher communication on Facebook with students. Other districts have established alternative websites that can be monitored. Some of the bans on social networking may be driven by fear of litigation and monetary verdicts against economically strapped school systems.

Just like many other hotly debated issues — from banning certain books to restricting student protests — policy makers will struggle to find the proper balance. However, the best answer should be education.

Digital media literacy should be part of every curriculum in every school in this country. Keyboarding and research skills should be taught alongside cyberbullying and civility. Digital education for parents, teachers, administrators and students themselves should include technology’s incredible opportunities but also its very real challenges. However, the digital rules are really not so different from the ones we teach in the real world. For example:

Don’t talk to strangers. Limit your “friends” to people you know in real life.

Remember the “Golden Rule”: Don’t post anything you wouldn’t want posted about yourself.

Do the right thing. Stop bullying when you see it — sadly, only about 10 percent of kids report bullying.

Use your time wisely. Set rules about media use.

“Lock your door”: Use and recheck the privacy settings often.

Think before you click! Millions of people can receive your communication in a matter of seconds.

In one recent survey, 92 percent of girls surveyed would give up all their social networking friends to keep their best friend. So, maybe we should look to our children and realize that perhaps they already have this figured out; or they will by the time we set up our first Facebook page.

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