

What Impact Does Social Networking Have on Teens?



With the surging popularity of social-networking sites, chances are that your teenagers spend the bulk of their online time connecting and chatting with friends. (Chances are that you've jumped on the bandwagon, too.)

At Facebook, the most popular social-networking site, users make and keep in touch with friends, post pictures, and update their online "profiles." Other social-networking sites include MySpace, Friendster, and Xanga. Twitter, another fast-growing network, combines interconnectivity with "microblogging." Users write frequent, short bursts of information (also known as "tweets") to keep up-to-the-minute current with one another.

All this online friend-forming is affecting teenagers' development, according to experts. Researchers say social-networking sites are shortening attention spans, encouraging instant gratification, and making young people more self-focused. A British neurologist warns that extended use of the sites actually rewires the brain, causing teenagers to require constant reassurance that they exist. Other dangers are more subtle. Kids may no longer spend time completely alone, enjoying the benefits of reflection and solitude. Yet they may feel isolated because they're less likely to be communicating with the real humans in their homes, schools, and churches. Finally, teenagers may focus even more on all the worries that accompany adolescence. So instead of escaping from their problems, kids dwell on them even more.

Use this issue of "The Parent Link" to start exploring your teenagers' social-networking habits.

Teenagers longing to be loved and admired may find comfort in having large numbers of online "friends." But they also need authentic friendships with people who can help them grow. The small-group curriculum *Guy Talk, Girl Talk* (from Simply Youth Ministry) offers these insights:

It's important to be known in a personal and meaningful way. The world sends the message that more is better, but God's Word says that "many companions" won't lead to anything good. The outcome is much different for the person who has a friend that is closer than family (see Proverbs 18:24). To make friends that last, teenagers should...

1. **Be wise in choosing friends.** Friendship can't be rushed. Pick a friend you can trust.
2. **Be authentic in your friendships.** You can only be as close to your friends as you're willing to allow them.
3. **Be willing to be held accountable.** A friend can provide helpful perspective. Truth can hurt, but it can also help us grow.



Pulse

Here's a snapshot of online social activities:

- Teenagers spend an estimated 40 hours online each week (or 5.7 hours each day).
- 65% of online teenagers have profiles on social-networking sites.
- 31% of social-networking teenagers have "friends" on their profiles whom they haven't personally met.
- The average number of "friends" in a Facebook network is 120.



Great Questions to Ask Your Kids

Start a conversation with your teenagers about their communication habits.

1. How much time are you online each week? How many online friends do you have?
2. How many genuine friends would you say you have? Is social interaction easier for you on-screen than in person? Why or why not?
3. Do you have friends who keep you accountable, and vice versa? How well does that work?
4. How up-to-date is God about your life? If you talked to God more, how might your relationship with him change?

A NOTE FROM TRAVIS

Hi again, and thank you once again for taking time to read this monthly newsletter.

In May, we had our "Fast4Food" event. I am so proud of the students who participated in the event. They raised over \$1300 for the work of Compassion International in Ethiopia. Many of the students were able to fast for the full 36 hours and survived sleeping in cardboard shanty homes. Photos and videos are posted on the FBC website.

In June, we are going to have a promotion party at Camp Koinonia on the 13th. This will be a BBQ and Pool party. This party will welcome the incoming 6th graders and the incoming high school freshmen, but everyone involved in student ministries is invited. We will begin after 2nd service.

Our second big summer event will be with the Jr. High group. We will be going to Raging Waters on June 23rd all day. Then on June 29th we will be taking the high school group to dollar night at the Boardwalk (didn't that use to be 25¢ night?).

Lastly we will have dates for our water-ski trips soon. I will contact you all by email as soon as I get confirmation from our wonderful boat drivers. Both trips will take place in July.

What's Up With Kids

At SimplyYouthMinistry.com, youth-culture expert Walt Mueller chats up social-networking sites.

Millions of teenagers now expose themselves, their feelings, and their thoughts in personal blogs (web logs) posted on one of the many social-networking websites. Public online journals have replaced hidden, locked private diaries. Today, both teenage girls and their male peers are openly sharing their "secrets" for anyone in the world with Internet access to see. Kids use blogs to vent and share commentary about every aspect of teenage life. They also post pictures of themselves, artwork, and personality profiles. Self-expression is encouraged, and the sites are highly interactive. Here are suggestions for dealing with this phenomenon:



First, know what your kids are doing online. Ask if they have their own blog page and if you can see it. Otherwise, spending some time online can usually get you to their online home. Register for free at the homepage of Facebook.com, Xanga.com, or MySpace.com. Then use the site's "search" capability to find your town or school. You'll be flying through a Web of local kids' sites with familiar names and faces. Eventually, you should find what you're looking for.

Second, read carefully without overreacting. You'll probably find some things on these sites that are surprising and alarming. While some of it might be marked by exaggeration and embellishment, most depicts what's going on in kids' lives. Look for clues that will help you discover their problems, challenges, concerns, and struggles. Remember, you're looking through a window into their world.

Third, carefully and prayerfully prepare your response. Warn teenagers about Internet predators. Discuss what you've read with your kids. Assure them that your concern is motivated solely by your love and care for them. Most importantly, bring the light of God's Word to bear on kids' issues and struggles.