



SOCIAL MEDIA

Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.

ROMANS 12:2

Social media is a recent phenomenon that has introduced new challenges to both children and parents. Social networks exist to connect people with other people. And in many ways, this technology can serve to enhance our lives. But as many parents have discovered, the world of social media can easily prove distracting, or worse, become a catalyst for sinful behavior. With technology in constant flux and a lack of biblical instruction on the subject, it is easy to understand why so many parents are unsure about the best way to guide their kids through the complexities of social networking.

No one has all the answers to these questions. For this reason, we simply offer some basic guidelines and principles that are grounded in biblical wisdom.

THE GREENER GRASS ON THE OTHER SIDE

If you've spent any amount of time on social media, you may have an idea of the possible perils in the online friendship world. Some assume that social media is only guilty of being a major timewaster, but the actual dangers run much deeper.

Author Vicki Courtney relates the story of a mother whose 12-year-old daughter had begun cutting. Courtney writes:

The discovery came as a complete shock to the mother who said it was out of character for her daughter to engage in such a risky behavior. She was a straight-A student and involved in extracurricular activities. In addition to having two loving and engaged parents in the home, she also had many close friends and was involved in her church youth group.

The mother went on to share that after several counseling sessions, the root of the problem had been discovered. They had recently allowed their daughter to use a popular social media app with some time limitations and protective boundaries in place. She was required to keep her account private and give her mother her login information so her mother could monitor her activity from time to time. Even so, the mother didn't notice any unusual activity that might have triggered her daughter's cutting. And that was the problem. There were no comments that implied bullying.

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Nor was there any contact from a stranger making inappropriate requests. Her daughter confessed to the counselor that she began cutting herself because she felt worthless when she compared herself to everyone else's highlight reel. The triggers weren't obvious, but at the same time, they were out in the open for all to see.

Her daughter struggled to understand why some of her friends' pictures got more likes than her pictures. Or why some of the girls she thought were her friends didn't mutually follow her back. She was stressed over pictures of girls who she perceived to be prettier and more fashionable and had the comments and likes from the popular boys to prove it, or the pictures of some of her friends hanging out together, without her. She began to obsess over perfectly timed posts with witty status updates that might garner her more likes and followers, but it never seemed to be enough. The more time she spent on the app, the more worthless she felt.⁹

Social media fuels comparison and envy, especially for young people. It creates the illusion that there is always someone with a better life—a cuter boyfriend, better grades, prettier hair, a fancier car, or a better family. Even well-adjusted kids from loving, engaged families can fall victim to the empty promises on the other side of the screen.

The perfectly-timed and -filtered photos we post to social media provide a running stream of Hollywood highlight reels, which create a mirage of constant happiness. But most often, it is only a mirage. As parents, we must teach our kids to love and find joy in the real life God has given them, not the fake life that is carefully presented to digital followers.

POTENTIAL PITFALLS

Social media can easily distort reality or isolate the user. One way that you can prepare your kids to use social media well is to help them identify some of the potential pitfalls inherent to the world of online friendship.

Consider the following examples:

SOCIAL MEDIA IS NOT ALWAYS REALITY. These online networks allow people to present themselves in an ideal way—users highlight their best qualities and carefully omit any flaws. Obviously, there is more going on behind the scenes.

SOCIAL MEDIA FOSTERS LONELINESS. The online world gives the appearance of relationships, but many of those relationships don't transfer into real life. The more time they spend online, the more they prefer fake relationships to real ones.

SOCIAL MEDIA LEADS TO A LACK OF REAL, GENUINE CONNECTION WITH FLESH AND BLOOD PEOPLE. While social media gives us the ability to stay connected to many different groups of

people, it can put up a wall between us and those we see every day. Real relationships are hard. The more time your kids spend on social media, the more they lose the hands-on skills needed to be successful in their most important relationships.

SOCIAL MEDIA MISDIRECTS IDENTITY. One of the tragedies of frequent use of social media is the fact that it can quickly become a metric for evaluating one's worth. This is especially common among young people. More than simply comparing themselves to the friends and celebrities they follow online, social media users can become obsessed with the validation that comes from gaining likes and followers.

Make sure you and your child are aware of these pitfalls and have a plan to avoid them.

THE NEED FOR HUMAN CONNECTION

Although in theory our pre-teens and teenagers may be constantly connected to other people through social networks like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, they are still in desperate need of real, human interaction. Author and girls' ministry leader Erin Davis writes:

The teenagers in your world need a hug. They need eye contact. They need someone to sit across from them in an actual coffee shop and carry on a conversation without emojis. Since Titus 2 calls all of us to invest in the next generation, this is important news. We don't have to be cool. (Thank goodness!) We don't have to develop slick programs. We don't have to write or speak in teenager jargon. As we seek to disciple young people, the plan is simple: give

them what they crave, human connection, and then point them to Jesus. You can do that!¹⁰

As image-bearers of the Triune God, we are designed to live in relationship with one another. One of the best things you could do for your son or daughter today is to put away all the devices (theirs and yours) and just talk. No agenda. No script. Just conversation.

Sit down with your family and read Acts 2 where we see the kind of community experienced in the early days of the church.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.

ACTS 2:42

The church is described as a community that gathers together to worship, to pray, and to be encouraged by one another. Let the local church be the place where your children find community. They need to be there when God's people are gathered, to know and bear the burdens of their peers.

Carry one another's burdens; in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

GALATIANS 6:2

Study the Word together, and learn to pray for one another.

A HUMAN DIGNITY ISSUE

Our identity as God's image-bearers is absolutely crucial to every area of Christ-centered parenting. We are living, breathing representations of the Almighty God. Does this truth have an impact on what your kids

post on social media? Is their identity rooted in who they are online or who they are in Christ? Do they have a sense of identity that isn't based on someone else's social media presence? Do they treat people with dignity when they interact with them online?

Social media gives everyone the opportunity to be somebody, pushing our kids into a culture obsessed with fame. Anyone with a smartphone and an ounce of wit can be a celebrity online. Your kids are so much more than who they are on social media. This is only a small part of their identities. They are not defined by how many followers they have or how many people like their status. They are image-bearers of the living God.

A HEALTHY BALANCE

It will take great care and intentionality to make sure that social media plays an appropriate role in your child's life. One of the most important ways to do this is to balance social media use with other priorities. Start by promoting a sense of authentic, biblical community in your home. Share meals at the dinner table and discuss the issues weighing on your son or daughter's heart. Set aside family times that are private. Don't post every activity online. Make these times special for your kids.

If your child is using social media, continue to encourage him or her to spend time with friends that you trust. Invite those friends to your table to promote real, significant relationships in your child's life.

Keep a healthy perspective on social media. If it is causing anxiety in your children's life, then take a break. If it is promoting a negative view of self, delete it. Don't allow

social media to become an idol. Instead, keep their eyes set on the most important friend they have—the One who knows them inside and out and will never leave them or forsake them (Heb. 13:5).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Assess how social media is being used by members of your family. Is it healthy? Do you have a good understanding of the different platforms being used? Explain.
2. How are you doing at making face-to-face time with your child a priority? What changes can you make to increase this time?
3. How are you promoting authentic biblical community in your home?
4. What one thing stood out to you from this article?