

AlbertMohler.com

The Dangerous Worlds of Analog Parents with Digital Teens

Parents cannot be spectators in the lives of their children, but should set rules, establish expectations, enforce limitations, and constantly monitor their teenagers' digital lives. Anything less is a form of parental negligence.

Wednesday, December 8, 2010

Sunday's edition of *The New York Times* gave front-page attention to the problem of adolescent bullying on the Internet. There can be no question that the Internet and the explosion of social media have facilitated the arrival of a new and deeply sinister form of bullying, and the consequences for many teenagers are severe. For some, life becomes a horror story of insults, rumors, slanders, and worse.

Meanwhile, many parents are baffled about how to help — if they are not completely out to lunch.

As Jan Hoffman reports: "It is difficult enough to support one's child through a siege of schoolyard bullying. But the lawlessness of the Internet, its potential for casual, breathtaking cruelty, and its capacity to cloak a bully's identity all present slippery new challenges to this transitional generation of analog parents."

These "analog parents" are often vastly outgunned in terms of expertise with social media as compared to their digital offspring and their adolescent peers. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the bullies are winning the war.

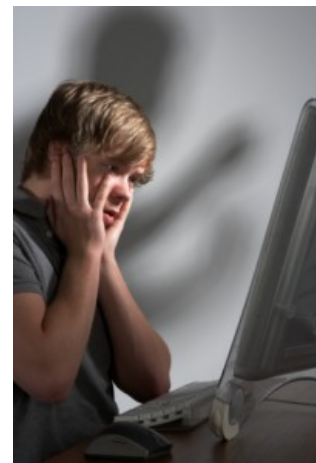
One New Jersey lawyer asked a room filled with seventh-graders if they had ever been "cyberbullied." Out of 150 students, 68 raised their hands. She then asked, "How many of your parents know how to help you?" Only three or four hands went up.

As the article reveals, many parents do not even seem to know that the "smart" phones they have given their children are actually mobile computers. Other parents seem oblivious to the fact that these devices both send *and* receive messages. Still others cling to a dangerous and irresponsible notion of adolescent privacy.

Parents must take control. Arming themselves with knowledge is the first step but summoning the courage to establish clear boundaries, rules, and consequences is of equal importance.

Just two weeks before the cyberbullying story, the paper ran another front-page article on the distracted nature of digital adolescents. Reporter Matt Richtel told of teenagers who were seemingly unable to do their homework and reading assignments, simply because they could not put away their digital devices.

For 17-year-old Vishal Singh, the book always seems to lose out to the computer. Representative of millions of his peers, Vishal feels much more at home in the virtual world of his digital life than in the real world, where books must be read, tests must be taken, and grades will be assigned.



Consider these paragraphs:

[Vishal] also plays video games 10 hours a week. He regularly sends Facebook status updates at 2 a.m., even on school nights, and has such a reputation for distributing links to videos that his best friend calls him a “YouTube bully.”

Several teachers call Vishal one of their brightest students, and they wonder why things are not adding up. Last semester, his grade point average was 2.3 after a D-plus in English and an F in Algebra II. He got an A in film critique.

“He’s a kid caught between two worlds,” said Mr. Reilly [his school principal] — one that is virtual and one with real-life demands.

Both Vishal and his mother agree that he lacks the self-control to turn off the computer and open the book. He is not alone. Richtel tells of Allison Miller, 14, who “sends and receives 27,000 texts in a month, her fingers clicking at a blistering pace as she carries on as many as seven text conversations at a time.” Sean McMullen, a 12th-grader, plays video games for four hours a day on school days and doubles that on weekends. These teenagers are not isolated cases — they represent what constitutes a new normal among American adolescents.

This sentence from the article is particularly haunting: “He [Sean] says he sometimes wishes that his parents would force him to quit playing and study, because he finds it hard to quit when given the choice.” Are they listening?

Both articles are worth a closer look, but the imperative to parents is clear enough. Parents of adolescents and young people cannot afford to be stuck in an analog world with outdated expertise, even as their offspring are digital natives living in an increasingly distracted and dangerous world.

Parents cannot be spectators in the lives of their children, but they should set rules, establish expectations, enforce limitations, and constantly monitor their teenagers’ digital lives. Anything less is a form of parental negligence.

When a teenage boy tells a newspaper reporter that he wishes his parents would force him to turn off his digital devices and do his homework, we can only wonder if his clueless parents will ever get the message.

The New York Times deserves credit for two truly important reports on the digital lives of America’s teenagers. These two reporters have been doing the work every parent of teenagers should have been doing all along.

The last word belongs to 16-year-old Katherine Nevitt, who wrote a letter to the editor in response to the Richtel article. She had decided on her own to limit her digital exposure and decrease her distractions. “I can only urge my fellow teenagers to do the same,” she wrote. “That is, the three of you reading this.”

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

Matt Richtel, “[Growing Up Digital, Wired for Distraction](#),” *The New York Times*, Sunday, November 21, 2010.

Readers Respond, “[Generation Text, Living on a Screen](#),” *The New York Times*, Thursday, November 25, 2010.

Jan Hoffman, “[As Bullies Go Digital, Parents Play Catch-Up](#),” *The New York Times*, Sunday, December 5, 2010.

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

