How to Keep Teenagers Safe Online

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Lessons I've Learned As a Leader in Cybersecurity

I'm a security nut; it's what I do for a living. I also happen to have kids; teenagers to be exact. So every time I attend a school event or present at an assembly, parents ask me the same question: how do I keep my kids safe online?

First, understand this: kids are like frogs on lily pads. They hop from one app to the next faster than parents will ever be able to keep up. They *are* the Internet of Things. They are not tethered to any one app, and if you take one thing away they'll just hop onto the next method of anonymous communication quicker than you can say "Snapchat".

Facebook is for "old people" (my daughter's words, not mine). Parents and grandparents are getting more comfortable signing up for Facebook so they can stay in touch with family and friends, which makes the platform much less attractive to kids. So realize that it's not just about monitoring one familiar platform; it's about having a much larger conversation. Here are a few key steps that I suggest every parent takes to ensure their kids leave behind a clean digital footprint.

Step One: Accept that you're not going to be able to keep your kids offline. Don't fight it. Instead teach them the rights and wrongs of online behavior. When I was young, my parents taught me not to steal. It's the same mentality in a digital age, only now we're teaching them not to share personal information such as a home address, cell phone number and inappropriate photos.

Step Two: Be familiar with your child's social media footprint. Be involved, know what apps they're using, and figure out how to track the ones that you're able to. Google your child every once in a while to see what comes up, connect with them on Twitter or Facebook, insist on having the password to their phones or iPads or have your fingerprint saved. Want to take it a step further? There are several Smart Phone spy software apps you can install. They may not like it, but at the end of the day, you pay the bills. They'll learn to deal.

Step Three: Talk with them about their futures. Early on, I explained to my son and daughters that they would never be able to run for President if there was an old high school picture of them online doing a keg stand or passing around a smoke. An Admissions Office recently told me that he spends about three minutes on an application, and takes five to examine an applicant's online profiles and activities. Everything that your kid does online is permanent - getting them to understand that fact is half the battle. To make matters even trickier, they can also be tagged in photos that can forever be associated with their name via a simple Google search. We live in a new digital world where everything is instantly documented. If you wouldn't want your future employer seeing it, perhaps rethink doing it.

Step Four: Don't let your kid be your help desk. This is the number one mistake I see parents make. When you don't take the time to educate yourself, your kids will outsmart you, guaranteed. Do not let your kid be the only family member who knows how to operate the home computer or iPad. Take the time to learn about your software options, so you're able to keep up and install the proper tools to keep them safe.

Bottom line: we can't stop kids from sharing their lives and communicating with friends outside of their school circle online. But, you can help them be safe and smart while they're doing it. Accept that this is going to become your second job, but it might just be the most important one that you have.