

# Common Sense on Digital Life: Our Kids' Connected Culture

## Some facts

- > 64% of teens engage in some type of content creation, like blogging
- > More than half of kids ages 8 to 12 will have cell phones within the next three years
- > 55% of teens have a social networking profile on a site like Facebook or MySpace

## Our kids use media differently

We may think of our kids' online, mobile, and technological activities as "digital life," but to them, it's just life. Their world is as much about creating media as it is about consuming it. Media devices have converged and become extremely powerful and portable. Phones aren't simply for phone calls but for listening to music, sending texts, filming videos, snapping and sharing photos, and accessing the Internet. Our kids use their computers, to do their homework, but they also use them to socialize, stream video, create movies and songs. And they can communicate or connect 24/7 from just about any location.

## What's at stake?

We want our kids to make great decisions so they can take advantage of the powerful technology that fills their lives. But in order to make good choices, kids must know how the digital world works. The very nature of their constantly connected culture means kids must understand the concept of privacy so that what they post and create won't hurt them or embarrass them at some point down the line. The fact that much of digital communication can be anonymous means that consequences can be separated from actions which can lead to irresponsible or disrespectful behavior. Much of the task of childhood involves figuring out who you are. But in digital life, anything said or posted can live on indefinitely and create undesired reputations.

The stakes are high because our kids' technological abilities can eclipse their maturity and judgment. Unrestricted access to information and people can mean age-inappropriate contact and content or it can mean a wealth of information and experience. The difference between a great experience and an iffy one lies in the decisions kids make. Just as kids learn to swim, eat properly, or drive a car, they need to know how to live in the digital world responsibly and respectfully. Their ultimate success depends on their abilities to use digital media to create, collaborate, and communicate well with others. Those who really know how to use digital tools will be able to harness their awesome power.

## Common Sense says:

**Teach kids the skills they need to use technology wisely and well.** It's hard to gate-keep in a world with no fences. Parents have lost control of the flow of information to our kids who see too much, too soon. We no longer hear conversations or see what our kids create and share with others. Since we cannot cover their eyes, or shadow them everywhere, we need to teach them how to see and how to behave responsibly.

**Keep an open mind.** We don't see the world the way our kids do. We don't help our kids when we judge their lives through the lens of a non-digital world. It's important for us to understand that our kids will spend their lives in a connected world where everyone participates in communication and creation.

**Don't be afraid.** Parents can't afford to be technophobic. Our kids adopt technologies faster than we do. That means they're often way out in front of us. This fact upsets the parent/child relationship. So get in the game. Have your kids show you how to do something if you don't know.

**Share wisdom.** Kids don't understand the implications of their actions. But we do. We have to remember to extend our basic parenting wisdom to the digital world. We teach kids to use their words, play nicely with others, respect their teachers – now we have to extend that to a vast, invisible world.

**Pass along your values.** One of the most important jobs of parenting is instilling in our kids the values we cherish. But in a world where actions are often divorced from consequences, where kids can be anonymous, and where they aren't face-too-face with the people they communicate our kids can lose their way. As parents, we have to be able to translate our values into the digital world and help kids understand the implications of their actions.

**Seek balance.** It's hard to know how much freedom to give our kids. We want them to explore, enjoy, communicate, and create. We also want to be sure they are protected or they know how to protect themselves. If our kids are going to thrive with digital media, we must balance the negative with the positive, privacy with protection. As our children grow, they need more independence and privacy. But parents have to be sure kids know how to be safe and responsible before letting them loose. Our kids need to see both the possibilities and the perils so they can act responsibly and seize all that is wondrous and have it enrich their lives as people and citizens.



Common Sense Media is an independent, non-profit resource that helps families and educators teach kids how to be safe and smart in today's 24/7 media world. Go to [www.common sense media.org](http://www.common sense media.org) for thousands of reviews and expert advice.

