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PARENT NETWORK UPDATE

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SPECIAL MIDDLE SCHOOL ISSUE ON
Social Media and Cyberbullying -- What Parents Need to Know

Today's kids are digital natives, and they are using technology for school and entertainment more than ever before. In Brookline, 46% of middle schoolers report using electronic devices for non-school related activity *more than three hours a day* (up from 33% in 2015). For many, smart phones have become a kind of social lifeline, a major connection to the world, whether it's texting, gaming, entertainment like YouTube and Netflix, or social media apps like Snapchat and Instagram, all of which can contribute to decreased personal interaction and diminishing social skills face to face. However, middle schoolers are too young to be fully aware of the dangers and consequences of certain kinds of internet behavior, and they can feel pressured to be connected 24/7 (FOMO – fear of missing out). Kids as young as 3rd grade use a range of sites and applications via both cellphone and computer. As parents, it can be tough to keep up with what our kids are doing online, and most of the time we tend to be a beat behind as they push the limits of screen time and what they can watch, play, download.

HOW DO KIDS USE SOCIAL MEDIA?

So what are Brookline middle schoolers doing electronically? Finsta (short for fake Instagram) and Snapchat are the middle school apps of choice for posting photos and snippets of info to share what they are doing any time of day, which can lead to risky behavior. Middle schoolers tend to share videos of inappropriate activities, like fights, or suggestive photos (sexting). Kids may think that sexting from the neck down is ok, since their face is hidden from view. However, suggestive photos can be traced back to the sender's IP (internet provider) address or IMEI (international mobile equipment identity) number and lead to charges of child pornography. (And if a parent owns the phone in question, that's the name that shows up on a subpoena for any illegal activity.) Even with Snapchat, which allows a ten second maximum time limit on how long a photo is displayed, a photo can be quickly copied and pasted to pass on to others, traceable forever. Snapchat now also offers a "for my eyes only" feature to 'hide' and store photos, similar to vault or ghost apps that are disguised as something else, like a game or calculator.

For messaging one another, kids sometimes use Instagram because it is easier to hide than texting, and they can delete messages before parents see.

Some middle schoolers also use a host of anonymous posting and/or question/answer platforms, which can lead to teasing, insults, and connections with strangers – Whisper, Kik, Sarahah (a modern day ask.fm), Omegle (an anonymous one-on-one chat app), Monkey (an app to connect strangers via video chat), and more. There are so many that parents now find it difficult to keep up.

Online gaming can present issues as well. When kids play games with people online, they could be playing internationally, connecting with predators, etc. Sometimes kids target other kids and talk inappropriately in each other's headset. It can quickly escalate to a power imbalance. To complicate

matters, new sites are cropping up every day. Just as we might get a handle on what kids are doing online, sites and apps become passé, with new ones to take their place.

HOW INTERNET USE CAN LEAD TO CYBERBULLYING

We've all seen bullying, maybe even been its victim at one time or another. Unlike a simple conflict, bullying has three characteristic elements:

- Some kind of power imbalance – size, strength, money, position, popularity (unfortunately, bullies tend to be very popular)
- It has to happen more than once – in legal terms, there have to be three documented incidents
- It makes someone sad or afraid

Those who aren't actively bullying often fall into one of two camps:

- Eggers – those who egg bullying on, joining in, laughing at jokes, ganging up, spreading rumors
- Bystanders – those who do nothing, who are perhaps too scared to stand up to a bully or too nervous to get help. Kids need to understand that by standing by, they help a bully continue by feeding his/her ego. By watching it happen, they give the bully an audience, without which he/she likely would stop.

Real world bullying, whether physical, social or emotional, is often perceivable – whether it's fighting after school, calling someone out, targeted exclusion or spreading an ugly rumor. Cyberbullying is more insidious, often playing out behind closed doors when a child is alone at a phone or computer. Cyberbullying is any kind of bullying by electronic means -- a tweet, photo, text message, email, etc. Anyone can be a target, though appearance, disabilities, race, status, and sexuality often are factors. Victims may even refuse help, deny incidents, or defend their abuser, feeling they are to blame.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

- **Be involved and proactive** -- talk to kids early and often about smart and respectful behavior on and off line. Talk about ethics, morality and healthy relationships, reminding them to "treat others as you would want to be treated." **Model** appropriate behavior in your own screen use.
- **Research age requirements** for games, online sites and apps you hear about. Know how they work and which ones your children use. Set up rules and restrictions – limits help kids feel safe. Consider an "internet contract." Make one condition that you can see their activity, like being their "friend" on Facebook – but be aware, they may have a separate account just for friends that you don't know about! Google your child's name to see what his/her electronic profile is.
- Encourage kids to **think before downloading** apps – certain games downloaded via Facebook provides access to their whole profile and all their friends' info as well. (It's the same with adults – coupon finders, etc. expose your contact and email info, making you a target for consumer blasts and identity theft. (Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg once said his goal in life is to collect everyone's information!) READ THE FINE PRINT!
- Get kids to **think before posting**, to ask themselves, "Do I want this out there forever?" Kids often act impulsively and don't understand possible consequences. Remind them not to post in anger.
- Reinforce that **anything on the internet can go viral** and **nothing is private** -- it stays online in some form or other forever (an eternal digital tattoo).
- **Monitor phone and computer use** -- consider keeping the computer in the family room and keep track of phone use. (You can contact your mobile carrier to manage devices, even getting deleted messages printed out for you.)
- **Be realistic** – while your kids may not come to you with issues, let them know you can help if anything troubling comes up. Ask what they are experiencing online. If you suspect your child might be the target of cyberbullying, you can have cell numbers blocked and use "block sender/user" and "report abuse" on many sites. Save any inappropriate messages/photos in case you need to pursue further action.
- If you know of any kind of bullying, on or off line, **get the facts and intervene**, but keep a cool head and **be a good role model** -- don't bully the bully. Work with the school/other parents over any incidents, and be there to help your child cope and move on.