

Raising Responsible Digital Citizens

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Today, there are over 37 million kids ages 3-17 that have access to the internet in the U.S. This reality has been ushered in as internet-connected devices become more plentiful and affordable. While kids have easier access to the internet at home, they increasingly need to access it for school. It is therefore paramount that parents, teachers and communities work together to teach kids how to be good digital citizens so that they use the internet in safe, positive and productive ways. However, with the arrival of new devices, apps and the range of their uses – risks and rewards inherent in all – teaching digital citizenship can seem like a daunting task. One way to approach this is to consider the different stages of a child's life with the internet, from pre-school through high school. Here are some guidelines parents and guardians can consider to support kids to become good digital citizens.

Pre-Kindergarten – Kindergarten

At this stage, it is important to carefully manage children's exposure to technology. It can be easy for parents and guardians to use digital devices as an "always there" babysitter. Children at this age are quickly absorbing the world around them; it's essential that they develop social skills and learn to be involved with the real world around them. Too much screen time can quickly turn into a bad habit, difficult to break as they age. Balancing their online time from the start is critical. Parents should also ensure that when kids are online they are exposed to content that is age-appropriate. There are many apps, sites and content available for this age range, and multiple ways to find them through search engines, app stores and parent and education websites. Some good resources to consider are Common Sense Media and SmartApps for Kids.

Elementary School

As kids enter grade school, they will have opportunities to start exploring apps, sites and devices so it's essential that parents embrace this. They will start to use technology more independently for school and social reasons, so it's important for parents to establish clear guidelines of how much time kids spend online for fun versus working on homework. One way is to have kids earn fun time online by helping around the house, reading a book or writing a letter.

This is the perfect time to talk to kids about the massive amount of content and people on the internet – and how some of it is good for them and some is not. Kids should

ideally use sites, apps, and services that are age-appropriate and safe. Parents should set rules about when, where, how long and with whom they are permitted to use internet-connected technology. They should also encourage kids to behave as if everything they do online – what they search, apps they play, sites they visit, things they post – is public and permanent. Even though there are ways to protect your privacy online, you never know who sees or knows what you're doing and could share it with others. If kids ever see anything that bothers them, they should always be able to turn to parents or caregivers for support. Lastly, parents should set good examples for their kids and behave the way they expect kids to behave online.

Middle School

By middle school, most kids have their own mobile phone or other device. For kids, this is quite liberating but for parents, it can be nerve-wracking. Kids should understand the privilege and responsibility of having their own phone since they are expensive and powerful tools that if lost, damaged, or used improperly could be costly to parents and kids. Prepaid phone options with no service contracts are a good way to ease everyone into the child's first phone. Giving a child a budget helps them think and prioritize how they want to use their phone, or internet connection, since they become aware that the money counts down with every use.

During this time, kids also begin to expand their relationships and communications through social media. Almost all social networks have a minimum age of 13. Once they begin getting immersed in social media, kids may need a lot of support and guidance as they come across different situations and content. As parents, it's best to try out social media ourselves – even it's just opening an account, following a few friends, and posting minimally – so we can understand how it works and have some idea of what our kids may be experiencing. It's a small investment in time with great benefit.

Parents should also help kids become critical thinkers of the content they see, interact with and post online. Kids should be taught social media literacy by learning to evaluate the quality and credibility of things they read or see and learn how (or if) to recognize and respond to a wide range of things such as peer interactions, biased news, persuasive advertising or deceitful hackers. Parents can support their kids by having regular conversations about what they are reading or hearing about online, encouraging them to trust their instincts and reject or ignore anything they feel is questionable or suspicious, and being a strong source of support they can turn to when they need it.

High School

In high school, students may still face some of the things they did as middle schoolers but in my experience, they have become more aware and wise – either from personal experience or learning from others. High school students also begin to look forward, considering how their past online behavior may affect their future. At this stage, they also have the opportunity to showcase their skills, accomplishments, and aspirations in a way that can project a positive image. Parents of teens should encourage their kids to be creative and demonstrate that they are adept at using the internet beyond just texting, playing Pokémon Go, or binge-watching Netflix. Teens who wish to pursue college, careers, or other post-high school programs will need to use the internet for submitting applications, researching jobs, or connecting with recruiters. But they can go beyond this and use the internet in fun and productive ways such as starting a Facebook page to raise awareness for a cause kids care about, volunteering to manage social media for a local organization, or even making public service awareness or educational videos on a range of topics important to them. Parents can support this by reminding kids that keeping things off the internet is wise, but showcasing good uses of the internet are equally vital to their future, too.

Today's digital landscape offers young people unprecedented access to things that previous generations never had. While the internet presents enormous opportunities for them, it is coupled with risks they need to be aware of and know how to respond to, with the support of the adults in their lives. Teaching kids how to be good digital citizens has never been more imperative. As parents, we need to be interested and involved in the way the internet can and does impact our kids' lives and help them to be safe, positive, and productive online so they can both flourish and ultimately master it for the sake of their futures.



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