



## **Protecting Tweens and Teens from Adult Content in the Digital Age**

By Barbara Rosenberg, PhD

In many communities, it is commonplace for pre-teens or “tweens” to have mobile phones. And, as they are spending more and more time connecting with each other online, parents may be unsure where to draw the line between safe technology use and healthy social connection. Kids feel pressure to not be left out, and parents really do not want this to happen to their kids either.

However, among such challenges, the Internet makes pornography more accessible and prevalent than any time in history. In her 2016 book, *Girls and Sex*, journalist Peggy Orenstein writes that 40% of all kids between the ages of 10 and 17 have been exposed to online pornography, many times accidentally.

Sexual material can be very confusing and even frightening for a 12-year-old. In this situation, I would suggest openly talking with the 12-year-old about her thoughts, understanding, and feelings about the photos. This creates an opportunity to help her understand sexuality in an age-appropriate and healthy way. Talking with a child, as opposed to being punitive or creating fear and shame, would encourage the necessary parental talk about “the birds and the bees” that helps satisfy a child's natural curiosity about sex.

The overabundance of sexual images in the media and easy access to online pornography can provide distorted perceptions about healthy relationships and sexuality. Although it is entirely appropriate for tweens and teens to want to explore romantic relationships, young people may easily confuse true emotional intimacy with nudity and sexual intercourse. They may be inclined to send nude or suggestive photos of themselves to someone they like, not realizing the consequences of their choices if such photos are shared.

Without parental guidelines and limit setting, most tweens and teens cannot safely navigate these issues on their own. As the use of social media becomes increasingly widespread, kids may face situations they are unprepared to handle. As an example, a child may be sent an inappropriate sexual image and then be asked to share that image with others.

Much of what a parent can do to help kids use technology in safe and healthy ways is basically using good parenting skills, such as ongoing conversations about how to make good choices when using social media. A parent really must talk with their child about the consequences of their actions when they post, message, text, or share images.

Also, parents themselves need to become well versed in mobile apps and the language of social media so they can talk openly and knowledgably with their kids. Popular apps and messaging tools like Instagram and Snapchat are constantly changing. Parents must stay informed about the minimum age to use, features, and percentage of users under age 18. Additionally, parents should discuss the potential dangers in a child hiding apps and social media accounts, as sexually explicit material can sometimes be accessed through them.

In such cases, monitoring your child's safety will be more important than respecting his or her privacy. It may be necessary to keep track of passwords and newly downloaded apps as well as to randomly check photos and other files stored on a child's cell phone. Safety must be the first priority for a middle schooler, and parents should feel comfortable having 24-hour access to their child's phone and passwords.

In her recently published book, *Social Media Wellness: Helping Tweens and Teens Thrive in an Unbalanced Digital World*, Ana Homayoun writes that how parents talk to their children has the most powerful impact on them making proactive and prosocial decisions about social media and technology use.

She advocates parents working collaboratively with tweens and teens so they learn to use social media in a way that promotes healthy, responsible behavior and good values in both online and real-life communities. In addition to encouraging a balance of online time with enjoyment of off-line activities, this would prompt kids to speak up if they see uncomfortable online images and behaviors. When parents work together with their kids around such goals, teens and tweens will think twice before lying and sneaking around.

Parents also should keep in mind that they model appropriate technology behavior for their children. Adults have to set good standards. If parents are texting while driving or replacing family time with their own excessive social media use, kids will have difficulty trusting them. Of course, without trust, the follow through in collaboration and cooperation between parents and kids will be less successful.