

Social Media: A Double Edge Sword

Social media is evolving fast and it is almost impossible to reject and hide from this new form of media. Not only is it an important part of socialization within peer groups but it is seen as a tool for group conformity and peer acceptance. A web site that allows social interaction is considered a social media site, including social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter; gaming sites and virtual worlds such as Club Penguin, Second Life, and the Sims; video sites such as YouTube; and blogs. Such sites offer today's youth a portal for entertainment and communication and have grown exponentially in recent years.

Social media sites can be accessed from laptops, desktops and mobile phones.

The penetration of social media usage spiraled with the increase in the availability of smart phones.

Mobile phone ownership rate in India is 57%. Children acquire their first mobile phone around the age of 15.

The mobile internet usage is about 18% and about 76% of children use social networking on mobile phones.

About 14% of children access the internet. Indian children are the most careful in their privacy settings for social networking services, with only 10% of children having public profiles.

Approximately 60 to 80% of parents have concerns about their children's use of mobile phones and are concerned about the length of time their children spend on mobile phones.

Psychologically children have limited capacity for self-regulation and are susceptible to peer pressure which leads them to experiment and make them vulnerable to cyber bullying, privacy issues, sexting, internet addiction and chronic sleep deprivation.

Aligning to this, UNICEF last September published a report on "Child Online Protection in India Report". Keeping in mind the challenges of children's usage of internet and social media, the chairman of NCPCR, Stuti Kacker stated that "it is an important step in the direction of child online protection and safety and will go a long way in improving child online protection measures in our country."

This report is a valuable resource for stakeholders and elaborates on the threats that children may face online such as cyberbullying, sexual abuse, 'grooming' and manipulation to engage in illegal activities.

Even though these days parents are comfortable and capable of using social media, at times they may find it difficult to relate to their digitally savvy children for several reasons.

At times parents lack a basic understanding of these new forms of socializations, which have become an integral part of a child's life.

Keeping in view that social media may be helpful in boosting a child's self-esteem, creativity, general knowledge, respect for other people's opinions and offers an alternative way of socializing, it is essential that parents and teachers play a pivotal role in monitoring social media usage.

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HOW CAN PARENTS MONITOR SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE

- Talk to their children and adolescents about their online use and specific issues that kids may face online.
- Parents need to keep themselves abreast with the latest internet content that children are likely to connect to.
- Discuss online topics that children are browsing.
- Keep a check on privacy settings and online profiles for inappropriate posts. Parents should focus on healthy behaviour and not engage in punitive action unless it's extremely essential.
- Educate children that people whom they find on social media may not be reliable.
- Keep all lines of communication open with children and assure your availability. This will enable a child to report any trouble that they may face.
- Make sure that child has access to only age appropriate online sites which promote ethical behaviour.

- Always ensure that the child has access to computer placed at home.
- Parents can explore the online world together with the child and engage in interesting activities demonstrating ethical and safe online behaviour.
- Parents are the first role models for children. Parents need to maintain caution about their own online activities.
- Parents need to observe the child's behaviour closely and be on alert for any unusual changes like moodiness, lack of sufficient communication, lack of interest in studies or leisure activities, declining grades, and change in sleeping patterns.

WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO AND WHAT IS THEIR ROLE

- Monitor the behaviour of each and every child.
- Monitor each child's performance. Constant falling grades and change in social behaviour will need intervention.
- They should look for anti-social behaviour, and personally talk to children who don't interact with other children or tend to spend activity time alone.
- If the teacher finds the behaviour of any child suspicious or alarming then she should inform the school authorities and the school counsellor immediately.
- Teachers and school authorities should ensure that no child carries any gadgets to school.
- Regular sensitization programmes informing students about the pros and cons of social media and Internet should be conducted.

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