

4 Tips to Confronting Your Child's 'Ugly' Online Life

In a previous article, "3 Tips to Preserving Your Kid's Online Life," I suggested to engage in your kid's online life, enlist support and encourage communication. But what happens if you discover a problem? What would you say? What's the approach?

Let me answer this after sharing a true story.

Recently, I took a minute to engage in my daughter's social media activity. I noticed one of her Instagram friend's screen name was "Sexy Betsy" (not the actual name). Sexy Betsy is the 14-year-old daughter of a dad I know and was posting photos of herself in racy attire. I wondered if her dad knew how his daughter was portraying herself and if she realized how her images affected men, young and old, with lustful desire.

So I enlisted the help of a friend who was in the same small group of this dad to share the material with him. He was blindsided with the unfortunate news, and within a week "Sexy Betsy" was renamed Betsy MacIntyre and the revealing photos were taken down.

I noticed one of her followers posted a comment: "Hey, what happened to Sexy Betsy?" Betsy replied, "It's a long story."

I'm not sure how Betsy's dad confronted her with this situation, but guessing by her response, it didn't go down so smoothly. So here are a few suggestions for what to do if you find out something "ugly" about your kid's life online:

1. Don't feel stupid. Be thankful you found out. I'm guessing Betsy's dad felt embarrassed, then dispensed an anger-ridden reaction that led to some kind of punishment explained as "consequences" for poor behavior.

Let me caution us dads to avoid this reaction. Instead, be thankful that you are now aware of the situation and the danger your child, perhaps unknowingly, faces. Knowing the battle is half the battle. Now you can do something about it.

2. Have the talk like Jesus would. Would Jesus angrily dish out punishment, take away privileges and expect children to eagerly accept the consequences as a learning opportunity? No.

First, He would confirm His love for the person He's talking to. Say something like, "Before we get into this topic, I am [or 'your mother and I are'] crazy about you. We love you. We want the best for you and know God is working His good plan for you. We also know there is an enemy who wants to destroy you and us. Do you understand?"

Now the table is set. Jesus spoke with grace and truth. He was authentic, affirming and accepting. So you do the same. Your tone should be calm, comfortable and confident that you know where this is going and what to do.

Next—and this is the key to leading by *conviction*, not *consequences*—refer to your family values so your child recalls what is important to you as the leader, what you endorse and what is not acceptable. In my family, it's "We love God. We help people."

Open a discussion about what that looks like online. Provide examples for what is acceptable, even encouraged. And demonstrate examples that cross the line. Now you can inform your child about what you learned about their behavior online. Ask, "Does this show love for God or help people?"

The beauty of this approach is that now you are having a conversation about your convictions and related behaviors—not a tirade about disappointment. Instead, ask your child to brainstorm ideas about how you and they can fix this situation.

This is what I call “discipline without discouragement” and “teaching through conviction, not consequences.”

3. Offer mutual accountability. Ask your child what they would think and feel if they found something “ugly” about their dad online. If they saw him posting pics of himself with hardly any clothes on and with him in a suggestive pose, would that show he loves God and helps people? Obviously not—and it’s a little weird thought, right?

Offer your child to hold you accountable online as well. Say, “You can call me on the carpet if you find something inconsistent with our conversation tonight.” Because you don’t want to misrepresent what you believe or compromise your faith and love for your family, so ask for their help.

4. Provide more time, talk and touch. Model Christ’s example to spend more time with your kids, talking about life and staying connected through touch. This sends your kids a message that they don’t need to look for attention or another male influence. Many dads today have to relearn this, being disciplined to carve out time to be alone with their children.

Don’t be in hurry with your kids. Often quality time results from quantity time. In other words, special memories don’t always occur during scheduled appointments. They arrive unsuspected over time.

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