

Culture Expert Offers Advice for Helping Your Teen Navigate the Dangerous Digital World

In a world where young people devote almost 9 hours a day to digesting entertainment media—six hours of this interacting with screens—who is giving them guidance on how to navigate this digital world and post wisely?

Nielsen research labels age 10 the “mobile adoption sweet spot” because the average age a child gets a smartphone today is 10.3 years old; yet less than 50 percent of parents actually engage their kids in conversation about what they’re posting, who they friend and what they’re streaming. Most kids embark into this digital world with very little guidance.

We recently caught up with teen culture expert Jonathan McKee about his newest book, *The Teen’s Guide to Social Media ... & Mobile Devices* (Shiloh Run Press, October 2017).

Q: This is a book for teens, yet you begin the book with “a note to Mom or Dad screening this book” with some quick tips about parenting the “Smartphone Generation” and how parents can use this book to engage their kids in discussion about their use of technology. What kind of feedback have you received from parents about this so far?

A: I couldn’t write a book like this without first addressing Mom, Dad, Auntie, Grandma—whoever most likely bought the book for a kid they love. So while I have the attention of this caring adult, I use the opportunity to give them a handful of practical tools to help them navigate this parenting journey raising someone from the “Smartphone Generation.” I had about 50 parents and youth workers screen this book before it went

to press. Most of them were really happy I included discussion questions at the end of each chapter to discuss what their kid just read. They were extremely excited to get this resource into the hands of their kids. In fact, some even said it would be their new “phone contract” for their kids—having their kids read and discuss before getting that new mobile device.

Q: Your approach in this book is curious in that you don’t tell young people what to do; instead, you give them the facts so they can have the information to make wise choices. Do you think this approach will be effective?

A: It’s the same approach I’ve used while speaking to teenagers in school assemblies. Most kids aren’t excited about some adult telling them how they should live their life, but those same kids are open to listen to real-life stories about a subject they’re actually interested in—like the devices they know and love. Most young people are intrigued when I tell them the history of Snapchat in Chapter 10, one of their favorite apps, and they’re both informed and entertained in Chapter 17 when I share about an experiment by *Car and Driver* magazine where researchers actually served people alcohol and tested their reaction times in a simulator, comparing those reaction times to sober drivers texting and driving. The results were eye-opening! These stories speak loudly to kids, providing them with memorable information that shapes the choices they are making out on their own when Mom and Dad aren’t standing over their shoulder.

Q: One of your early chapters is all about privacy settings, encouraging young people to know “who’s peeking at you.” How do you think today’s kids will receive this message?

A: Most kids don’t think twice about safeguards like privacy settings, but they are curious when they hear stories of stalkers like the creepy guy I talk about in Chapter 2 who used the location information in young girl’s posted pics to break into their houses and steal their underwear. Literally.

This anecdotal approach makes them just curious enough to check their settings and see exactly who's "peeking at them."

Q: Know the app before you snap—your chapter about Snapchat. What is your advice to young people in this chapter about what is most likely their favorite app?

A: Many kids use Snapchat innocently, but few understand the reality of the ephemeral nature of the app. Snapchat was built on the notion that the pics disappear, but many have discovered the hard way that the pictures were far more permanent than they originally thought. In fact, in 2014 the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), in its efforts to ensure that companies market their apps truthfully, actually charged Snapchat for deceiving its users. Bottom line: there is no miracle app that allows you to post whatever you want without consequences. So my advice to young people is simple: Don't post anything you wouldn't want the whole world seeing.

Q: Posting pics is a huge part of teen culture today. Tell us a little about your advice in the book, "Don't post pics you wouldn't want Grandma, your boss and Jesus seeing!"

A: It happens all the time. Boy asks girl to send him a sexy pic. Girl sends pic. Eventually guy and girl break up. Guy shows pic to everyone. Girl regrets taking pic in the first place. Here's where the world's advice differs from my advice. The world warns us, "Be careful what you allow someone to film." Personally, I don't think this is very good advice, simply because I've read countless stories of people who didn't even realize they were being filmed or recorded. Here's a better piece of advice: Live your life in such a way that people can't accuse you of anything. It's not even my advice. It's from I Peter 2:15. It's basically saying, "Be careful how you live."

Imagine if we lived our lives as if everything were being filmed. {eo}

Jonathan McKee is the founder of , a popular youth ministry website which averages 550,000 page views monthly and an average of 130,000 users each month. Jonathan also founded the “sister site” to his youth ministry website, , which is focused on providing free resources, advice, and help for parents. He is a regular contributor to various websites and blogs, including , , Youth Specialties, , , and many more.