

5 TIPS TO PREPARE YOUNG PEOPLE FOR SOCIAL MEDIA



This is the first of a series of articles by Anne McCormack on preparing young people for social media. Anne is a Psychotherapist and Irish Times contributor. Her first book on the topic of social media will be published later this year.

Social Media

By Anne Mc Cormack

Young people spend a lot of time on social media. And in preparing them for it, parents usually advise them on how to keep safe (not posting any identifying information etc) and to tell if someone is bullying them. But once young people get access to social media, it quickly becomes a big part of their world and so the preparation for this cyber world needs to be much more robust. Young people say they will enjoy social media and they have an expectation that it will be fun. But it is not always fun and times can get tough for them online. Their mental health as well as their physical safety can be impacted by what happens them online. They need time before ever they go online to gain knowledge about the fact that difficult situations could arise for them. The first tip in preparing young people for social media is this:

1. Talk to them about their expectations as to what it might be like.

Social Media is how young people connect with the world and with each other. They can feel free online to say things to others that they might not feel as comfortable saying to their face. And this is part of what creates the context for young people doing or saying something that may be hurtful or upsetting to some other. Often online, people say things with no intention of being mean or upsetting to another and yet, there is no way of knowing really how another person is interpreting an action you take, unless you take the time to check this out. Because of the stage of psychological development young people going onto social

media are at, they tend to see things a lot, just from their own point of view. Therefore, they would not be thinking of how something might cause another to feel, unless they are specifically trained to do this. Step two is the following:

2. Talk to your child about how important it is to consider the impact of their words or behaviours on social media, on other people.

Social Media can be a source of much anxiety for young people. This is because the social media world has become one of the main mechanisms through which young people work out their identity; i.e. who they are and what they are worth. They come to depend on feedback from peers online to answer questions such as 'Am I popular, am I liked' and therefore 'Am I of worth'. But social media feedback is too narrow a filter for anyone to work out their worth. Even the most confident adults would feel their self-esteem falter if they were depending so much on positive feedback for validation. Tip three for preparing young people for social media is to

3. Check with them what they think about the idea of their own self-worth.

Young people begin to face the psychological task known as identity formation around the same time that they begin to use social media. In their mind they grapple with questions such as 'What is my identity/ Am I a person of worth?' but young people don't know these questions are there, because they are in the unconscious part of their mind.

How these questions are being answered throughout adolescence is being impacted by what is happening to them online. It is better for young people to know about this psychological task as knowledge is power. It is in their unconscious mind and by talking to them about it; it brings it into the conscious mind where they have awareness. Tip four is:

4. Start to make what is unconscious (hidden) conscious (known)

Social media sites can be used as a place to 'perform'. People post the best of what they wish others to see, the social media site becomes like a stage. Young people can be helped by thinking of social media in this way right from the very beginning. What others post is often (although not always) 'performance', whether that is selfies of the stars or selfies of their classmates. People go on social media, make public what it they want others to see and wait for the reaction of the 'audience'. If the audience reacts well, it makes the performer feel good but it does not make the person who 'performed' any better or worse than anyone else. How an audience reacts is outside of the performer's control. But what they can control is how they interpret the reaction. Young people can take more ownership of how they interpret people's reactions to them on social media when they begin to understand the context of performance. Tip five is:

5. Talk about how social media sites can often be used by others as a place to perform and then get feedback on that performance.

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www.annemccormack.ie