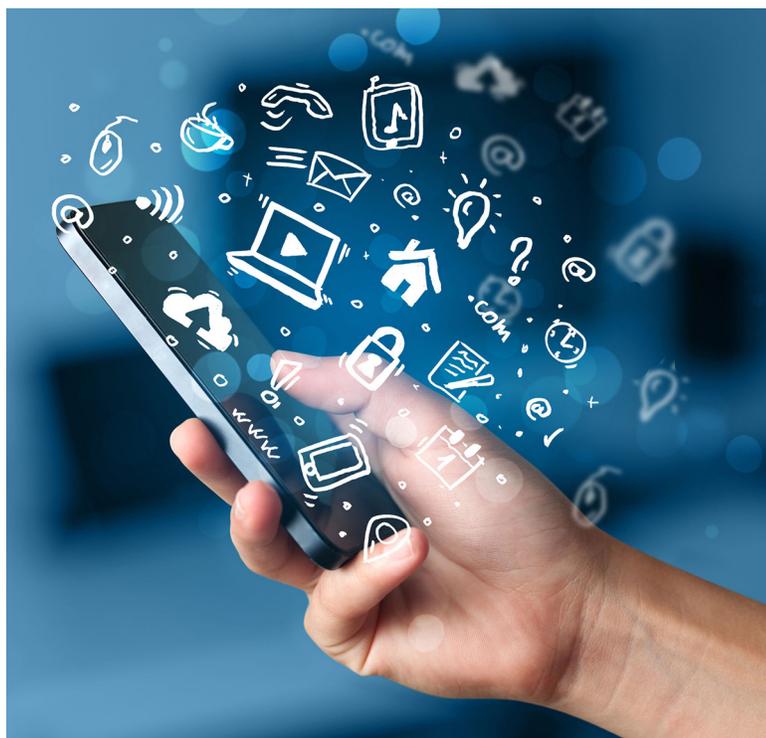**Parent Tips**

Good Apps, Bad Apps

Good Apps, Bad Apps

"Which apps are okay for my kids to use?" *Or* "Which apps are bad?"

At the end of every one of my parenting workshops a mom or dad will undoubtedly raise their hands and ask, "Which apps are okay for my kids to use?" Or "Which apps are bad?"

It's not a stupid question. I've asked it myself. Sadly, technology is changing so fast, the second I answer this question... my response becomes dated. The moment someone posts a list, a new dangerous app will emerge.

But what would you rather have, a list of suitable vs. objectionable apps, or the ability to spot scary elements within any app? Let's face it. It's hard to keep up! The moment we got used to Facebook our kids were already telling us Vine was so "yesterday." How can we expect to keep current, especially with the mobile venues our kids enjoy navigating?

What makes a good or a bad app?

Here are five elements parents need to understand to help teach their kids responsible app discernment:

1. Privacy Settings
When your 13-year-old daughter posts an Instagram pic of her slumber party, can the 42-year-old, harry, naked man living in his mother's basement down the street from you look at her pics?

This is why it's important to teach our kids about 'privacy' settings. These are the settings that most apps provide which allows a user to let their content be seen by either everyone, or only "friends/followers." Some apps have a default setting for 'public' and the user need to proactively search how to set it to 'private.'

According to a recent McAfee "Teens and the Screen" study,* only 61% of young people have enabled their 'privacy' settings on their social network profile. Parents need to teach their kids to only use social media and apps that actually provide 'privacy' settings, and they should always have them set to 'private.'

But these settings don't do much good if we don't teach them about...

2. Stranger Danger

When our kids were in Kindergarten we taught them, "Don't talk with strangers." But the Internet provides a false sense of security where kids not only feel safe, but are actually encouraged by some social media sites to, "talk to strangers!" (like Omegle.com—a place you don't want your kids, period.) The scary part of this is the fact that many kids end up telling strangers too much. According to that same McAfee report above, over half of young people don't turn off their location services, leaving their location visible to strangers (more on this in a moment). 14% of young people end up even posting their home address to strangers.

I encourage parents to teach their kids, "If you haven't met them in real life, you don't chat with them." Is every stranger a pedophile? Not at all. But I've personally seen countless teens get themselves, hurt, in trouble—even in danger—when the person they were chatting with online turned out to be someone else (Doug Fields and I wrote more about this in our book, Should I Just Smash My Kids' Phone? at TheSource4Parents.com)

This is one of those areas young people think is 'no big deal.' Video games, for example, offer the ability to play live with people from around the world. Have you ever heard the way people talk during these sessions? It's like a middle school locker room when the gym teacher is out of the room. This is because most of these settings offer...

3. Anonymity

Young people are attracted to anonymity for two reasons. One, many of today's young people have a low self esteem and they find the Internet a place of acceptance. Sadly, this is hindering their ability to communicate and engage in interpersonal relationships in the real world. Two, anonymity creates a lack of accountability. Have you ever noticed how mean people are in comment sections? It's because no one knows who jackwad69 is.

Parents need to teach their kids that their digital conversations will be held accountable, not only in this world (ask Hilary Clinton), but by a God who sees what is unseen by others.

But it's not only our conversations that might come back to haunt us...

4. Not-so-disappearing Pics

Thank the people at SnapChat for creating this one, an app with disappearing pics. Sadly, the pics don't always disappear. Google "Do Snapchat pictures disappear?" You'll get the whole story. But the simple truth is nothing is temporary on the Internet.

Young people love the "ephemeral" element of Snapchat. They don't have to 'post' anything in places Mom or Dad can find, and there's no text trail. It appears momentarily, then it's gone... or is it?
Sadly, countless young people have sent content they thought was not only private, but temporary, only to find out later that it was screenshotted and still "out there." Not to mention the fact that Snapchat creators have had their hands slapped for not only deceiving people about exactly how temporary those pics are, but for collecting information about the user without their permission.
Help your kids understand a simple truth: never post anything you wouldn't want Mom, Dad, your future boss, grandma and your entire school to see.

5. Location Services

Earlier I mentioned that over half of young people don't even turn off their location services. This is the setting that allows others to see where your kids are posting from. This is fun if your kids are with you on a family vacation to Chicago and they post a pic from the top of the John Hancock building. This isn't so smart if your 17-year-old is studying late at Starbucks and posts a pic of her empty coffee cup with the caption, "No more fuel to keep me awake for my late night study session! Calling it quits soon!" Remember that harry naked guy down the street from you? Thanks to your daughter posting her exact location, now he knows exactly which parking lot to park his paneled van.
Help your kids understand how to turn off location services for their apps as a default. You'd be surprised how many kids post pictures from home not even thinking twice that they're also posting exactly where that picture was taken.

Sit down with your kids calmly and talk about some of these issues. Browse the apps your kids have. Read them a paragraph from an article like this and ask them, "Is he right?" Make it a dialogue, not a monologue. Are you having these conversations with your kids?

JONATHAN McKEE is the author of over a dozen books including Get Your Teenager Talking and 52 Ways to Connect with Your Smartphone Obsessed Kid. He speaks to parents and leaders worldwide, all while providing free help for parents on TheSource4Parents.com

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