

Wired Shut? Teens in Their Own High-Tech World

By Annie Finnigan

With teens connected 24-7 to cell phones, computers and one another, many parents feel they're being tuned out. The solution? Get smarter about your kids' high-tech bubble and you won't have to stay on the outside looking in.

Wired Shut?

When my daughter Gracie was 15, I did what experts say you should never do: I set up a computer in her bedroom. I was sure that my kid, a book lover who shuns the phone and TV, would go online only, say, to research her AP history paper. How wrong I was. Late one night I heard clicking coming from her room. I nudged open the door and saw her at her desk. "What are you doing?" I asked. "Nothing!" she snapped as she shut off the computer. "Just checking my MySpace page." What, my kid a MySpace cadet? I could hardly wait until morning to snoop around her site after she left for school. Sure enough, there was the choir girl who still slept with her blankie, flashing major décolletage and cooing, "I'm not as innocent as I seem!" Throbbing in the background was the song "Cocaine." I did what any mom would do -- I freaked. "Everyone can see the stuff you put up! College-admissions officers. Cyberstalkers!" I told her when she came home. "I can't believe you looked at my page without asking," she said, as if I'd read her diary. We went at it for an hour -- the most heated argument we'd ever had. Gracie agreed to take down the provocative photo and theme song, but it was a bittersweet victory. She was shedding her little-girl skin and trying on a new, secret self -- and I had been oblivious to it.

Perpetually plugged in to computers and cell phones, our kids are coming of age in a tech bubble, a members-only world where grown-ups aren't welcome and our old-school rules don't apply. And if you're like me, you worry. Isn't all that IMing making them rude and antisocial? Do they know the difference between Wikipedia and a real encyclopedia? The risks of baring their innermost selves online?

Fact is, for all its drawbacks, tech has a powerful upside. "It's teaching kids essential skills for the future, encouraging self-expression and creativity, and providing unprecedented peer support," says Justine Cassell, PhD, director of the Center for Technology and Social Behavior at Northwestern University. See what your kids are really up to in their wired world -- and learn how to cross the digital divide to get closer to them.

The Truth About Face Time

Why we worry: Chatting nonstop on computers and cell phones, our kids are interacting less often with friends and family, and losing the ability to sustain meaningful relationships.

Relax. The reality is: e-mailing, TMing, and IMing aren't making teens antisocial -- just the opposite, experts tell me. "These technologies build relationships," says communications professor Jeffrey Cole, PhD, director of the Center for the Digital Future at the University of Southern California, in Los Angeles. "Since 2000 we've seen that Internet users are spending the same amount of time with their families and more with friends." Sherry Turkle, PhD, a sociologist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was even more comforting. "Cell phone culture has tethered kids and parents so they're talking more than ever," she says.

Still, get smart by: encouraging your kids to call only when it's urgent -- and save the conversation for when they're face-to-face. "Adolescents are continually checking in with friends and family, sharing feelings before they have a chance to reflect on them," says Turkle. "For teens to create a personal

identity, they need to focus inward." Flattered as I am when Gracie speed-dials me for fashion advice, I'm going to start backing off, letting her decide which platform shoes are the coolest.

What They're Really Learning About Online

Why we worry: Kids are plugging in to all the wrong things: time-wasting sites like Quizilla! ("What Horror Picture Are You?"), blogging venues where they blather on about nothing, and YouTube videos showing kids doing stupid pranks and worse, like huffing inhalants.

Relax. The reality is: the Internet offers an educational experience kids can't get anywhere else. Nearly 60 percent of teens who go online post something they've created -- a song, home movie, or full-length novel -- according to the Pew Internet & American Life Project. And they can get props from peers across the country and around the world, which "encourages them to think as individuals," says Henry Jenkins, PhD, co-director of the Comparative Media Studies Program at MIT. I used to fret that "Internet-ese," with all those acronyms and emoticon symbols (you know, like those little smiley faces), might vanquish Gracie's verbal skills. Silly me. "Kids haven't put away standard English -- they've become, in effect, bilingual," says Cassell. That has some surprising brain benefits. "Bilinguals can function better while distracted," she adds. "They view the world through two lenses, not one."

Still, get smart by: helping protect fragile egos, since the feedback kids get can be negative and downright nasty. Anyone who stars in his own YouTube video, for instance, risks being slammed about his hair, his body, even his sexuality. Tell your kids to ignore online bullying and give them a lesson in constructive criticism by logging on to sites like metacritic.com and pointing out thoughtful reviews versus moronic ones. Have them read the Blogger's Code of Conduct (blogging.wikia.com) to make sure they mind their own manners when they're dishing it out.

Too Much Information?

Why we worry: Tech gadgets are distracting our multitasking teens, who listen to iPods, Web surf, and IM their buddies while doing their homework. Plus, they're bombarded with too much data, which is frying their brains.

Relax. The reality is: our children are learning how to work and think in a complex digital age. "Information is coming at us from all sides, and we have to be able to make sense of it on the fly," says Jenkins. "If kids can tune in to only one thing at a time, they'll be dysfunctional in the workplace." Even Russell Poldrack, Ph.D., the psychology professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, whose recent study showed that people learned best when zeroing in on one thing at a time, is encouraging. "All the science is being done on people who grew up in a very different world than kids today," he says. "It could well be that if you start multitasking at a young age, you'll end up with a brain that works differently and efficiently."

Still, get smart by: learning when to cut your kids some slack when they're doing things like studying while taking IMs or phone calls. Work with your teen and experiment a bit. For example, I've found that Gracie can ace her algebra while plugged in to her iPod, but she can't get a grip on her U.S. history while listening to music. Monitor homework, and if they're struggling with something new or particularly brain-puzzling, insist that they hit the books and nothing else. "Multitasking isn't going to take the place of paying close, focused attention," says Jenkins. "Kids have to be able to do both."

The Cyber Social Scene

Why we worry: Networking sites like Facebook and MySpace bring out the worst in our kids, who try on bad-girl or bad-boy personas in a venue that every college-admissions officer and job interviewer can see. Worse, the sites make them vulnerable to sexual predators.

Relax. The reality is: striking sexy poses and experimenting with different identities is part and parcel of adolescence, and the Internet is a relatively safe environment for doing so, says Cassell. What's more, the prevalence of tech may well have made our teens smarter about fending off online stalkers. The percentage of kids reporting sexual solicitations has declined since 2000, from 19 percent to 13 percent, according to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Part of the reason is that more than half of teens with personal pages know not to post their full names and addresses. They also use a privacy feature that grants full access only to those they've invited to be their "friends" -- almost always people they know directly or who've been referred by a mutual acquaintance. As a result, says Cassell, "teens can spot suspect adults immediately and just ignore them."

Still, get smart by: constantly reminding your teens and especially tweens about online risks. Make sure

they know that what goes up, stays up -- forever. You can drive the point home by showing them the Wayback Machine (internetarchive.org), which crawls the Web, archiving billions of pages for posterity. And tell them that you're checking their computer history and postings. "Kids need a grown-up watching their backs but not snooping over their shoulders," says Jenkins. If you find something objectionable, have a sit-down and ask them to take it down. Brace yourself for attack and stick to your guns, like I did with Gracie.

Finally, learn the ways of the Web. Start a blog or put up your own MySpace page, and tap your teen as your guide, suggests Jenkins. Once you get a little tech cred, your kids will be more likely to listen to your words of advice and heed them. Me, I've decided to dip my toes in this strange new world. Gracie's promised to help me build my own page -- as long as I don't insist on being her "friend." Right now I'm trying to choose my theme song -- maybe Tom Petty's "I Won't Back Down"?

Originally published in Family Circle magazine, August 2007.