

8 Ways to be a Plugged-In Parent

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Connecting with teens is an ongoing challenge for most parents who are not equipped to navigate the 24/7 social network world of Snapchat, Kik, Instagram and Twitter. From the moment they get out of bed in the morning, a teen's first priority is to "check in" on their phone. Throughout the day, and into the night, they are working diligently to build their personal brand. Most are consumed with online popularity, the number of likes and their next post, in order to create a life that looks perfect, yet uniquely individual.

However challenging this social media frontier may be to embrace, parents can learn how to tackle it and begin to create an open dialogue with their teen, says Total Package Global CEO Kristi K. Hoffman who recently spoke to members of the YPO Parenting Network. "I tell parents not to 'fear the dinosaur.' Embrace what they have learned from their personal experiences growing up, but recognize that their kids are living a different reality."

But does asking questions and delving deeper into your kid's online habits mean that you are a helicopter parent? "Definitely not," says Hoffman. "It means you are plugging into your teenager's life, keeping the communication flowing, and helping them deal with the anxiety, confusion and stress of their lives, even though you may not completely understand it."

Who are Gen Zers?

Social media and tech savvy, Generation Z members were born between 1995 and 2012. They are online an average of four hours a day. Almost 90 percent of them use multiple screens, often simultaneously. They crave viral validation and credibility, and although parents might not like where they are getting their information, they are generally well-informed on current events, getting their news on demand.

"As parents, we need to understand as soon as we give our kids a cellphone, we are actually altering the way they live their lives. Their phones are not just a means of communicating but become much more influential," explains Hoffman, "and it is causing stress, anxiety and fear for a majority of them."

According to Hoffman, every day a teen may be exposed to, or have friends who experience:

- Online harassment, ostracizing and bullying
- A romantic or friendship break-up via text messages or social media that often includes a "revenge" picture posted

- Sexualized, pornographic or violent photos or livestreaming that may blur the lines of morality or desensitize teens to horrific events
- Selfies that are filtered to reflect “perfect” images

Making the connection

Your teen’s reality revolves around their online image and presence. When not connected on social media, even for an hour, they feel isolated and fear missing out. “But studies show that there is a direct correlation with screen time and teen depression,” Hoffman says. “That’s where parents need to step in and provide some relief.”

Parents can arm themselves with eight secret weapons to stay plugged in to their teens:

- **Watch for clues.** When things don’t look right, they probably are not. Dig deeper if you notice dramatic behavioral changes, new friends or new hangouts.
- **Prep ahead of time.** Role play with your teens by giving them a real-life scenario and asking them what they would do if they found themselves in a certain situation.
- **Set parameters.** Create rules around amount of screen time per day and where they can use their devices.
- **Monitor activity.** Most cellphone and internet carriers allow you to monitor your teen’s online history, but be cautious. If some of the sites and activity are questionable, avoid punishing or blaming your teen and have a conversation instead.
- **Leave the Joneses out of it.** Define your core values as a family and develop your own set of rules. Try not to succumb to the pressure of what other parents are doing.
- **Be a guide.** Don’t be afraid to speak up if you find they are hanging out with questionable, risky or poor influencers.
- **Establish your ‘true blues.’** These are family members or close friends who your teen trusts who they can talk to other than their parents.
- **Keep them active!** Help your teen find a passion or an activity that gives them confidence or helps them unplug.

Hoffman believes that parents can learn valuable tools to build their teen’s confidence, develop strong leadership skills and set them up for success despite the challenges they face.

“Let your kids run their own race and know that failure means growth,” she says. “Open the dialogue and let them know you will forgive them, love them and that you are there to support them.”

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