

SPECIAL REPORT

DARK

SHADOWS

Hidden Entrée to the Internet

STORY BY SUSAN HELLER

This isn't about sexual predators stalking your children. And it isn't about cyberbullying, both of which are obviously huge issues for parents. This is something else altogether and it is incredibly insidious and inherently damaging to your kids, to their futures.

Consider the fact that the teenagers who are now in high school are the first generation in history who have grown up with the Internet much as television was a fact of life for most adults under the age of 66. Today's teens and middle-schoolers move in and out of cyberspace many times every day. In the classroom, on their smart phones, in their bedrooms. Digital communication is integral with life and it is seamless. This boundary-less universe shared and shaped by 6 billion (give or take a few) Internet users all over the planet, is their playground. And therein lies the rub.

You wouldn't allow a young teen to go into Manhattan without supervision and/or some serious boundaries. You don't want the prevailing culture raising your children and shaping their morals and beliefs. But you do want your kids to learn how to interact with others, to bond with real people rather than created avatars, to know how to handle relationships both personal and professional.

Alison Birnbaum LSCW, has been a family psychotherapist over twenty-five years in New Canaan, CT. Additionally, she spent ten years as a parenting expert on the Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign coordinated by the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy. (<http://www.theantidrug.com/advice/expert-advice/default.aspx>) I asked Alison to join me in conversations with several very social media-savvy kids so she could shed some light on where the disconnects are

and more precisely, present you with immediately actionable advice to help shift the odds in your child's favor - for the future. There are two issues that are entwined and enmeshed one within the other. Most adults aren't aware of them so it's no surprise that so many kids are flying blind.

Alison explains, "The first thing that worries me about this generation is their lack of experience with face to face contact, particularly around the area of intimacy. Texting and interacting online is a way to protect themselves from the embarrassment or awkwardness of interaction. If you can't be seen when you blush or you can't experience the look in another person's eyes which gives you information and stimulates your own experience, then how are you going to learn to build intimacy?"

"Now, look just a little way down the road and you can see where the issue gets connected to alcohol and drug use. Where there are no skills, you look to substances to bridge that gap, that discomfort around intimacy."

Makes perfect sense, doesn't it? Now let's now add the second component -- the inability of kids to understand that that their projection of themselves online isn't private. That any content they post is accessible by virtually anyone and as stated within one social media site's Terms of Service, "Any personal information or picture content that you voluntarily disclose online (on discussion boards, in messages and chat areas, etc.) becomes publicly available and you acknowledge that third parties may access, collect and use such content."

Do you know anybody who actually reads The Terms of Service on any web site? More later on those legal loopholes that can turn into

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black holes in a child's life.

First, a sense of what it looks like from a teen's point of view. In a conversation with a lovely young girl I'll call Caitlin who is now 16 years old, we learned that in 7th grade she asked her mother if she could get a Facebook account. When her mother said no, Caitlin went online, as all of her friends had done and simply signed herself up. No large whup.

"I got on Facebook when I was in 7th grade. I was very, very obsessed with being sexy on Facebook and having an identity that said, 'I'm hot and you should look at me because I'm pretty.'"

Yikes. At 12, Caitlin was fully aware that the zeitgeist of middle school had everything to do with branding herself as a desirable someone. Not only that, she could create an idealized Self, one that fit the current (albeit ever fluid) definition of what was cool. The feedback loop was self generating, other kids - boys and girls - would comment on how good she looked, thus reinforcing the behavior.

Alison describes the internal reality for kids like Caitlin. "Being online is an opportunity to create and brand yourself in a very stimulating and open way. It's a popularity thing, a way to assert yourself. The reality comes sharply into focus when you know that the developmental issue underlying the teenage years is to identify who you are and what you're about. Middle school is the beginning of a preoccupation with social comparison."

Now, lest we forget or pretend that this comparison thing is just a 'teen phase' I invite you to consider the degree to which you now compare yourself to others. Not if or how you should, but how you do truly compare yourself to colleagues, friends and others in the privacy of your own insecurities. It's uncomfortable and it's unfortunate that we sometimes still go there, but it is also a reality. The benefits of teaching tweens and teens how to have a healthy and safe container around comparison can't be overstated.

On the flip side of the comparison angst Alison points out that "There is something gorgeous about being able to self-define. That means that you can pull your image together in a way that is very powerful. On the Internet it can all be make-believe. Middle school is a time of affiliations - you're leaving your parents home and you're going into a peer group. So imagine the landscape opening up and your affiliation isn't just to the kids you know at school which can be kind of brutal, but it can also be anybody on the Internet anywhere in the world. It

can be people who love Dr. Who, play X-box, or listen to a certain kind of music and engage you in seemingly intimate activities. It's easy to understand the incredible lure of those invitations."

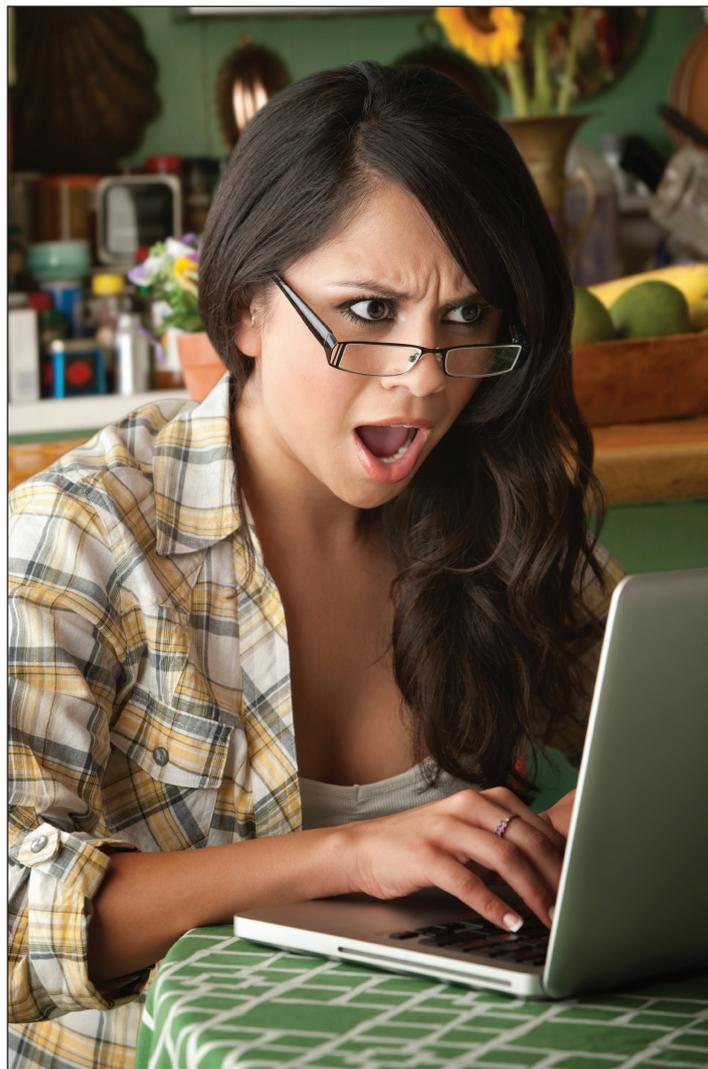
Caitlin admits she has over 1,000 photos of herself on her account and in a total paradox of sensibilities common to a 16 year old, she considers them hidden while conceding the fact that if anybody went to her photos on Facebook, they could easily track back and see them all. If at some point in the future she has aspirations of working for a bank, a corporation or the government, if she becomes famous, if she even meets the right guy, that vague "Anybody" appellation could translate to some or all of those photographs making their way back into her life.

Caitlin however, has moved on. She considers herself much more sophisticated now. "Facebook," she intones, "is sooo middle school. I grew up and now I think that stuff was kind of slutty." So while she still maintains a presence on Facebook, she's on to the newest, coolest social media site, Tumblr. Not familiar with it? Tumblr is a somewhat phantasmagorical and kaleidoscopic view of pop culture as seen through a constantly changing menu of weird news, insane videos, edgy happenings and Internet star wannabes. People post ads, pictures, original videos, scenes from TV dramas and web sites and then people following them, re-post and re-blog the content, possibly ad infinitum.

Each month Tumblr gets 16,735,428,608 posts. For those of you who (like me) don't play well with numbers, that's 16 billion, 735 million, 428 thousand, 608 page views. In thirty days. With the numbers rising every month.

Caitlin considers her Tumblr page to be quite tame and reserved. She says she only posts cool TV segments and sexy ads that don't include visuals of her. "People don't know who I am like they do on Facebook," she says. However, Alison points out that right in the middle of her page, Caitlin has a link titled, ME and that a simple click revealed very provocative shots of her now sixteen year old self. Caitlin tells herself she is only re-posting material she has received when in fact, she has opened her psyche to anyone who has access to a computer.

Insisting that her site was not an issue, she gave us the URL of her friend Rebecca's Tumblr account for comparison. I was totally gobsmacked. The material is horribly graphic. A combination of degrading



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porn mixed with a celebration of drugs and alcohol and inappropriate conversations with people interacting with her on her site. It could give Hustler magazine a run for its money and easily be classified as a porn site itself. Except it isn't. It's a Tumblr page of a suburban 16 year old girl.

As a therapist and a parent, Alison weighed in on the subject. "I really do believe parents should go on their child's site or sites at any time. It isn't snooping because of the public nature of the Internet - it's very different than going into your child's bedroom and reading their diary. I don't consider it a violation of privacy, I consider it good parenting. Parents have to perform their due diligence in learning how to track what is being hidden from them.

There are all sorts of tools on the Net for doing specifically that."

Alison adds, "Parental monitoring activity includes texting. Kids do avail themselves of a tremendous amount of porn. What that has done, is change the way they relate to each other. I have seen images and heard texts in middle school that are shocking in their explicit nature. Without the intervention of an adult to say, 'No, we don't talk to girls this way,' or 'This is not something you reveal to a boy,' or ' You never

show anybody how you're touching yourself,' kids do what everybody around them is doing."

Not my kid, you say? Caitlin says its quite obvious that Rebecca's mother is clueless about her daughter's online activities as were her own parents in terms of her 1,000 piece pictorial on Facebook. The same is true for every kid she knows.

Marcus is fifteen. He says his mother tried to invoke parental controls around the amount of time he spent on Facebook, but she never enforced it. He is aware that people behave badly and was witness to cyberbullying that occurred on Formspring - a social media site where people can post anonymously. Marcus says the over-exposure and unforeseen consequences, "...are just something my generation is going to have to live with."

Cut to Jaimie, a nineteen year old freshman in college. "I did have people say be careful what you post online - but I think kids don't think anything will happen to them - that once in a blue moon somebody gets nailed by something they posted."

And yet, Jaimie did get clobbered by something she posted. A traumatic event in high school resulted in her taking a medical leave of

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absence. She wrote about her experience in a cathartic blog that she thought was private. It wasn't. It never is. Someone at her school discovered it and passed it up the chain of command. Jaimie is still angry about being told to take it down. "I have free speech - nobody can tell me what to do."

In that same vein of defiance and naiveté, she asks, "So where is the line between what you do at work and what you do in your personal life? My opinion on it is if I can bring qualities to the job and be responsible, why is my personal life necessarily going to be held against me? It's really frustrating to be judged for what you post because you know, this is what we grew up with. We're not doing it wrong on purpose. So we don't really see a problem with us posting a picture of ourselves passed out or puking in a bathroom."

Time to revisit those clearly stated but almost always overlooked, Terms of Service. One section on Tumblr reads: "While you are free to remove published pieces of content from or delete your Account, because of the nature of Internet sharing, the strong possibility of Reblogging of your content by others, and technological limitations inherent to the Services, copies of that content may exist elsewhere and be retained indefinitely, including in our systems."

But wait. It gets creepier. "Moreover, if we, or substantially all of our assets, were acquired, or if we go out of business or enter bankruptcy, user information would be one of the assets that is transferred

or acquired by a third party. You acknowledge that such transfers may occur, and that any acquirer of us or our assets may continue to use your Personal Information as set forth in this policy." ***

Yikes again. Since Jaimie has also had a Facebook account from the age of twelve, she's aware of the inherent falsity of social media. "I don't think a lot of people on Facebook are very authentic about themselves. With pictures on FB, there is tons of editing that goes on. I'm guilty of it. If I have a blemish I'm going to go on an editing site to remove it before I post the picture. I don't want my 2,000 friends seeing my flaws."

The editing has gotten so creative that kids now know how to Photoshop an image so that they look less heavy, or they will enlarge a doorway to make themselves look smaller by comparison. Which brings us back to the intimacy issue and the struggle for a level of perfection that can never be realized in genuine human interaction. We have a generation of shadow figures who paradoxically, are the real human beings, and light-bright self-created celebrities that are fake.

Parents have the power to transform the situation by curtailing, limiting and monitoring the various points of access to the digital world. How does that work?

Alison explains, "I believe there is an effective combination of full disclosure and non-disclosure to kids. It starts with a conversation about how we are different and what we believe. However, first there

must be a statement of 'who we are', a flag firmly planted in the ground through an opening discussion. This is how our family treats the outside world and this is who we are in terms of the outside world. The thing that you do differently from other families becomes a topic of conversation focusing on what is most important to you; whether it's ethics or honesty, emotional exposure, intellectual rigor or serious sports engagement."

In an interesting bit of Synchronicity, Thomas who is twenty and a psychology major, brought up one of Alison's main concerns; self-regu-

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lation, which is a learned skill-set that parents need to teach their children. Thomas has been a camp counselor for two of the last summers, he was stunned to see 2nd and 3rd graders with smart phones. "They don't know how to limit themselves yet. Unless someone else puts those kinds of limitations down, they never will learn self control. In reality it comes down to societal influence and your parents. If either one of them is not doing a great job, you're probably going to end up following the patterns you were originally introduced to."

How do you respond to the inevitable, "Nobody else's parent's are doing that, all my friends get to..." Alison says the full-disclosure is, "Use of Facebook, cell phones, and e-mail is a parenting decision, it's our call. Internet access is not a right - it's a privilege.

"If we are providing you with internet services we will be checking on you. I know that we are going to see this in two different ways and in some ways we will disagree and I of course, want to hear and respect what you feel. But as long as you are in my house and your well being is my responsibility, until you reach the age of majority, these are my rules."

Checking on how your kids present themselves to the rest of humanity is the equivalent of a physical drive-by. "You say you're going to the movies, mall, best friend's house? I'll be conducting drive-bys to ensure you're keeping your word. I am holding you accountable for your actions and your agreements." There's no question that as a parent it is a lot to contend with; you have to be creative, consistent and committed in your perseverance to do your job well - but isn't that a life-lesson you want your kids to learn too?

Susan Heller has earned a reputation for excellence as a Writer, Ghostwriter, Producer and Director. She also designs and directs; TV spots, advertising, video and multimedia presentations when she's not writing speeches or helping other professionals hone their public speaking skills.



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