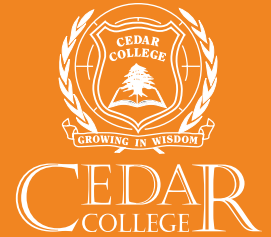


# TIPS TO HELP TEENS USE SOCIAL NETWORKING SAFELY



PART OF THE CEDAR COLLEGE **HELPING TEENS RESOURCES** AVAILABLE AT [WWW.CEDARCOLLEGE.SA.EDU.AU](http://WWW.CEDARCOLLEGE.SA.EDU.AU)

The advent of email, instant messaging, mobile phone calls and text messages has generally resulted in more efficient and broad based communication for our society.

**Teenagers have taken up these new methods of communication with great enthusiasm.** 83% of Australian teens have a mobile phone (most prefer to text than to make calls), nearly half don't turn their phone off at night and nearly a quarter will answer a text message during the night regardless of the time it was received (one New Zealand study found that 10% of teens are woken every night by a text message). 86% of Australian teens are regular users of net based communication (eg via email, MSN, Facebook and MySpace) and one quarter communicate via the net at least once daily.

**Cybercommunication has many potential advantages for teenagers.** It means they have another means by which to communicate with teachers and parents. For many reasons, a difficult conversation with a teacher or parent often happens more easily within cyberspace. Mobile phones can provide an additional level of safety for teens and reassurance for parents, and convenience for both. Cybercommunication also means that teens have increased communication with their peers – this can be beneficial for social skills and development. It makes social interaction easier for young people with disabilities, for those who live in rural areas, and for those with poor social skills.

However, there are also potential disadvantages and dangers associated with cybercommunication. **For example, 20% of teens say mobile phone debt has caused them major problems.**



The “cyber-divide” means that teens without access to cybercommunication facilities can be alienated from peers. **More options for communication means more options for bullying and harassment.** This bullying now occurs wherever a student has mobile phone or net access (ie potentially wherever they are at any point in the day), rather than the bullying only occurring while physically with their peers as was the case once upon a time. Nearly half of teenagers say they have received an upsetting text message or been blocked on MSN, and more than half say they “need professional help” in dealing with chat room issues.

Access to the net and mobile phones also means it is harder to monitor who and what teenagers have access to, and in addition, who has access to teenagers. **One study found that 70% of 11 and 12 year old boys had accessed pornography on the net.** Furthermore, cybercommunication is potentially addictive and can take away time spent on other healthy life activities (research shows increasing use of cybercommunication is associated with decreased sleep and physical activity for teens).

**Nevertheless, cybercommunication is here to stay.** Given its importance and prominence in many teen's lives, it is worth spending time considering how we help teenagers use cybercommunication safely and wisely. A few strategies to do this are as follows.

**First, we need to provide explicit and pragmatic instruction to teens about cybercommunication.** In my seminars to teenagers I use their own experiences to teach concepts such as: being clearer than they think they need to be when cybercommunicating, keeping personal details secret, not using cybercommunication when angry, dealing with cyberbullying and other ideas. Communication is a complex skill. Cybercommunicating has the potential to be even more complex. Teens won't learn these skills on their own in a hurry – they need our help.

**Second, as those who care for young people, we need to be familiar with technology ourselves.** New forms of cybercommunication are emerging all the time. We cannot help teens who use this technology unless we know about them.

**Third, we should be familiar with whom teenagers are cybercommunicating.** If our teenagers were spending many hours every week hanging out with a particular friend after school and on the weekend, most of us would think it is polite and reasonable to have met or know who this friend. In the same way, we should have a general idea of whom teens are cybercommunicating with. This means asking questions and being alert to what the teen is doing on the net and mobile.

**Fourth, we need to be aware of the potential of cyberbullying.** It happens frequently and has a significant effect on young people's emotional well-being. We should be alert to danger signs, ask questions and be aware that it might be the cause of sudden changes in mood. We then need to be or provide a supportive person to "talk through" the issue with. We should know how to help teens reduce their exposure to the bullying and how to help them through this issue.

**Fifth, we need to communicate with teens that their internet and mobile use will not be completely private.** Although I don't advocate that we read emails or texts as a matter of

course, I think it is reasonable that we know who teens are emailing or chatting to on the net, generally who they are calling/texting and receiving calls and texts from. Teens should also know that we want to know the kinds of sites they are visiting and what they are downloading. Furthermore, I believe teens should also be made aware that if we are seriously concerned about their safety, we may, on rare occasions, check their emails and texts.

**Finally, teenagers need to know there are specific rules about net and phone use.** In my surveying, the majority of teens themselves expect rules from parents and schools about this issue. The rules will of course vary, but will generally be about concepts such as: the amount of cybercommunication permitted (number of minutes/hours), where cybercommunication occurs (location of computers, where

mobiles are kept overnight for example), when it occurs (before/after certain times of the day/other tasks completed), kinds of net sites visited, who is communicated with and so on.

**We need to teach teens about cybercommunication, and monitor and regulate its use.** But we should also keep in mind that it is not the enemy! In fact, it is an important part of their lives, and can indeed have a positive influence on them.

“...teenagers need to know there are specific rules about net and phone use.”

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<http://developingminds.net.au/tips-to-help-teens-use-social>