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Parenting in the age of technology

By Vera Kochan



Erica Pelavin, LCSW, Ph.D., co-founder of My Digital TAT2, Inc. Photo Vera Kochan

Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School hosted a lecture entitled Media in the Middle on Feb. 21 aimed at helping parents of middle school kids unravel the mysteries behind popular apps, social networking sites and more.

Guest speaker Erica Pelavin, Ph.D., is a psychologist and licensed clinical social worker with over 20 years of experience specializing in bullying prevention, relational aggression, cybersafety and conflict resolution. She is also co-founder of My Digital TAT2, a nonprofit organization that helps schools and communities address issues and the use of technology in constructive ways.

Pelavin, as a mom in the digital age, doesn't just talk the talk, she walks the walk with her own kids, telling parents to "talk to your kids about what's going on in their social media. Stay connected with their interests." She adds, "Teach kids that they're responsible for their digital footprint. Let them know that they have control over the device and to get help when they're in over their heads."

She stresses that it's important for kids to understand that privacy matters and to never give out personal information online. "Kids don't realize that whatever they put online can come back to haunt them as adults. They must consider where their information might end up and must never share passwords or electronic devices with

others."

Over the last 15 years, there have been huge advancements in social media technology. Facebook was created in 2004, and by 2005 the average user sent 35 texts a month. By 2016, the average person sent 2,022 texts per month. The first iPhone was released in 2007, with the first iPhone app following the next year. As of 2018, teens have access to 3.8 million apps.

Many of these apps can be dangerous places for middle-schoolers to traverse. Pelavin says it's important as a parent to know what your kids are viewing on social media, but they can be defensive about their presence there.

She suggests that parents express an interest in their child's favorite apps by asking non-threatening questions, and if the app is harmless enough, have the child explain the features and benefits of it.

Social media is a teen's outlet for coping with day-to-day life. "Teens use social media to connect with peers, investigate the world, try new identities and establish independence," says Pelavin. "If kids have struggles in the real world it may show up online. The same goes with their passions and interests. They search for fame and recognition. They're looking for acceptance, hoping to be noticed, struggling to stay relevant and are strategically posting."

Kids must understand the consequences of rumors, gossip and cyberbullying. Digital content can be taken out of context and words must be chosen carefully. Kids should only post positive things about themselves or others and remember that they can't undo a message once they hit "send." Leaving a digital tattoo is virtually impossible to remove. Anyone has the power to be an ally to someone who has been cyberbullied by sending a message of support to the victim either publicly or privately. They can also report the bullying to an adult and refuse to participate in the attack. Bullying can only thrive when there is an audience.

According to Pelavin, kids must learn to balance digital use with device-free active and healthy activities. Many kids stay up late using their devices when they should be sleeping, thereby depriving them of quality awake time during school hours. She says, "Put devices to bed at least one hour before bedtime."

A fourth-grader she counsels told her, "My friend was sleeping over and we couldn't fall asleep. We Googled how to fall asleep, and it said, 'Get off of your device.'"

"Kids really do want forced family time - put all of the phones in a basket and have the 'no phones' rule apply to everybody during mealtime or other family activities," concludes Pelavin. "Our kids are watching us. If you abuse social media, so will they."

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