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Navigating the Social Media Landscape and Phone Use with your Teens and Tweens

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Social media has become an undeniable part of our children's lives. While it offers opportunities for connection and creativity, it can also present challenges. I encourage you to read this article and reflect on your role as a parent in your student's phone use.

First off, if your student has a smartphone, have you ever looked at the screen time summary? Start there!

Here is how to do it on an iPhone:

1. Go to settings, and click on Screen Time
2. Tap "See All App and Website Activity", then tap Devices to select which device you want to see usage for
3. Tap Week to see a summary of their weekly use, or tap Day to see a summary of their daily use.

Here is how to do it on an Android device:

1. Settings, and then click on Digital Wellbeing & Parental Controls
2. There is a dashboard that shows overall screen time and usage for individual apps

Look at that *with your student*. This would be a great conversation starter with your student and maybe an eye-opener for parents. Our freshmen looked at this in one of their Freshman Extension class periods this year. Many students were shocked to see the number of hours they spend on different apps. There were multiple students who had *multiple hours a day on TikTok!* TikTok has rapid-fire succession of short, attention-grabbing videos. This can create the need for constant stimulation, and only reinforces short attention spans. This can make it hard for our students to succeed at any academic/career task that requires endurance for more than a few minutes.

Another item to have your child show you and talk about is the number of followers on their social media apps. How many of these accounts do they know in real life? If they don't know their social media connections in real life, they are sharing private, personal information about their lives with strangers. It is important for kids to follow and interact with people *they actually know and trust*. In addition, just because they know someone, that doesn't mean that they need to be connected to that person on social media. Does that person need personal information about your student? Could that person use your student's posts for nefarious reasons? Does that person's posts bring your student joy? Based on those answers, there are likely a good number of kids your student should remove from their social media.

Social media can be about positive connections with friends and family. However, it can also contribute to feelings of inadequacy and anxiety due to constant social comparison and the pressure to present a perfect image of one's self. It can also lead to drama that seemingly never ends. The drama can continue after school and on the weekends, and students never get a break and it snowballs into much larger issues. It then robs your students of their ability to relax and recharge, because they are constantly involved with comparing themselves or messaging back about drama.

Please keep in mind that if drama on social media ends up causing a disruption at school, it is then allowable for school staff to investigate, and can lead to consequences.

School staff can attest to the fact that we have seen reduced social skills in elementary, middle, and high school-aged kids due to over-reliance on screens. Many students struggle with face-to-face communication, empathy, and emotional intelligence because they are on a screen far more often than they are interacting with peers. Consider how this will continue to affect their friendships, learning, and future career and college experiences.

Principals have all had multiple reports of students sending or receiving naked pictures on their phones. This, unfortunately, is more prevalent than most parents realize. If you have not had very blunt conversations with your student who has a phone, you need to do so.

Smartphones are here to stay, and I'm not saying kids should not own one. But as parents, it is our job to teach safe and positive use-routinely, not just once. It is our job to regularly monitor our kids' use. We are responsible for their phones being a positive addition to their life and using their tools for good.