Teen Panel Handbook

Want to be a “fly on the wall” as teens reveal the ups and downs of their digital lives? Host a teen panel. Invite your parent community to hear from local students as they share their perspectives and insights. When it comes to teens’ digital lives, they are the experts — and with a teen panel, the school simply is creating the space and context for teens’ voices to be heard.

Teens engage in quite a bit of exploring and experimenting online. And their insights can be valuable to all ages in the school community — elementary, middle, or high school. Invite older kids to share the opportunities and pitfalls they’ve experienced online so that parents of younger kids can anticipate how to support their kids throughout the coming years.

Drawing on the experiences of teens within the community also ensures that the follow-up outreach efforts are relevant to your school community’s needs. After hosting your teen panel, choose a series of Conversation Cases that will encourage parents to engage in local conversations.

This handbook includes:

- **Logistics** for hosting
- **Field-tested questions**

### The Logistics

#### Step 1 — Schedule:

- Work with school administrators and teachers to plan for a teen panel event.
- Find dates and times that work well for other parents. If this is the first event you’re hosting, you can check with a teacher, administrator, or former PTSA coordinator about which days and times get the most parent attendance.
- Teen panels can run from an hour to two hours. Decide whether or not your time will include an audience Q&A.

#### Step 2 — Recruit:

- Panels work best when the students are comfortable talking about their experiences and feel empowered to speak candidly with parents. Reach out to an adult in the community who has close relationships with students — possibly a dean, guidance counselor, teacher, or coach. Ask them for suggestions of students who might be comfortable discussing their digital lives. Aim for diversity in terms of gender, grade level, and school demographics.

**HINT**: There is a careful — and crucial — balance when it comes to picking students: If the teachers recruit only students who have exemplary habits, the panel conversation may not surface relevant challenges of digital life. On the other hand, if students have been at the center of difficult experiences (e.g., cyberbullying or sexting), putting them at the center of the conversation may be uncomfortable. The goal is not to avoid difficult issues, but rather to avoid putting teens in a vulnerable position if they aren’t ready to embrace sharing.
• Invite the selected students to participate in the panel. You can reach out to the teens and their families through a school email or letter. If you reach out to students individually, make sure that they feel comfortable saying no. It’s also helpful if students know that they hold the power: They won’t have to answer any questions they don’t want to and they aren’t required to share their personal experiences — they can draw from stories they know through their peers. And make sure they know they were selected because adults in their lives think they will rock.

• Consider who might be the best moderator. Maybe a neutral third party or a trusted school personnel (teacher, coach, etc.)?

**Step 3 — Plan:**

• Schedule a time for the event — it’s helpful to check with someone at the school to find out when parent events are usually held and what times tend to work best for the parents in your community.

  **HINT:** If it is your first time hosting an out-of-school event, it helps to talk to an administrator or past PTSA coordinator to find out the best times. You’ll want to avoid nights with big community-relevant events. It may be helpful to recruit a teacher or a few older siblings to stay during the event and watch younger children, since some parents may want to come but have childcare conflicts in the evening.

• Student panels can be set up in different ways depending on your community’s space. The key is to make sure students are seated and comfortable, and that parents will be able to hear. You can have students sit at a rectangular table facing the parents or you can arrange chairs in a semi-circle. The panel can be at the front of the room or up on a stage if you are in an auditorium. Depending on the size of the space, you may also want to use microphones.

• Decide which questions you will be asking panelists. The number of questions may depend on the number of panelists and their answers. Based on your preparation work (see below), you may have a better idea of the answers/stories the teens are comfortable sharing.

• Find a few volunteers, other parents or teachers, to help out during the event for check-in, for time checks, and for the Q&A session.

• If resources allow, providing an easy meal/snack also can increase attendance!

**Step 4 — Invite:**

• Get the word out! Copy, paste, and tweak the following messaging for:

  ‣ **Emails**

    Dear [School Name] Family Member,

    Many parents today share an interest — and even sometimes a bit of concern — about their kids’ digital lives. As part of Common Sense’s Connecting Families Program, we are hosting a Teen Panel so that you can hear from the kids themselves about the ups and downs of their digital world. We hope you will join us on [day of the week, date] at [time] in [meeting room].

    I hope to see you there!

    Warmly,

    [Your name]
Newsletters

[School Name] is excited to be offering Connecting Families. This parent engagement program from Common Sense begins with a Teen Panel. Come hear from teens about their digital lives on [date] at [time]. We hope you can join us in [meeting room].

Flyers

Send home this writable flyer to families of elementary students
Send home this writable flyer to families of middle/high school students

• Consider inviting school staff as well to this event.

Step 5 — Prep:

• Before the formal event, it’s helpful to meet with students to give them a better sense of what they should expect. We recommend that you share the chosen questions with them so that they can think about their responses. You may want to ask them what other topics they feel they should address.

• Be clear with students about whether or not the event will be recorded (obtain parents’ written permission if the event will be recorded and shared).

• The multiple student format avoids putting any one student on the spot. Let the teens know that they are the ones who decide when to weigh in on a topic; they shouldn’t feel pressure to respond to every question. Same with the audience Q&A — panelists can volunteer an answer when they feel comfortable doing so.

• Ask panelists how they would like to be introduced; it is fun to share at least one fun fact about each participant with the audience.

• Provide the moderator with the chosen questions before the event night.

Step 6 — Host:

• Consider how you want to greet parents. Do you want them to sign in? Are you gathering contact information? Do you want name tags? If so, have a couple of volunteers ready at a central table by a main door.

• Make sure to have an extra set of questions printed out for the moderator.

• Set the tone for the evening by claiming a personal stake and interest in the teen panel night. For instance, acknowledge that these teens are the experts:

I know that my teen years were quite different than what our teens are experiencing today. I was a great pen pal letter writer and I could gab on the phone for hours. But it’s hard for me to understand the ups and downs of today’s 24/7 digital world — tweeting, Snapchatting, LOLing, it’s all new and a tad overwhelming. So, to help us all understand the opportunities and the pitfalls of our kids’ digital reality, we’ve invited the following students to share their perspectives about their digital lives …

• Introduce each of the panelists.

• Keep track of the time spent on each question (you may want to have an official timekeeper, whose signals from the audience can help you stay on track).
• For audience Q&A, one trick we’ve found works well is to hand out blank flashcards before the event (or you can place them on the seats). Ask parents to write their questions on the flashcards and ask another volunteer to collect them about two-thirds of the way into the event. This method has two benefits: (1) Parents don’t have to worry about feeling embarrassed about their questions and (2) you — or your volunteer — can preview the questions before they are asked aloud. If there are many questions, this allows you to select a few representative questions. It also enables you to avoid questions that seem inappropriate or that might put the students in an uncomfortable position (e.g., asking them for personal reactions to a particular scandal in the community).

• You may want to offer refreshments after the event. It will give family members the opportunity to connect with each other, and it will give you an informal opportunity to gauge parents’ response to the night.

• Have printed materials from the Family Toolbox available in a central location. Parents can take them on the way in or the way out.

**Step 7 – Follow-up:**

• Make sure to thank the student panelists after the event.

• You may want to have a debrief with the teens to hear their perspectives on how the panel went.

• You may want to do a survey of parent attendees to ask for their thoughts on the evening’s event. You also can ask questions about which topics (refer to the Conversation Case topics) they are most interested in as a way to help you plan for continued outreach.

• After a successful panel, you may decide to host more than one to reach even more parents. Consider hosting another panel at a different location as well (e.g., an elementary school).

• It is so valuable for students to hear from their peers (especially those a bit older) as well. You may want to ask the teen panelists if they are willing to share their experiences with other students. If so, work with school administrators to host an assembly, at which the teen panel can speak.

• Next, work with school administrators to continue the family outreach by picking and planning for a series of Conversation Cases through the coming school year.
Field-Tested Questions

It is up to you, your administrators, and your student panelists as to which questions you are most comfortable with. Pick from the range of questions below. There is no right or wrong mix. Use these questions as a guide to elicit candid, yet comfortable, responses from your student panelists. This event will allow you to get a pulse on your teens’ digital lives and your parent community’s concerns. Then, you will be able to plan a series of Conversation Cases accordingly.

Playing it Safe
- Since the focus of our discussion is on teens’ lives, let’s start with something simple: your morning routine. What’s your morning routine? Does technology factor in?
- Some teens say that their cell phones or computers can be distracting when they’re trying to get homework done – or even just when they’re hanging out with their friends. Does this happen to you or to your friends? Do you have any strategies to try and help yourself focus?
- Let’s talk about privacy: What’s one thing you would you never share online?
- Do you have any rules in your house about technology? Which ones do you find helpful? Which are less helpful – and why?
  - If you could make one new policy in your community that everyone had to follow, what would it be?
- Some teens say that they wish they could just unplug – or that they could get their parents or friends to unplug. Do you ever feel that way?
  - Do you ever give yourself a break from technology? (If not, what stops you?)
- Are there any conversations that you would rather have face-to-face instead of online or over texting? What about conversations that you would rather have online than face-to-face?
- Do you think social media make the world a better or worse place? Why?
- Overall, does time spent on social media generally make you feel better about yourself or worse? Why?
- Can you fill in the blanks here? My digital life is like _________ because _________.

Pushing the Envelope
- What’s a misconception that adults have about your digital lives that you’d like to set the record straight about?
  - Or: A lot of parents are worried about how teens use technology. Are their worries are legitimate? Which ones are, and which ones are not?
- One thing that adults are often concerned about or perplexed by is sexting and sending nudies. How would you explain to adults why some teens sext?
- How would you define cyberbullying? What is especially tricky about managing a situation of cyberbullying?
- What kinds of digital drama do you see on your newsfeeds or timelines?