

Common Sense on Connected Culture

What's the Issue?

We are all part of communities. Our schools, our towns, our hobbies or interests all form the centers around which we connect with other people. These communities all have codes of behavior (written or unwritten) that help everyone get along. But in today's 24/7 digital world, we are also part of online communities. And these communities connect us to people we may not know. They connect us in ways where we are known only by screen name, or where we are anonymous. They connect us to people who are sometimes very far away. Whether we're reading or writing an online restaurant review, posting something on a Facebook page, texting a friend, or sharing a picture on a photo website, we're participating in a world where we can be instantly connected to thousands of people at a moment's notice.

Why Does It Matter?

When our kids connect to each other either from a distance or through a screen name, it can impact the way they behave. Actions can be free from discovery or consequences. When something happens anonymously, it's easier for people to behave irresponsibly, cruelly, or unethically. Kids benefit from a code of conduct for online and mobile activity just as they need a code of conduct in the real world. They should be empowered to be good digital citizens, in addition to being good citizens in general. Our kids are creating online communities with every click of the mouse or text they send. And they will have to live in those communities. The information they post about themselves or others will last a long time and travel great distances. So parents and teachers need to help kids think about the consequences of their online actions. Kids should learn that how they behave when they are connected really matters to them, their friends, and to the broader communities they participate in. Finally, there's a great deal at stake. When kids misuse online or mobile technology to harass, embarrass, or bully others, they can do real and lasting harm.

common sense says

Connected culture can be positive or negative – it's what people make it. When guiding our kids, it's important for them to understand that they have a choice in all of their online relationships. They can say something positive or say something mean. They can create great community support around activities or interests, or they can misuse the public nature of online communities to tear others down.

Talk about cyberbullying: It's real. It's everywhere. And remember that kids sometimes will tell you about a friend's problems rather than their own experiences. Make sure your kids know how to deal with a cyberbully, and that if the situation gets serious, urge them to tell a trusted adult about it.

Give kids a cyberbullying vocabulary. Talk about bullies, victims, bystanders (those who witness offensive behavior but don't do anything to stop it), and upstanders (people who actively try to stop cyberbullying). It will help them understand what roles they play or could play.

Encourage positive posting. Are your kids fans of YouTube? Have they said something encouraging about something they've seen and loved? Have they added knowledge to a wiki or shared their experience on a hobby or interest site? From the earliest ages, kids need to know they can add positively to the online world.

Remind kids that texts and IMs may not persist, but they still have impact. Anything they say or do with their phones or through quick messages may seem to disappear when the devices shut down, but the impact on others remains – whether for good or bad.