Gender and Digital Life

What does gender have to do with digital citizenship and literacy?

Imagine a teen girl clicking through her friend's profile pictures, wishing she could look just as slender. Or imagine a teen boy purposefully waiting an hour before texting a girl back, just to make himself appear more independent and detached. Teens are keenly aware of what it means to be popular, and how others perceive them. They not only turn to mass media for hints about how teen boys and girls should look and act, but also to their peers online. The problem is that the media often encourages narrow definitions of boys' and girls' roles. And these narrow definitions can then make their way into peer-to-peer interactions online, making it that much harder for a teen to keep perspective on media messages.

In order to learn how to be responsible and respectful digital media users, young teens must also develop an awareness of the unspoken rules, assumptions, and stereotypes that can inform their behavior. Gender norms — or common social ideas about masculinity and femininity — play a critical role in framing how young teens develop identities, express themselves, and hang out. Kids who do not think critically about gender stereotypes are more likely to be misinformed about how the world perceives them, how they perceive themselves, and most important, what they can grow up to be.

Why Does It Matter?

Your students are media creators, with the ability to publish content round-the-clock. This ability, combined with constant access to all kinds of media, makes it critically important to teach kids how to recognize and understand gender stereotypes. Adult mentors are well positioned to help teens develop lifelong media literacy skills — ones that will discourage them from perpetuating harmful stereotypes.

To be upstanding, teens need to crack the gender code. Teens need to think critically about common attitudes that can fuel issues such as digital drama, cyberbullying, and sexting. Quite often, these issues are rooted in social attitudes, not the technology itself.

Not Your Specialty? Not a Problem!

There are more classroom connections than you think. Talking about gender roles can create an easy segue between the subject you regularly teach — whether history, English, or health and wellness — and a class discussion about digital citizenship. Refer to the following page of this backgrounder for tips to help you get started.

Treat students like the experts. Encourage students to feel as though they're teaching you about how they and their friends use digital media, and encourage them to dig deeper into issues by asking lots of questions. They may start the lesson with a certain set of ideas or expectations about "the way things are" online, but then may reevaluate their opinions in the end.

SOCIAL MEDIA, SOCIAL LIFE: IT'S NOT GENDER NEUTRAL

Every day, more teen girls than teen boys text. In the daily Twitter-verse, there are also more girls than boys, and when it comes to photo posting, it's especially a girl thing...but not always a good thing.

77% TEXT DAILY
33% EVER TWEETED
75% LOVE POSTING PHOTOS

60% TEXT DAILY
22% EVER TWEETED
42% LOVE POSTING PHOTOS

For girls, especially, putting their pictures online can be stressful:

57% girls vs. **28% boys** sometimes feel left out after seeing photos of others together online

45% girls vs. **24% boys** worry about other people posting ugly photos of them online

28% girls vs. **9% boys** have edited photos of themselves before posting

Source: *Social Media, Social Life: How Teens View Their Digital Lives* (June 26, 2012). A Common Sense Media Research Study. http://www.commonsensemedia.org/research/social-media-social-life

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tips for ...

ALL TEACHERS

Know the difference between *gender* and *sex*. Gender has to do with social identities and roles. Gender is about how a culture defines terms like "masculine," "feminine," and everything in between. One's sex, on the other hand, is a matter of anatomy and biology. For example, when you separate a class into groups of boys and girls, you are separating them by sex, not by gender.

ENGLISH TEACHERS

Imagine characters in books using 21st-century technology. What would Holden Caulfield think of texting? How would digital drama play out between the Montagues and the Capulets? Have students explore how male and female characters' lives would change if they had access to social networks, cell phones, and other forms of digital communication.

HISTORY TEACHERS

Think about gender roles across history and across cultures. Depending on when and where people grow up, expectations about men and women's roles may differ. For example, in the early 20th century, Americans associated the color pink with strength and masculinity, rather than femininity. Have students research how attitudes about boys and girls have changed over time, and the extent to which these differences relate to race, class, and community culture. Consider connecting virtually with a school or class in another country, and have students explore what it's like to be a teen boy or girl in another part of the world.

TECHNOLOGY TEACHERS

Explore gender gaps in the fields of science, technology, and math. Fifty-seven percent of girls say that if they went into a STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) career, they'd have to work harder than a man just to be taken seriously.[1] Discuss with students where these attitudes come from, and find examples of role models who have challenged the status quo, such as the late Sally Ride.

HEALTH AND WELLNESS TEACHERS

Dive deeper into media messages. The Internet allows us to access media anytime, anywhere. Explore messages about boys and girls in your students' favorite magazines, songs, movies, and TV shows. For example, you can use documentary films such as *Miss Representation*, as well as those offered by the Media Education Foundation, to spark class discussion about gender representations in the media.

1 "Generation STEM: What Girls Say about Science, Technology, and Math." Girl Scouts of the USA (2012).