



## Teenagers & a Cybersafe World

*"The internet is a public place. Protect your reputation and your privacy as if you were walking down the busiest street in town."*

*— Vinton Cerf, also known as 'Father of the Internet'.*



**W**henver I talk to parents of teenagers in my clinic, the most common complaint is the excessive screen use by the children. Since new information about the digital world is still coming up every single day; the parents, the teachers, and the society are naturally very apprehensive. They are basically concerned about the known and unknown threats of internet. Afterall, the older generation is a migrant in this fascinating yet frightening world, whereas the teenagers are digital natives! It is impossible to pry them away from the screens which they are glued to. The virtual world is as important to them as the real world. Resisting it is not easy for them.

They consider everything they share online as totally confidential; be it their chats, or photos or videos. In reality, all of it is so public that anyone can access it freely. Someone may take a screen shot, or forward it to someone, or it can be retrieved later. The digital footprint they leave is like an indelible mark that can never be wiped off.

Though their brain is still immature, teenagers feel they are grown up and wish to be treated as such. Do they know all the dangers of digital media? Surprisingly, many of them are aware of at least some of the perils but the problem is in implementation.

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To keep teenagers safe from the imminent dangers of the cyber world and to keep the screen use to minimum, multiple methods are tried. Teenagers are instructed, cajoled, and threatened. The screens are either not given at all or are snatched away. They are constantly reminded or reprimanded to keep the phone away. They are warned with dire consequences in case they do not listen. A bleak future is threateningly dangled in front of them. Alas, all of this falls on deaf ears.

### Intriguing Teenage Brain

When we understand the developmental stage of teenagers, the reasons for futility of these interventions becomes apparent. The adolescents are in the process of becoming independent and responsible adults. To facilitate this transition, the human brain goes through some significant reorganisation. The nervous system forges a lot of new connections between its neurons. It also reinforces the frequently used pathways, and does away with the less used. The emotional brain is in its peak form. The frontal lobe of the brain which can control the thoughts and emotions, is yet to catch up. Also, the way they think is mainly in 'black and white', which means they take decisions based on immediate rewards, and fail to extend their thinking to long term consequences. This essentially results in a situation akin to a car without brakes.

Consequently, teenagers are curious, experimentative, and are risk takers. They have a mind of their own. They think differently and they wish to take their own decisions. Warnings about the future have little meaning to them. They look down upon advice and rebel against orders. Since they love experimenting, every prohibited thing irresistibly becomes a must have. The usual parental techniques fail because of all these reasons. The best way to reach out to teenagers is to involve them in the process. To be a little crafty and make them feel as though they are the ones taking decisions.

### Cybersecurity Education

- **Online safety:** A lot has been said about online safety. Frequent change of passwords, not sharing the passwords with anyone (not even trusted friends), caution before posting messages and photos and videos, and refraining from explicit personal information are some of the ways. Teenagers spend an extensive amount of time on social media. Hence, they face a lot of online bullying. They should be taught proper ways to handle bullying. Adults should reassure them of help. Appropriate cyber-cell numbers should be prominently displayed in schools and at home. The National Cyber Crime helpline number is 1930.





- **Respecting other's online space:** Trolling is very common as people can opt to be anonymous. It affects both the perpetrator as well as the target negatively. Minding respectful boundaries is an important skill teenagers need to learn.
- Being aware of frauds such as phishing, cheating. The preventive action involves not clicking on suspicious, random links; and being extra cautious in developing online relationships.
- **Using the digital space for activism:** Digital space can be used for creating awareness about various problems or diseases, promoting good work done by individuals, environment conservation etc.
- **Using digital space for knowledge gain and learning:** Many teenagers prefer attending online lectures instead of offline ones. One college going youngster once told me that he prefers this because he finds the actual lecture too slow, and he can speed it up to double speed online. But online learning should be used in tandem with in-person learning as we don't wish that the teenager is deprived of the socialisation.
- Creating online communities of like-minded people all over the world.
- **Digital literacy:** It is of extreme importance to educate teenagers about how to use their critical judgement while taking in online information, while consuming entertainment programs and while playing online games.
- **Balance between reel and real life:** It is alarming how easily the fine line between reality and virtual reality blurs. Internet addiction is considered a real disease now. In person meetings, outdoor games, helping others, participation in community work and contributing to home chores are some ways of keeping today's teenagers grounded.

#### Approaches to Digital Media Literacy

- **Good communication:** Without a doubt, effective communication is the most precious tool that helps us reach out to teenagers. It acts as a bridge that facilitates transfer of intent and knowledge. We communicate our love and empathy via this bridge. A dialogue that is respectful, empathetic, honest and unprejudiced is the most desired one.
- **Active teaching:** As the name suggests, this is not the conventional way of teaching. It involves two-way communication, active participation of teenagers in discussions, decision making and consequences. Teenagers come up with different options as they have the advantage of fresh perspective. Also, this type of interaction leaves lasting impression with desired results.
- **Non-judgemental attitude:** Each generation is different, but that need not make either one of them wrong. I agree that respecting teenager's choices may not be easy. For example, someone may have been brought up in an environment where expressing one's personal details publicly is considered dreadful. For them, accepting the way today's teenagers express everything from their mood to their likes and dislikes on social media might be quite difficult. Agreeing to disagree is a skill adults need to imbibe if they wish to reach out to teenagers.
- **Anticipatory guidance:** There is no use crying over spilt milk! It is better to make sure that the milk is not spilt in the first place. Some baseline rules for the individual and the family should be in place right from the time the mobile phone is handed over; including the dos and don'ts, different ways to handle possible online situations, the time limit of usage, the consequences of not following the rules etc.
- **Life skills education:** Teenagers can be empowered with life skills so they learn effective strategies to resist the overwhelming temptation to go to the make-believe world. Life skills are the abilities of adaptive behaviour that empower an individual to handle day to day situations effectively and gracefully. A seemingly ordinary situation such as planning a menu can be a great opportunity to impart skills such as creative thinking, critical thinking, decision making, planning and time management. These skills can be provided in a non-threatening way in schools where there is a unique advantage of a captive audience.
- **Love and empathy:** There is no doubt that the parents and teachers love the teenagers; but somehow, that love does not find its way to them, it is lost somewhere in the flood of anxiety and concern. Let us find ways to express love as much as, if not more, we express concern or anger towards teenagers.
- **Avoid lectures and constant instructions:** If you are a parent to a teenager, you have used lectures and instructions many times so far. And if so, you



have also realised how hopelessly ineffective those can be. Keeping in mind the earlier discussion about teenage brain, the grown-ups can use more of adult-to-adult communication to impart knowledge rather than a lecture.

- **Peer education:** Peers understand each other well because they are going through the same phase of life and they speak the same language. We can train peers to support and educate other teenagers.
- **Law and apps:** Law gives us a guideline, saves us from frauds, and it also can be used as a deterrent. It has been proven that discussing the laws with teenagers helps them in responsible decision making. A general law-abiding atmosphere at home makes it easier to implement these.
- Using the philosophy 'poison destroys poison', multiple apps have been developed which block certain sites or filter others. Apps monitor screen use. They also restrict the use by enforcing time limits.
- **Role modelling:** For the parents who are still struggling with technology, being a role model can be quite challenging. They need to be mindful of how they make use of the digital space, how they balance the real and virtual world and the way

they handle the information overload. A healthy acceptance of the new, and a respectful adherence to tradition is vital. Teenagers can learn this by observing the adults.

### Good Digital Citizen

A citizen is generally defined as a person who, by virtue of birth or naturalisation, is a member of a community, possessing specific rights and responsibilities within that community. Essentially, it's a legal relationship between an individual and a country, where the individual enjoys certain privileges and is expected to fulfil certain obligations. If we extend this definition to the digital space, the users are the citizens of the digital nation. The persons have the privilege of many benefits; at the same time, they also must be accountable for their actions. This involves taking care of the space, being empathetic towards others, to make sure that the space is kept healthy and tidy. They should respect other's opinions and rights even if they do not agree with them. They must ensure safety of themselves and others. And most of all, it should be a constructive relationship, where the users benefit by evolving and growing with the digital world!

Let us come together to empower our teenagers to be good cyber citizens and to make their world cybersafe. □