# NEW MEDIA, NEW RULES

## Simple advice for complex times: parenting a digital generation.

*by Bobbie Eisenstock, Ph.D.*

Do you blog? Text message? E-mail photos from your cell phone? Download music to an MP3 player or upload videos to share on a website? Do you listen to radio over the Internet or tune in to podcasts? Do you play MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games)?

Chances are, your kids do some or all of these things. Yet most parents find that it's virtually impossible to keep up. Consider the cell phone. No longer just for talking, it has morphed into a digital camera, video-game platform, text- and picture-messaging device, music player, and web connection. If you want to watch a movie, choose your screen: TV, portable DVD, desktop, laptop, video iPod, or cell phone. When you're in the mood for music, you can listen to a radio, CD player, or a playlist on your PC, MP3 player, or cell phone.



### RAISING THE DIGITAL GENERATION

For parents who grew up with TV, radio, and LPs, new interactive media can present a parenting challenge. By preadolescence, kids are watching TV while listening to music online, posting comments on blogs, chatting on cell phones, juggling three or more IMs, *and* Googling sources for a homework assignment. Raising the digital generation requires a new set of rules—but before setting limits, it's important to understand the role media play in kids' lives today.

**Multitasking packs more content into less time and can affect adolescents' ability to perform certain tasks proficiently.** Surveys of Gen Yers' media habits find them to be marathon multitaskers. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation's Generation M study, kids 8–18 years old are not reducing their TV watching or music listening—they're simply using these media at the same time as they go online or play video games. That means kids may be using media $6\frac{1}{2}$ hours a day, but they're cramming in $8\frac{1}{2}$ hours of content. Kids with wired bedrooms tend to use even more media.

Some experts are concerned about technology overload among young people, who tend to overestimate their ability to multitask. It's one thing to have the digital dexterity to perform several tasks at the same time, and it's quite another to perform them proficiently. Research suggests

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that the area of the brain responsible for efficient multitasking develops during the late teen years. So until then, children and adolescents who multitask may not perform an individual task to the best of their ability—particularly challenging tasks that require them to focus and process a lot of information. Unplugging kids from media while doing schoolwork and other demanding activities can only help improve the quality of their performance.

**Teens are media consumers and content creators who are turning the media environment into a virtual extension of the teen lifestyle.** Unlike previous generations, Gen Yers live in a media world in which they consume *and* create content. According to the PEW Internet and American Life Project, more than half of all 12- to 17-year-olds—12 million teens—are content creators. Five million keep a personal webpage,

parents who are "newbies" to technology may find communicating with their teens a bit daunting unless they take a cyber crash course. Being able to talk tech with them may give parents an entry point to their teen's world.

**Tech savvy does not mean safety savvy.** While the Internet can be empowering for tech-savvy teens, it can also be perilous because they lack the skills and maturity to deal with certain situations. Teens are not thinking about the consequences of their actions when they publicly post personal details about their lives, harass or bully classmates and teachers, and interact with strangers who may not be who they say they are. Many young people are unwittingly creating a cyber trail that may come back to haunt them. Using that online trail, high schools now suspend or expel students for cyber abuse, college recruiters screen applicants for risky behaviors,

the technology, keep informed about kids' techno-experiences, and teach them to protect their cyber privacy and personal safety. Start by asking kids to show you what they know and where they go. Register for a blog and create a profile, visit a chatroom, listen to a podcast, play a video game, text and picture message. Become a **POS** who monitors kids' disclosure of **ASL** and mediates **F2Fs**. Translation: you need to be a *parent over shoulder* to make sure kids do not share their *age, sex, and location* or arrange to meet *face-to-face* with an online "friend." That's net-speak and part of basic training for parenting the cyber generation. Once parents understand the risks and rewards, they can make age-appropriate guidelines that help kids think critically about responsibly taking advantage of the emerging opportunities in the digital culture. ::

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four million blog, and eight million read blogs. They're posting original stories, poetry, artwork, photography and videos, plus remixing images, songs, or videos into their own creations, and inadvertently developing communication skills while enhancing their self-esteem.

The Internet has become the virtual mall, where teens can hang out 24/7. Developmentally, the Internet is a perfect playground for adolescence. At this stage, they are searching for their identity while seeking social acceptance from their peers and struggling for independence from their parents. The cyber culture provides unlimited opportunities for adolescents to try out different identities and new behaviors, socialize, create a sense of community, and separate from their parents. Self-authored blogs and webpages, along with customized playlists for MP3s, avatars on IMs, wallpaper on desktops, and ring tones for cell phones, are just a few ways adolescents are using new media to express their individuality and mark their passage into young adulthood. Since teens are now ensconced in two realities—the real world and the cyber world—

employers monitor workers for character flaws, and sexual predators search for victims.

Yes, the Internet has a dark side. The latest incidents range from minors using blogs to post photos of themselves with guns or drinking alcohol to making racial slurs or threatening classmates with physical harm. As a prank, two high school sophomores posted a threat to shoot up their school on MySpace.com—prosecutors arrested them on suspicion of terrorism and charged them with malicious use of a telecommunications service, punishable by a $500 fine and up to six months in prison. A 16-year-old girl was molested in the parking lot of her after-school job by a 37-year-old man who knew where she worked because she posted it on her MySpace profile. Parents need to be proactive to safeguard children and teens as they venture into the digital world.

## WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

Parents have always played an important role in helping kids use media wisely. Yet many parents may be unaware of what teens do online because, for fear of having their Internet privileges taken away, kids tend to abide by the unwritten rule that what happens online, stays online.

Parents' best course of action is to learn to use

## Related Resources

**BlogSafety.com**
www.blogsafety.com

**The Cyber Tipline**
www.cybertipline.com

**"Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year-olds."**
www.kff.org/entmedia/7251.cfm
Report by Donald F. Roberts, Ph.D., Ulla G. Foehr, and Victoria Rideout (Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, March 2005)

**Net Family News**
netfamilynews.com

**"Online Victimization: A Report on the Nation's Youth."**
www.netsmartz.org/safety/statistics.htm
Youth Internet-safety survey by David Finkelhor, Kimberly J. Mitchell, and Janis Wolak (Crimes Against Children Research Center, June 2000)

**SafeTeens.org**
www.safeteens.org

**"Teen Content Creators and Consumers."**
www.pewinternet.org/ppf/r/166/report_display.asp
Report by Amanda Lenhart and Mary Madden (Pew Internet & American Life Project, November 2005)

**WiredSafety**
www.wiredsafety.org

For more on ethical behavior in a digital age, go to
www.ciconline.org/enrichment/digitalethics