



# NEWSLETTER



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## **HOPE Newsletter - Issue 49 Parents' Social Media Habits are Teaching Children the Wrong Lessons**

By Stacey Steinberg



My friend Lindsay was packing the next day's lunches when she noticed her son Cole's phone vibrating on the kitchen counter. Curious to see who was texting him so late, she

picked up the phone and entered the password. Like most middle school parents, Lindsay had told Cole that she would occasionally check his phone. She wasn't snooping, she told herself, she was simply doing what any concerned mother would do.

What she saw was disturbing. The text was an angry message from Cole's best friend's older sister, Becky. As Lindsay looked back through Cole's messages, she saw why Becky was so upset. She opened Instagram on Cole's phone, where he had posted a picture of Becky, one of his closest friends, in her bathing suit, bending over to pick something up. It wasn't a flattering image, and by the looks of the picture, Becky did not know that her photograph had been taken. The photo had garnered many comments, most of which made fun of Becky's appearance.

Obviously, my friend was not happy, and she knew she had to do something. Our children rely on parents to help them understand how to navigate relationships in both the real world and online. "Tweens and teens are stuck between wanting to be seen/liked, and understanding the impact of actions," says Jennifer Sager, a psychologist in Gainesville, Fla. Children are going through tremendous inner confusion with regard to what they know they *should* do and what they think their friends *want* them to do. "An electronic share, 'thumbs up,' or in many cases, 'thumbs down,' is a placeholder for real self-esteem."

So was Cole's post simply an example of the impulsive and irrational teenage behavior Sager describes? Or was it something he has learned? As Lindsay stared at her son's phone, she couldn't help but recall the many times she'd posted pictures of him doing embarrassing things. Many of the pictures and stories were shared before Cole even knew what Facebook was. But as Cole got older, the sharing continued. He occasionally saw the pictures and seemed embarrassed, but he rarely asked his mother to take them down. Lindsay wondered if he ever felt empowered enough to do so. She was concerned that her own sharing had somehow influenced the habits Cole was developing.

Many of today's young teens were born in an era before social media. By the time they entered preschool, most of their parents had Facebook accounts. And many parents — new to social media — excitedly shared their children's personal and embarrassing stories. I have written in the past about how parents must consider the effect this sharing has on a child's psychological development. Children model the behavior of their parents, and when parents constantly share personal details about their children's lives, and then monitor their posts for likes and followers, children take note. While most parents have their children's best interests at heart when they share personal stories on social media, there is little guidance to help them navigate parenting in the digital age.

Children are constantly absorbing messages from many sources, including parents. They mimic these observed behaviors in adolescence and adulthood. It is quite possible that parental (over) sharing has taught children that sharing another person's

personal pictures and stories is expected and appropriate. Indeed, many children spent their elementary school years with little recourse to their parents' online sharing.

Parents can help their children better understand the implications of nonconsensual online sharing even if they've shared about their children in the past. One powerful way to do this is to offer their older children the opportunity to delete posts that cause embarrassment or shame. Before sharing any future posts about their children, parents can ask permission. This can help teens understand the power and the importance of controlling one's own digital footprint. In turn, this helps teens understand why it is critical that they, too, obtain consent before adding to, or altering, the digital footprints of others.

After we spoke, Lindsay had a conversation with her son. While he quickly deleted the picture from his Instagram feed, much of the damage had already been done, causing hurt and embarrassment to Becky. To help Cole understand, Lindsay pulled up her own Facebook posts, many photos featuring Cole as a very young child. She watched as he processed each picture. While there was some laughter, she could tell Cole was also surprised by many of her disclosures. They talked about the importance of controlling one's own digital footprint. To that end, Lindsay offered to delete posts that Cole found embarrassing or inappropriate. After reflecting on the conversation with his mom, Cole offered a sincere apologize to Becky. He knew she still had a right to be angry, but he hoped that by taking responsibility for his actions, they could start to make amends.

I, like Lindsay, share pictures of my children online. I try to do so responsibly and to consider the best practices I've gleaned from my research. Perhaps most importantly, I no longer post pictures of my oldest child without asking him first. While I've spent years exploring this issue as an academic and as a mother, I still find it difficult to balance my drive to share my story while still protecting my children's privacy. It is too early to know how my own social media sharing practices will one day affect my children's online sharing habits. I can only hope that by being thoughtful before pressing share on social media, I am instilling in my children the importance of doing the same on their own social media feeds.

We are only beginning to develop road maps to guide us as we build communities and expand our lives through social media. As we explore the competing issues of protecting privacy and curating our lives online, it might be time to rethink our habits and reset the message, to teach our children the importance of consent and help them become responsible communicators and upstanding online citizens.

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