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Written by **Clinton Alexander** on August 16, 2016

Social Media Culture Believed to Have a Negative Effect on Youth

According to a study released July 14, 2016 by the University of Birmingham (U.K.), parents have become increasingly concerned with the impact of social media on children and teenagers alike. With this latest generation of youth — many of whom are connected to the digital world 24 hours a day — it's an issue more parents are paying attention to.

According to a poll commissioned by researchers, "More than half of UK parents think popular social media sites hamper their children's moral development." While a short few decades ago, it would have been a punishment to send a youth to his bedroom, children and teens are increasingly holing up alone in their rooms by choice. Alone and with naught but digital media platforms to teach them honor and morality.

Forty percent of parents indicated they are "'concerned' or 'extremely concerned' about the negative and potentially harmful impact of social media," especially about the potential impact social media can have on youth.

A 2015 study on a related topic by the *Daily Mail* revealed 57 percent of youth ages 11 to 16 use social media platform Snapchat, and more than 50 percent use Facebook daily.

The recent study highlights a wide range of concerns voiced by parents. As youth delve into a communication pipeline that can glamourize fame, fortune, and image, the concern over a lack of moral development has taken center stage. When images of jet-setting celebrities, which focus on nothing other than wealth and status, are being pushed on young people already concerned with body image, the lacking moral compass can leave them adrift.

Respondents to the University of Birmingham poll named a number of strengths they felt were left wanting in the social media world, a world that has captivated so many: "24% said forgiveness and self-control was least present, followed by honesty (21%), fairness (20%) and humility (18%)." Negative traits parents found to be showcased via social media were anger, hostility, arrogance, ignorance, bad judgment, and hatred.

"Social media is here to stay," commented Dr. Blaire Morgan of the University of Birmingham. "So, by learning more about this relationship we should be able to maximize the benefits of its use and avoid the pitfalls." While it is true there are a plethora of dangers tied to activity in the digital world, the study did find multiple positive aspects associated with social media. Many parents saw such character strengths as humor, creativity, love, courage, and appreciation of beauty at least once a month. Doctor

Morgan noted that while the character strengths were seen significantly less often, their placement in the poll gave room for optimism.

Given the combination of dangers and character strengths associated with social media use, the question arises, "What is a parent to do?" The initial answer is simple enough: One of the chief things parents can do is to monitor their child's Internet and social media activities and habits. Second is to limit (especially young teens) the volume of access to digital media. Instead of allowing youth to hide away by themselves using "social media" to become anything but social, make them be present in a room with others, and have rules governing interaction with others in the home.

A number of other suggestions were pointed out in an article entitled "13 Tips for Monitoring Kids' Social Media." Touching on the appropriateness of children using digital media platforms, the article in *Parenting Magazine* pointed out a good place to start is "No Underage Facebooking." Facebook rules state that one must be of 13 years of age to set up an account (although Facebook admits that as many as 7.5 million users are under that age.)

Too, parents should consciously help develop morals in their children. Home is where children's moral compass should be developed. When children who have yet to fully develop that "compass" are exposed to a world where no boundaries are placed on emotion, and values often run counter to what a positive home life would be, those children can end up with a "skewed" perspective of what is mentally healthy. The home atmosphere is where youth are being prepared for life. When exposed to the negative aspects of the virtual world, prepubescent youth without mentoring parents have nothing to balance the data and emotions they are exposed to.

Another suggestion in the *Parenting Magazine* article was to "Create Ground Rules." Says the author Jeana Lee Tahnk,

> If your kids are old enough to be using the computer on their own, they are old enough to understand that there are rules they need to abide by. Breaking them should not have a lesser consequence than if they broke a rule in the offline world.

Those rules should "ground" kids and teens in reality. One organization, the Family Online Safety Institute (https://www.fosi.org/) has a number of resources available to parents. One of those resources is a downloadable contract for parents and youth that lays out terms by which digital and social media may be used. Contained within are stipulations governing such things as individual and family privacy, the type of material that may be shared, what type of "virtual-behavior" is acceptable.

There are a number of other suggestions in the *Parenting Magazine* article, such as keeping family computers in a central location within the home and limiting cellphone use. The bottom line is, it all comes down to parenting. Have the ground rules set up and be as aware as possible about your children's and teens' online habits.

As Dr. Morgan noted, social media is here to stay, and youth will no doubt utilize the various platforms to connect with the world. The question is, how mentally prepared will those youth be?

Set the boundaries and communicate about the materials they are bound to encounter. Reinforce the positive messages found in the various social media platforms. While it may not be possible or healthy to completely shelter youth from the outside world (eventually they will have to encounter the world without their parents), it is possible to take age appropriate measures to prepare them for the world they will encounter.

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