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SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE MIDDLE SCHOOL CHILD

Your 11-year-old son begs you for a cell phone. You are ambivalent because you think that all his friends have one and you don't want your child to be left out of contacts to get together. You rationalize that at least he can always be reached by you if they need you. You want to upgrade yours to the latest model, so you give him your old smart phone. With that one decision comes the world of social media access. How will knowing what you learned about in *Surviving and Thriving In The Middle School Years* presentation influence your parenting approach to this issue?

- We know that a tween **underdeveloped frontal cortex** cannot manage the distraction or the temptations that come with social media use. Remember while you start teaching responsible use of technology now, know that you will not be able to teach the maturity that social media requires. We know social media can be an addictive form of entertainment and companionship
- We know at this stage in their development **risk taking is high and impulse control is low**. Since the **cognitive brain is still being formed**, the need for your teen to be attached to your family is just as important now as when they were younger. Make sure that connection is strong. While they need attachments to their friends, they need healthy family attachment more. There are way too many scenarios on social media that require **self-control**. Tweens aren't yet equipped to navigate those things thoughtfully and responsibly. The limitations of their young brains may overrule what smart parents say.
- We know that a **tween seeks acceptance from his/her peers**. The world of their social scenes is often shifting, making new friends, leaving old friends to join a new group, They have a **"more is better" mentality** which is a challenging match for social media. They may feel compelled to see how many likes they got on Tick Tock, how many friends they have on Instagram that follow them or encourage them to overdo their friend connections by wanting to be connected too often during the day for fear of missing out. Social media may negatively impact their understanding of friendship
- While one can argue that there are certain benefits of social media such as connection to their peer group, the costs are very high during the teen years when **their brain development is operating at peak performance for learning new things**. It is easy for young adolescents to waste too much of their time and **too much of their brain in a digital world**. We know from many studies that it is nearly impossible for them to balance it all.

If our role as parents is to help our kids slow down, be their manager not their CEO, and practice critical thinking skills, what can we do to support appropriate use of social media and technology?

- Delay access. Place greater importance on developing personal relationships first.
 - Have a social media/cell phone contract that you and your child write up together. Talk about behavioral expectations
 - Set up parameters that include following their accounts. Explain that nothing is private in the digital world so it should not be private to parents. Make sure privacy settings are in place. Encourage your child to have conversations they want to keep private in person if they don't want it on social media.
 - Create family accounts instead of individual tween accounts. This allows kids to keep up with friends in a safer social media environment.
 - Allow social media only on large screens in plain view so the temptation for reckless use is lessened. The more secret the access, the more potential for bad choices.
 - Monitor how much time your child spends on social media a day. Set one time each day for three days a week for your child to check their social media. Friend requests is checked by you
 - Facilitate them planning face to face time with their friends. Help them plan social get togethers such as leave phones at the door party, a home movie night, game night, or host a bonfire. Remember they crave these social gatherings.
 - Spend more real non-tech time together. They need to be able to rely on family time to detach from social media drama. Set your technology aside, especially at dinner time, social time and bedtime.
 - Teach them to share scary things with you.
 - Despite your best efforts, middle schoolers may naturally hesitate to tell you when something bad happens online. They don't want you to know because they don't want you to take away their access. While this may be how they feel, we parents have to find a way to convince them they won't be in trouble for talking to us. Always start with empathy, listen to their concerns, and help them problem solve challenging social media situations. Praise them for coming to you and their efforts to find a solution.
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- Adapted from Melanie Hempen of Families Managing Media