



Taming Technology

Monitoring Teens in the Techno World

By Kay Kosak Abrams, Ph.D.

Dear Dr. Kay,

Mark, our 13-year-old, is in seventh grade. His temptation to chat using AOL's Instant Message with his many friends takes over his best intentions to do homework.

When Mark's grades slip, we insist that he do his IMing at night after his homework is complete. However, he does his work on the computer, and we cannot always monitor him. How can we help Mark resist the temptation to engage in so much techno talk?



Dear Parent,

Teens face a whirlwind of technological temptations, from text messaging on cell phones to IMing and keeping up with social profiles on Facebook. In addition to handheld video games, computer games and Xbox, 7-year-olds have MP3 players and 10-year-olds have their own portable DVD players. Children are flooded with stimulating distractions that are far more gratifying than their "boring" homework.

Your teen's investment in techno toys

will likely continue to trump his investment in academics. Ironically, we parents hand out the tempting toys and all the Internet privileges, while at the same time, we hold out high expectations for academic excellence. Imagine if your boss offered you many temptations to play while also expecting high productivity. What a bind!

Many teens lack the maturity and motivation to prioritize work over their pressing social needs. Some resort to defenses of denial, believing they are fine. All is well until they are backed in the corner and have to face the fact that all those techno temptations have taken a toll.

Parents set up rules to encourage compliance in order to shape and reinforce behaviors, such as studying and obtaining good grades. We aim to teach children to monitor their homework and also manage their social needs. How much influence do we have, and when do we step back to let teens live and learn?

I live and work with teenagers. So, I began asking teens their opinions about Instant Messaging as a distracting factor, and therefore a bad influence, with respect to its impact on homework.

Several teenagers acknowledged that they have had to learn some lessons the hard way. Most said they can post an away message when they need to get to work. Several teens said, "When it is mindless homework, I can listen to music or IM, but when I need to study for an exam or write a paper, IMing has to go."

Most teens reported the belief that by high school, they should be allowed to monitor the temptations of technology and create their own study habits. Other teens admitted that they are addicted to screens and have little to no ability to resist the temptations to avoid work.

Here are a few tips to help you think about ways to influence your son Mark's motivation to resist Instant Messaging and choose homework.

- Privileges are to be earned based on maturity. Be mindful about when to give and how much to give when it comes to techno toys. Try to gauge the giving of privilege with the readiness of your teen.

- Some parents find it helpful to set up one computer with no internet access for doing school work.

- Set up homework time, if possible, as a quiet time for the entire family, after parents are home from work, with all screens and phones turned off.

- Model sustained concentration by slowing down the tempo and pace of your life. Frenzied households that thrive on stimulation create frenzied kids who cannot tolerate the boredom of sustained work.

- Recognize that some children can concentrate sufficiently while multitasking. If this is the case, there is no problem. In a world that is full of distraction and stimulation, how fortunate they are.

- Children and teens who are highly distracted to do IMing in favor of homework need consistent concrete RULES to promote greater productivity.

- Teach your child the advantage of working in a quiet area, focusing on one subject at a time, with a short break to IM in between working sessions. You will need to be present to enforce this system of moderation until it becomes habit.

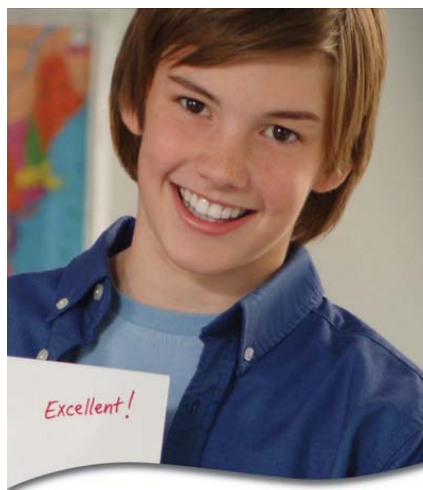
- When you catch your teen sneaking or lying in order to IM whenever he likes, make it clear that the freedom to use his own judgment will be lost and the IM program will have to be taken off the computer.

- Caution! Teaching children takes time, diligence and consistency, with a no-nonsense,

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"I tried everything to help my son with school. I wish we'd tried Sylvan first."

—Lisa B.



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Safely Embracing the World Teaching Your Children to Protect Themselves

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Predators Have Vulnerabilities, Too

This may seem a bit overwhelming because so many different kinds of children can be vulnerable to mistreatment. However, predators have vulnerabilities, too. They are terrified of being found out. A predator's worst fear is a child who speaks out when something doesn't feel right.

So what can you do to shore up your child's defenses without frightening her? Perhaps the single most important step you can take is to teach your child to notice and express her feelings about her safety. A child who listens to her instincts will be better able to spot real threats when they arise. This essential skill can be coached in a positive way by teaching your child to check to see if she is in her "comfort zone," particularly in situations where you suspect she may not feel comfortable. When you feel your child is mature enough, you can help her problem solve about specific threats (e.g., What route to school feels safest and why? If someone near you makes you nervous, where can you go to feel safer?). Help your child to see fear as the first step in problem solving, not as something to be ashamed of.

Make sure your child understands the difference between aggression, passivity and appropriate assertion (see "Safety Basics" sidebar). Then model, coach and reinforce appropriate self-assertion at every age. Children may need help, in particular, to understand that they must assert themselves if something "doesn't feel right," even if someone bigger or older tells them to do something. Asserting safety limits can be hard even when strangers are involved, because children usually think that adults know best. It can be even trickier for a child to assert safety limits with someone she knows, particularly someone who is supposed to have some authority over her. Misunderstandings could potentially cause more hard feelings in these situations than when a stranger is involved. Even so, children are mistreated more often by people known to them than by strangers. Thus, it is essential for your child to know how to politely speak up with adults she knows. This discussion can be kept positive by focusing on potential misunderstandings that can be resolved through appropriate self-assertion. Remind your child to stick to the specifics of what happened and what she wants to happen instead. Make sure she knows she can come to you with these concerns if she feels uncomfortable talking to the person directly. If the other person feels offended, remind him that your child is only asking him to stop a specific behavior and is not making accusations. If your child has practice speaking up politely but clearly about little things like this, it will be easier for her to act on her fears in potentially dangerous situations.

Make sure you've discussed safety basics and dirty tricks with your child (see sidebar). Trust your own sense of your child about what kinds of examples she can handle at a given age without becoming upset. Even young children can learn from role-playing

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Dirty Tricks

Help me: Children are less likely to perceive a person as threatening if he seems to be in distress. Remind your child that if a person really is in distress, your child can be safe and helpful by immediately getting an adult or the police to help the person.

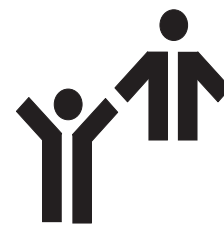
I'll help you: Children are more likely to trust someone who seems to be helpful. Remind your child that a seemingly helpful stranger should not be trusted any more than any other stranger. A genuinely helpful person does not want anything in return for his help!

You hurt my feelings: Predators often try to make a child feel guilty for making reasonable attempts at self-protection. Children need to be told explicitly that it's more important to be safe than to be nice. Remind your child that, as long as she is not being aggressive, there is nothing wrong with telling someone to leave her alone.

Our little secret: A skilled manipulator may use a series of shared "secrets" to form a bond with the child and at the same time drive a wedge between the child and her parents. These predators usually begin with a seemingly harmless secret, such as giving the child a special gift, but asking her not to tell anyone. The child may feel afraid to tell her parents if something more alarming happens because she's already been manipulated into keeping little secrets from her parents.

Hurry: Predators often create a false sense of urgency (e.g., a false emergency), because it's easier to confuse and mislead people when they feel rushed. Teach your child that it's always important to stop, take a deep breath and stay calm in urgent situations, especially if strangers are involved.

Trust me: Predators often use phrases like "Trust me" or "I promise" when they see that a con isn't working. Their intent is to make a child feel guilty and perhaps ignore her self-protective instincts. Phrases like this are a big warning sign in any situation.



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dirty tricks scenarios in order to develop self-confidence and assertion skills in a range of potentially confusing situations. As children mature, they will become able to understand the more complex issues of manipulation and intimidation. Peer conflicts will provide ample opportunities to discuss these realities and to problem solve them. It's always painful to have to tell a child that some people may lie or act mean, even if they seem like nice people. It's not necessary to focus on exactly what bad people might do. However, your child will be better able to protect herself if you address the issue of manipulation directly.

It may seem a bit overwhelming to try to share all of this information with your child. In fact, it's not necessary to have a big, serious

talk with your child about interpersonal safety. It's much more effective to have many short, simple talks with your child across various ages. Preschoolers and early elementary-age children need simple, clear-cut rules. These are easy to remember, but they won't cover every situation. Middle-school children can appreciate more complex rules that can help them in a broader range of circumstances. Remember that children often learn more by doing than talking, so focus on coaching your child to be assertive and self-aware in all aspects of her behavior.

Teresa Elliott, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist on staff at Kingsbury, a comprehensive center serving children and families through a school specializing in learning disabilities, a tutoring program and a diagnostic testing center.

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matter-of-fact approach. Avoid screaming, arguing and dramatising.

- Be sure to gently compliment and attend to the positive behaviors you are expecting.

Our new world of instant communication is of great benefit and is not going away any time soon. Our teens are growing up in a sound bite, newflash culture with cut and paste ways to communicate and manage information. Most teens struggle with the balance of work and play. Many will have to learn lessons the hard way, perhaps through experiencing regret and even failure. Parents can only tighten the reins so much to teach the ties between productivity and privilege.

Your son, Mark, can mature in his awareness that resisting techno temptations and engaging in self-discipline pays off. Teaching our teens how to know when work comes before play, and when play comes before work, is a lifelong lesson. We are all adjusting to the ongoing whirlwind of techno temptation in the face of our needs to play and to also be productive.

Kay Kosak Abrams is a clinical psychologist in private practice. Her Parenting With Confidence Coffeehouse meets on the fourth Thursday of each month. For more information, visit her website, www.kayabrams.com.



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Pee Wee II	July 11-12	9-12	\$90	\$85
Jr FUN Camp	July 9-13	9-12	\$225	\$195
Jr FUN Camp	July 9-13	<1-4>	\$225	\$195
Jr FUN Camp	July 16-20	9-12	\$225	\$195
Jr SKILLS	July 16-20	9-3	\$395	\$349
Pee Wee I	July 23-24	9-12	\$90	\$85
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Jr FUN Camp	Aug 6-10	9-12	\$225	\$195
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