

CHAPTER ONE

Basic Skills

Parenting virtually isn't much different than just parenting; both keep us young and full of joy, usually.

Technology is great, but common sense is better! All of my life I've had a love affair with technology. I also love my family. But technology can do things for me they cannot—and vice versa—and technology can enhance my life with them and relationship to them, and others, like nothing else.

On the other hand, I can really hate technology. When it doesn't work it is an absolute nightmare. You know what I mean—you've been there too. Years ago a cartoon drawing circulated on email of a duck, hammer in hand, poised to smash a computer monitor. The caption said "Hit Enter." Everyone who has ever used a computer—for anything—knows how that duck is feeling at that very moment. But it doesn't stop us from coming back, again and again, because even though that level of frustration can drive us to do things we wouldn't ordinarily entertain, when the problem is resolved, we are back in love with the idea that our lives have been

and continue to be enhanced.

The World Wide Web (the files, pages, software, etc. that we actually see when we log on) and the Internet (the physical hardware: servers, modems, wires, routers, etc. where the files live or transfer between) are really not such a technological barrier that our society cannot learn to manage and even control its impact. Is it moving us forward faster? I believe so. Can we keep up with the pace and maintain cultural mores and values? I hope so. Are we doing that now? Not so much.

First, let me join the chorus of technophiles and digital literacy researchers and everyone under age 18 to say exactly what you expect us to say: THE INTERNET IS HERE TO STAY. Trust me...it isn't going away. It will definitely change, expand, warp into something even more amazing, but the basic global connectivity it has brought us, barring a global electrical blackout, will not disappear. Not tomorrow. Not ever. And I, for one, am at once ecstatic and terrified to see the future it will bring. So should you be.

But what many frequently forget is that THE F2F WORLD IS NOT GOING AWAY EITHER! That pro-

posals from the one person in the world you want to spend the rest of your life with, that final interview for the dream job – will likely happen in a F2F environment rather than online, although even in those areas there is movement in that direction. It is our job as parents to remind our children there is a F2F world, and to teach them where the “off” button is once in a while (not all the time), and to set the boundaries so that they have freedom to experiment in ways that minimize the risk of harm.

In my opinion, and in the opinion of most parenting and family researchers, good parenting with or without technology can be boiled down to three critical concepts, the first of which is:

Being There

Being there means creating and maintaining an open line of communication and dialogue with your children that actively engages them in the conversation, goal setting, decision-making and other things that are required as critical facets of the growing-up process. Put bluntly, they need our help and we can't help if we aren't there for them. If we don't know what's going on in their lives. If we don't appreciate their lows and highs

as real and overwhelming and scary and wonderful and frustrating and amazing in the world that they live in. They do not live in an adult world as adults. Mostly, they're doing the best they can with what they have. But we as the adults could do so much more, if only we took the time.

Growing up is the most fundamental youth-adult partnership. It's been around a long time and isn't likely to stop happening anytime soon. But parents are busy people, confronted with what, in their minds, are real problems and issues that take precedence over worrying about the math test or basketball game or something someone might or might not have said about or to your child or a friend. The fact is...these are real problems and issues for your child. From an adult perspective they seem trivial and even amusing at times, but the things that concern your child are real nonetheless.

Alas, our youth has flown by, and we long for the perceived freedom and lack of responsibility our children have. Under major stress, many parents find themselves even envying their child what appears to us to be a stress-free life. But that is our perception, not theirs. Parents are blessed – and cursed – with having

been able to experience life both from the carefree youth perspective, and from the ulcer-creating stress of the adult life.

Fundamentals of youth-adult partnerships require engaging youth, and engaging with youth to create something wonderful that benefits both. Youth-Adult partnerships can take several forms. All are appropriate given the situation and availability of resources. But all are very different in perspective of Being There.

Consider:

- Youth activities that have youth participating in a minor way. Adults think of the activity, plan the activity and implement the activity with or for youth. Can you think of any youth programs like this? There are many: school trips, summer camps, youth representatives on adult boards, etc.
- Youth activities that have adults supporting the activity with financing, transportation, logistics, etc.. These are thought of, planned and implemented by youth and have adults in a supporting role for the most part. This is also done widely

in school clubs, faith-based youth groups, and others.

- Youth or adult activities that use and value input from both adults and youth to think of, plan, and implement the event without tipping the balance toward one group or the other. These, for the most part, are rare.

Being there means being a passive and active participant in your child's world on a daily, weekly and monthly basis. It means participating in your child's world on the same levels you expect your child to participate in the family. You don't expect your five-year-old to support the family, but you certainly might expect him or her to put away things, prioritize responsibly, help pick movies for family film night, plan and participate in cooking meals or weekly shopping, as well as having input into family vacations or décor.

Conversely, your teenager doesn't expect you to do homework (I hope), take phone calls from friends, drop everything to chauffeur him or her around, go to school dances or parties with friends (although I would never discourage you from attending, you won't and should not be there as a friend). However, your teen

might appreciate help getting started on a writing assignment, selecting classes for next year, scheduling access to a family car or finances, and more. And he or she likely doesn't care about the trials and tribulations YOU had to face as a teenager who had to (and this is my father's voice here), "Carry my shoes around my neck to save on shoe leather, erase my papers every night to have clean paper the next day, get up at 4am to milk the cows, and walk in snowdrifts 4 feet deep 5 miles to school – uphill both ways – five days a week." Do you think we believed that? Not a chance. But it still makes me smile and rethink what tagline I want my children to remember me for!

There are many websites and resources that help you learn how to put in place the fundamentals of what in research circles is known as "Positive Youth Development" principles. These are listed in the Resources section of this book.

But to begin with, here are some ideas:

- Let your children know what some of the problems you are facing are, even asking and seriously listening, for their input and suggestions.

Take the perspective that these are family issues, not just yours. If expenses need to be trimmed, ask the children to participate in turning out lights, taking on extra duties, thank them for their participation and help with a special treat out of some of the savings.

- Text with your child if you've given them a cell phone, Nintendo DS or other communication device that uses texting. They don't email.
- Talk about technology and technology use. Engage them in helping you find technological answers to your daily tasks. Discuss new technologies and the many formats they take. Before allowing access to a particular game or website, ask your child to give you a tour and be present when he or she sets up the account.
- Take your son or daughter to dinner once a month. Just the two of you. Make it somewhere special for both you and your child. Discuss positive things—goals, dreams, current loves, travel—whatever keeps you both laughing.
- Schedule private time at home each day. Get up early and do a devotional together, religious or otherwise, and discuss concerns for the day and ways to approach them. My husband and our

son always had a time at night where they caught up and shared ideas and issues. I used the car to have discussions both fun and serious. We were both captive audiences.

- Plan family F2F and online activities together that are fun for everyone, then follow through with participating gladly and with verve. Remember, I said fun for everyone!

Next in the basics for parenting well virtually, is the concept of: vlog? Do you have any idea what I just asked? Most any twelve-year-old wouldn't remember any of these, but would know exactly what I asked.

Being Aware

FACT: Kids are the digital natives, and everyone over 20 is a digital immigrant.

Think of it in these terms — do you remember the first email you sent? The first txt? Your first blog or vlog? Do you have any idea what I just asked?

We aren't aware of what our kids are doing in the virtual world because we just aren't native to it. It's as simple as that. Kids are naturally — and this isn't

unique to this generation—early adopters. For a lot of reasons, they gravitate to and want to immerse themselves in whatever is new, bright, glitzy, cool, savvy, etc. And these days, that's technology. There is much more about this in Chapter 3.

But for now, let's just focus on the fact that adults for the most part don't use technology in the same way, and aren't as ready to accept the changes it requires, as youth are. I think we can agree on that. We love our technology, but we hate to upgrade. Digital natives have no such fears or constraints. Upgrading is the name of the game.

Every previous generation of parents since 1440 (see Chapter 2) has been able to say that they had once been six, twelve, fifteen—and make a case for understanding the world their kids live in. Not true today. That is not to say that we can't become socialized into this new way of thinking and reacting in time and space, but it won't be easy and we'll never be native.

These suggestions may help you become more aware:

- Understand that just being home with a computer doesn't mean children are safe.

- Spend some time each week reading technology culture blogs or listening to them on – dare I say it – an MP3 player.
- Surf the websites your kids go to regularly and see the kind of things – good and bad – that appear. Talk about what you saw – both good and bad – with your child (another method of Being There)
- Find some colleagues or friends that do things online that you do not, particularly fun things, and learn more about why and how.
- Do some searching around on videos and blog reading to see the wide variety of excellent programming as well as junk that really exists.

As the digital immigrants we need to recognize that, after all, this is and always will be an alien culture. But that doesn't mean we can't generate survival skills and indeed over time begin to feel comfortable in it, if not native. But it is very important to realize that technology is no longer separate from the world we live in. Web 2.0 has moved us into a world that is no longer grounded (pun intended) in the F2F world. The online and the offline world is blended together with this always-on, always-connected, anytime, anywhere, every-

where, all the time and completely boundary-less virtual existence, and our physical life that is limited by time and space.

Giving access to the Internet without appropriate safeguards in place, which requires knowledge of what the dangers are, is the virtual equivalent of sending our eight and nine-year-olds to Europe...or China...or Africa...alone and unchaperoned. We don't know where our kids are and we haven't a clue how to protect and guide them in the vast expanse that is the Internet.

And that is our charge as parents, which leads us to the third and final basic skill of good parenting.

Being the Parent

You're the parent. You're footing the bill. And you are the one that is ultimately in control of and responsible for what and how your family uses technology. But you need ground under your feet to gain firm footing when you take a stance.

Whether they want to admit it or not, kids want us in their lives, both online and off. They do need our

patient and responsible guidance and experience to help them make sense of the world. Researchers have been abundantly clear on that issue. But parenting isn't about being a best buddy or trying to recapture lost youth. It's about accepting responsibility for the life you have brought into the world and becoming the mentor, role model and monitor they need us to be.

Just as we watch out for our kids when we help them learn to cross the street in the physical world, we need to be watching what they are doing in the virtual world. And they need to know we are there...supporting them, guiding them, parenting them...physically and virtually.

Parenting virtually does mean:

- Monitoring activity online, just as we monitor what they do in the physical world.
- Working together with our children to set limits according to what they have proven they are capable of handling responsibly.
- Modeling appropriate behavior in the online world, such as creating your own profile on your child's favorite social networking site that follows clear safety parameters and insisting that any-

one you link to follows those same rules.

- Helping keep the online world safe by reporting abuse, which is easy and efficient, while not totally effective, on every social networking website.
- Placing the computer in a highly visible area of your home, such as your family room or kitchen, and limiting use in private areas.
- Collecting and turning off cell phones at a certain time each night. One friend has a long power strip on the kitchen counter where all cell phones must go when her family comes home, turned off and waiting for the next day. She has 11 children in her home!

Kids see the abundant benefit in the new Web 2.0 culture. But typical to all younger generations...they dismiss or minimize the very real dangers and problems that technology brings with it. That's our job as parents—to look out for them and to teach them that the world isn't all marshmallows and candy canes. And frequently, as adults have since Aristotle's day, we over-react and want to change things back to the way they were...to OUR way. In this context, it means removing access...pulling the plug.

I will never advocate pulling the plug. I am a firm believer that technology has and does and will bring better things to how we work and live, and by preventing access to it for our kids we short-circuit their ability to learn to live wisely and safely in an ever-increasingly technological world. Shutting our eyes to the potential benefits that might be gained only exacerbates the problem.

Technology doesn't have to be the problem; technology just might be the answer.