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## *Teens, Technology, and Trouble*

*Our students are always online and always on their phones, and some of them are misusing technology in pretty bad ways. And it's affecting what we're trying to accomplish at our school. We've set numerous rules, and outlined a number of sanctions—some of which are severe. We've implemented blocks and filters. But I feel these strategies are piecemeal. There has got to be a better approach. There has got to be something else we can do.*

—educator from Florida

### **THE STORY OF SAM**

Awkward-looking, skinny, tremendously introverted, and simply not popular, Sam found growing up difficult. He couldn't hold eye contact with anyone; he couldn't talk to girls; and he spent a great deal of his time outside of school reading, studying, and playing with computers. He was the quintessential nerd. But don't be misled. Sam wanted to be popular. He wanted to wear the cool clothes; attract the attention of the cute cheerleaders; be strong and tough and confident; and display charm, wit, and humor at all times. But it didn't happen. And so Sam muddled his way through elementary and junior high school, often the victim of both benign

and malicious bullying, and just did his best to keep growing up. One particular instance vividly stands out in his mind.

The year was 1991. Sam was in eighth grade and was excited about wrapping up the school year and moving on to high school, where things might open up for him in terms of a social life and popularity. It could definitely happen, he thought to himself! In his physical education (PE) class, he was finally beginning to gain a little more confidence in himself, and he enjoyed casually chatting with one of the prettiest girls in the school—also an eighth grader. Well, it turned out that one of the sixth-grade guys who was also in that PE class had over the course of the quarter developed a crush on her . . . and had actually asked her “out”—and she had accepted. So, they were together. Sam didn’t think to modify his casual chatting behavior with the girl, which—in the sixth grader’s eyes—apparently was a threat to his blossoming romantic relationship. And so Sam was made fun of, and called names, and threatened, and disrespected, and embarrassed, and mistreated by the sixth grader and his friends—all classic forms of bullying.

Sam did his best to shrug off the verbal assault when it came and thought that the sixth grader would soon tire and move on to someone else. But he didn’t. Instead—straight out of a Saturday morning movie—the other boy challenged Sam to a fight at the flagpole after school. Sam had to show up—he was attempting to embrace a new image as he transitioned into high school, and it was necessary to leave behind any semblance of being a wimp. In addition, almost everyone in his PE class had heard about the challenge, and he could not lose face. The challenger was a sixth grader, for crying out loud! Even though the other boy was two years younger, he was physically bigger and stronger, so Sam steeled his nerves and tried to chase away the fear by psyching himself up. He could do this. And so he did—he met the sixth grader at the flagpole after the final school bell had rung that afternoon.

And Sam got the living crap beat out of him.

For many reasons, it was an instructive incident for Sam—who, by the way, is actually Sameer, one of the authors of this book. It was the last major experience with bullying that he had—partly due to his growing self-confidence, and partly due to a more mature high school culture where everyone was pretty much doing their own thing. He was lucky. Some adolescents continue to experience bullying into high school and beyond. Or even worse, some don’t make it that far.

## **WHAT WOULD HAPPEN TO SAM TODAY?**

As we began to write this book, we thought a lot about what might have transpired between the sixth grader and Sameer had computers and cell phones had been as ubiquitous as they are today. We wondered how he might have been cyberbullied given the very same circumstances. It is

possible that the sixth grader would have circulated malicious statements via text messaging about Sameer's race, the way he physically looked, the clothes and shoes and length of socks he wore, his "nerdiness," and his "wimpiness." In addition, many students frequented a Facebook "Fan Page" devoted to his junior high school; the sixth grader could have posted comments viciously insulting him and his motives. Using his smartphone, he could have taken a picture of Sameer in the locker room wearing only his underwear and then sent it via Twitter to the rest of the student body.

These behaviors would likely have occurred right alongside the bullying that was going on at school. That's because what happens online is often happening at school; research has shown that most cyberbullies are generally not strangers but peers from school.<sup>1</sup> So all of this begs the question: Why *did* it happen, and why *does* it happen? One of the big-picture reasons we keep coming back to has to do with the environment in which students learn, interact, and simply exist at school.

If you'll travel back in time with us, you'll recall that you did better in classes, grades, and schools where you felt safe, secure, noticed, supported, cared for, encouraged, caught up in school spirit, and a part of something bigger and grander than yourself—a "community" to which you really belonged. Sameer didn't have that growing up in middle school. When he was targeted, he didn't know what to do. He didn't know where to go for help. And his school environment was one in which bullying seemed commonplace, and the potential for being victimized in some way or another was in the back of his mind every day. It wasn't encouraged or condoned by administration, but no meaningful efforts were made to build an atmosphere where peer respect was extremely cool and peer harassment was deemed completely uncool. No attempts were made to intentionally create a social movement to get everyone (administrators, educators, staff, students, and even parents) on board to share the load of promoting positive interactions and heart-level acceptance of each other. It just wasn't happening, perhaps because it wasn't a priority and perhaps because other tasks were deemed more important.

**Prevention Point:** Technology is a double-edged sword that should not be wielded carelessly.

Sameer's experience was not unique back then, nor is it out of the ordinary to see in schools today. However, a lot has changed in just one generation in terms of how students learn and communicate with friends and teachers. Technological interaction has become as ubiquitous today as Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles lunch boxes were when we were growing up. For the most part, this is a good thing. The Internet and cell phones allow students to connect and interact with people and content in ways previously unimaginable. But technology is a double-edged sword that

should not be wielded carelessly. Cyberbullying and sexting are just two examples of ways some teens misuse technology. Before detailing these problems, it is important to better understand the full extent to which students have embraced high-tech devices.

## TEENS AND TECHNOLOGY

More teenagers in the United States are going online than ever before. Data from the Pew Internet & American Life Project show that 95 percent of those aged 12 to 17 use the Internet.<sup>2</sup> Over 11 million youth go online every single day. Almost three-fourths of teens have a desktop computer, and 18 percent have a laptop. The vast majority (93 percent) go online with their desktop or laptop computer, though an increasing number are accessing the Internet with their cell phones, gaming consoles, and portable gaming devices. Over three-quarters of teenagers have a broadband (high-speed) connection to the Internet at home.<sup>3</sup> As of spring 2011, 76 percent of all teens between the ages of 12 and 17 used online social networking sites, an increase from 58 percent in 2007.<sup>4</sup>

Cell phones, too, have become an efficient way for teens to communicate, surf, and contribute to discussions while on the go. The combination of mobility, the ability to initiate communication at any time (e.g., during periods of emergency or boredom), the decreasing cost of ownership, and continual (and remarkable) improvements in technological capabilities have made cell phones “must-have” devices for teens and adults alike. The most fundamental benefit is that individuals can make or receive calls from almost any location to almost any other location. According to the Pew report, approximately 77 percent of teens owned cell phones in spring 2011.<sup>5</sup>

Of course most cell phones today can do much more than make simple voice calls. They can be used to send and receive text messages (also known as short-message service [SMS] or “texts”). Among teens who own a cell phone, 88 percent say they have sent a text message to another’s phone, and 54 percent do it daily.<sup>6</sup> In fact, two-thirds of teens who text say they are more likely to reach out to friends in that manner, rather than talking to them via a voice call. Many teens text others quite regularly: 28 percent send 11–50 texts a day, 16 percent send 51–100, and 31 percent send 100 or more texts every single day—more than 3,400 texts per month in 2011. Girls send and receive about 132 texts per day, while boys send and receive around 94.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to allowing calling and texting, many cell phones can serve as personal digital assistants and provide a host of services such as Internet and email connectivity; games; digital camera functionality; contact information storage; digital music and video player; two-way walkie-talkie; calculator; calendar; appointment reminders; to-do lists;

alarms; integration with home security systems, appliances, and vehicles; and pretty much anything else you can imagine (there's an app for that!). Teens seem to be very interested in taking full advantage of all of the features that their mobile devices offer. According to Pew,<sup>8</sup>

- 83 percent have taken pictures;
- 64 percent have exchanged pictures;
- 54 percent have recorded video;
- 32 percent have exchanged video;
- 31 percent have used instant messaging;
- 27 percent have used the Internet;
- 23 percent have used use social networking sites; and
- 21 percent have sent email.

It is clear that many adolescents are no longer dependent on a desktop or laptop computer as their mobile phones can do many of the same things. Regardless of whether an individual takes advantage of one, some, or all of their capabilities, cell phones have become the most ubiquitous device of the 21st century thus far.

Internet-enabled devices like computers and cell phones allow adolescents to engage in a host of positive activities. For example, they can conduct research for schoolwork online, communicate with friends in real time, play games, and engage in a number of other pro-social activities. These benefits have in part contributed to their proficiency and comfort with these devices and are an integral part of almost all of their day-to-day activities. If you are raising a teen, you know he or she seems surgically attached to the phone and is pretty much always checking, sending, and posting messages, comments, pictures, and the like—for the primary purpose of socializing and keeping up to date with all that is going on.

Technology puts access to unlimited amounts of information, the ability to entertain yourself, and the ability to quickly and easily communicate with others at your fingertips. Online participation also teaches youth various social and emotional skills that are essential to successfully navigate life. For example, cyberspace provides a venue for identity formation and exploration, opportunities to be introduced to new and different world-views and opinions, and moments to refine critical-thinking and decision-making skills. Directly and indirectly, youth are reaping a number of extremely important educational, affective, developmental, and relational benefits by embracing and exploiting all that technology has to offer.

## TECHNOLOGY IN SCHOOLS

Computers have long been a fixture in many American schools. Indeed, we had computers in our middle schools in the late 1980s. And when we

visit schools today—large and small, rural and urban—they (of course) all have computers. Many schools have computer labs or general-access machines in libraries or other common areas. In addition, many classrooms have their own computer(s), and teachers regularly use various technologies to deliver educational content or enhance instruction. Some schools have even provided laptops to each individual student (“one-to-one” schools). While there is some debate about whether these programs are worth the money, it is clear that technology is a big part of education.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the close connection between schools and technology, many districts have balked at allowing students to bring in their own devices. Many schools prohibit the use, or even display, of mobile devices (especially cell phones) during school hours, while some allow use during specified periods (e.g., during lunch or between classes). We have received many phone calls from administrators who are considering opening up their schools to student-owned mobile devices because of the headaches associated with attempting to keep them out and the positives that may accompany using them to help kids learn. According to a report published by Walden University, “Teachers who use technology frequently . . . report greater benefits to student learning, engagement and skills from technology than teachers who spend less time using technology to support learning.”<sup>10</sup>

To be sure, allowing students to bring their devices to school holds much promise for furthering their education. Most schools do not have enough resources to provide a laptop or tablet for each student, and since many students already have a cell phone, tablet, or other portable device, few additional expenditures are required (e.g., the school can lend devices to the handful who don’t own one). Once equipped, teachers can ask students to research particular questions using their devices. They can use audience response systems via clickers or cell phone live polling (e.g., Poll Everywhere) to assess student competency with certain concepts. They can assign creative, interactive projects using the camera functionality and photo- or video-sharing sites. Many teachers use Facebook and Twitter as supplemental instructional tools.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, one ninth-grade science teacher in Atlanta has even used the popular game *Angry Birds* to teach complicated physics principles.<sup>12</sup> The opportunities are as endless as the Web itself.

We love to see schools embrace technology to help students learn and to expand their educational horizons. Unfortunately, educators now also must deal with questionable, problematic, and even criminal behaviors perpetrated by teens via online technologies. However, you do not have to feel intimidated or discouraged from taking advantage of all technology has to offer at your school—as long as you do so in an informed and appropriate manner. This book seeks to help you along these lines.

### Delete Day

On May 6, 2011, The Mary Louis Academy in Jamaica Estates, New York, hosted a student-developed and student-led program called Delete Day. During Delete Day, 250 students came to the school's computer room during their lunch or unscheduled period. Once there, service-homeroom students helped participants do the following:

- Delete inappropriate pictures or comments from their Facebook pages.
- Delete “friends” whom they didn’t know personally.
- Delete personal information that could be dangerous to share.
- Delete their membership in groups that might be hurtful or offensive.
- Delete Formspring pages.\*

At each computer station was a “Delete Day Pledge” for the participant to sign and take home, as well as a comment card that solicited information, ideas, and reactions about the student’s experience at the event. Fifty-four percent of participants deleted friends and disengaged from certain Groups on Facebook, 21 percent deleted comments, 20 percent deleted photos, and 17 percent deleted personal information from their profiles. Forty-four students deleted their Formspring pages completely, and nine students deleted their entire Facebook profiles. Upon completion of her participation in Delete Day, each student was given a pin with the Delete Day logo (designed and assembled by the student leaders) and a cookie (baked by student leaders).

According to student organizers, the purpose of the event was “to offer members of the Mary Louis community the opportunity to delete pictures, information, or other content from the Internet that may prove hurtful, offensive, or dangerous.” Their motto for the event was “IT IS TIME TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY. IT IS TIME TO TAKE ACTION. IT IS TIME TO DELETE!”

While no piece of the program was formally dedicated to cell phone usage, the leaders of and participants in Delete Day were invested in making all of their digital connections with others reflective of their best selves. The commitment of the organizers and participants alike created a newfound dedication to and appreciation of the obligation and responsibility they have to themselves, one another, and their school. All of the participants came of their own volition and during their free or lunch periods, as they were excited to join the community of students who had volunteered their time to make a difference. It was the student organizers who pushed hardest to make Delete Day happen—even those seniors who had already been accepted to college and had finals, AP exams, and other activities competing for their time wanted to host this event—and it created an extremely high energy level at the school.

Delete Day is a program that can be done at any school. It takes education, dedication, commitment, and an organized effort on the part of students, faculty, and staff to engage with the issues facing their community and work on them together. As is clear from the success of the event at The Mary Louis Academy, student-led programs have the capacity to impact school climate in amazing and valuable ways.

—Alison M. Trachtman Hill, founder and managing partner  
Critical Issues for Youth (<http://ci4y.com>)

*\*Students decided to delete their Formspring pages completely (rather than solely remove inappropriate content) because they felt that everything on their Formspring pages was cruel, hostile, and unkind.*

## Why Schools Must Respond to Cyberbullying and Sexting

We believe that schools across our nation should be sacred institutions for learning, where students feel secure and free to focus and interact without threat of harm or violence. School personnel are morally and legally obligated to provide a safe educational environment for all students—one that is free from discrimination. Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 requires schools to prevent and address sexual harassment and sex discrimination, and its interpretation has been broadened in the decades since its passage.<sup>13</sup> It is safe to say that any form of discrimination occurring on campus that undermines a child’s ability to feel safe and concentrate on learning must be addressed if it is made known to school officials. Not only is addressing such behavior mandated by law, but not dealing with it could lead to claims of negligence and financial liability (as well as reputational damage) if harm to a student occurred based on discrimination. It is important to remember that all forms of peer harassment—on a fundamental level—involve some type of discrimination. This could be discrimination based on how someone looks, dresses, acts, speaks, or simply “is.” Youth can take the smallest difference and magnify it to cause drama, to build themselves up while tearing another down, or to indulge an impulse—in other words, just because they feel like it.

**Prevention Point:** Schools have a moral, ethical, and legal responsibility to prevent and respond to cyberbullying and sexting.

We remember that when we were in school that we couldn’t wear T-shirts with inappropriate slogans or depictions. Occasionally, we heard of another student being sent to the principal’s office and forced to wear the shirt inside out or made to wait until his parents brought another shirt to wear for the rest of the day. This might not seem like that big a deal, but there is logic behind these rules and actions. First, inappropriate content on T-shirts compromises the positive, safe, wholesome atmosphere that schools strive to provide. Second, such shirts can be offensive to other students and staff at school and therefore infringe upon their civil rights. The US Court of Appeals recently upheld a Tennessee school’s decision to punish students for wearing Confederate flag T-shirts, agreeing with school administrators that the shirts would cause a substantial disruption among students and staff on campus.<sup>14</sup> Third, they unnecessarily attract negative attention and thereby distract students from learning. Schools, then, can respond to problematic content—or the behavior that creates such content—if its effects are detrimental to their purpose and goals. Such content and behavior range from inappropriate clothing all the way to severe forms of interpersonal harm. And this is just one way that a supportive environment can be fostered and institutionalized.



## TECHNOLOGY ISN'T THE PROBLEM

As much as this book is about the trouble teens can cause and get into when misusing technology, it must be made clear at the outset that *the vast majority of teens use technology safely and responsibly*. As you will learn in Chapter 3, approximately one in five teens admits to have participated in cyberbullying. Of course, this means that 80 percent of students have not bullied others online! Our research also shows that about 7 percent of students have sent a nude or seminude image of themselves to a classmate (see Chapter 4). Again, this means that 93 percent of students have not. Does this mean we should ignore these problems? Definitely not. Rather, it suggests that we should keep a sense of perspective. It also indicates that we need to approach these problems from a data-driven viewpoint—one informed by what research says about what teens are actually doing (see Chapter 8). We need to fully understand what electronic misbehaviors our students and children are involved in and be intentional and strategic in how we empower and educate them to do the right thing, both online and offline, no matter what.

To be clear, technology isn't the problem. There is nothing inherently problematic about cell phones; they are amazing devices that have revolutionized the way we communicate. Similarly, there is nothing fundamentally dangerous about Facebook. Social networking through that site has allowed interpersonal relationships to start, restart, and thrive, generating many emotional and psychological benefits. However, some will choose to use technological enhancements to cause harm to others or, intentionally or unintentionally, cause harm to themselves. This harm is often not physical—although there might be physical ramifications and side effects. Rather, it tends to manifest in less visible but possibly even more damaging ways. It is those behaviors that we should focus on—not the technology.

According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, motor vehicle crashes are the number one cause of death of teens. In 2009, approximately 3,000 teens died in car accidents.<sup>15</sup> Does this mean we should ban teens from driving? Of course not. But we do need to take steps to prevent accidents from happening, such as providing driver's education classes, encouraging parents to model appropriate driving habits, establishing safety guidelines, and so forth. The same approach needs to be taken with technology. You wouldn't just throw your teenager the keys to the family sedan and say, "Good luck and be safe!" But this is often what we do with technology: we assume that children will be safe and smart because we tell them to do so (or because they *had* to have heard and internalized all of the lessons from school and on the news!).

We need to be much more deliberate and comprehensive than that and regularly remind teens about issues they may run into. They are

adolescents. How many times did you learn the lesson on the first go-around when you were a teenager? Probably not as often as you would like. Neither did we, so don't feel bad. This should serve to inspire us in the ways we deal with and instruct teens. Parents have to do this in their households, and we believe they bear the largest load when it comes to teaching their kids to use technology wisely. However, school personnel unquestionably share a good portion of the responsibility as well, since those kids are their captive audience for much of the day. Most schools now realize that they need to educate students about appropriate online behaviors and take steps to prevent students from misusing technology at school. Educators also know that what happens online—whether during school hours or on evenings and weekends—often directly impacts what happens *at school*. We propose that schools can take significant strides to prevent cyberbullying and sexting by developing and maintaining a positive, respectful, and nurturing classroom and school climate.

## THE POWER OF A POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

The National School Climate Center defines *school climate* as “the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on patterns of students’, parents’, and school personnel’s experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures.”<sup>16</sup> In general, a positive climate is one that engenders respect, cooperation, trust, and a shared responsibility for the educational goals that exist there. Educators, students, and *everyone* connected to the school consequently take ownership of the mission of the school and work together toward a shared vision. If a climate like this is established, everything else seems to fall into place. For instance, it will definitely lead to more academic success and greater educational exploration.

*No one program, policy, or practice can address all of the reasons why young people harm themselves and others. No single strategy can prevent strangers or staff members from jeopardizing the well-being of students. The most prudent course of action for all schools is to address safety comprehensively.*

—Daniel L. Duke, author of *Creating Safe Schools for All Children*<sup>17</sup>

More to the point of this book, though, is that there will be fewer problems at school and online, because students will not want to damage the positive relationships they have at school by doing anything that will disappoint or upset the educators or other students to whom they are strongly bonded.

“I am not going to post that online—Mrs. Smith is my favorite teacher and is really awesome and I don’t want her to think badly of me!”

“I don’t want my friends at school to think I was a moron for sending that message.”

“I am totally going to keep my profile page clean, since everyone else at my school does it too.”

“I don’t want to miss out on any opportunities and fall behind my peers, and so I have *got* to build a positive online reputation!”

“I don’t want to stand out for doing the wrong thing when everyone else is doing the right thing!”

We know that teens are more likely to be deterred from engaging in inappropriate behaviors by a fear of how their friends or family members (or others in their lives they look up to) might respond than by adult nagging. Indeed, we know from experience (and you will likely agree) that this deterrent effect is much stronger than laws, policies, and other rules. Therefore, by developing strong relationships between the school and students, among students themselves, and between the school and their families, this principle can be used to dissuade negative behaviors and encourage positive behaviors even when adults aren’t around—such as when teens are online. And the vast majority are online, which has revolutionized the way they communicate and the way we have to handle behavioral problems.

## SUMMARY

We know that many youth have been the victim of cyberbullying or have done things to others that could be characterized as cyberbullying. We also know that some youth have sent and/or received sexually suggestive images of themselves or someone else to others, actions that could have substantial consequences. Finally, we know that all of these behaviors and experiences meaningfully affect the ability of students to learn and feel safe at school. As such, it is imperative that educators do what they can to prevent and effectively respond to the aforementioned behaviors so that a positive environment at school can be maintained. Moreover, as we will assert and affirm throughout this book, *educators who do establish a nurturing and caring classroom and school climate will make great strides in preventing a whole host of problematic behaviors, both at school and online.*

**Prevention Point:** A respectful climate at school will produce students who are safe, smart, honest, and responsible at school and online.

In addition to concisely detailing the scope, prevalence, and nature of cyberbullying and sexting, throughout this book we will encourage educators to marshal the powers of peer influence and the school environment to curtail these behaviors. We will also introduce and cover specific, pragmatic school climate initiatives that educators can implement in their schools. These include social norming, youth grassroots campaigns, peer mentoring, data-driven action plans, and multipronged policy and programming approaches by adults. Through these efforts, we hope to enlighten educators, parents, and teens about the tremendous importance of cultivating a positive school climate, not only to enhance student achievement, success, and productivity but also to *produce students who are safe, smart, honest, and responsible while using technology.*

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Besides the ability to make a call from almost any location, what are some other benefits that teens derive from their mobile phones?
2. What are the risks and benefits of having students bring their own devices to your school? How do you minimize the risks and increase the benefits? Do the risks outweigh the benefits, or vice versa?
3. What misperceptions have adults historically had about teen behaviors that may negatively influence the way they address new technology problems?
4. In what positive ways are the Internet and electronic devices used in classrooms at your school? On the other hand, what are the most common problems or complications arising from this use?
5. If technology is not the problem and teen behavior with technology is, what behaviors warrant the most attention? Where should you even start?

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