

## Article 109: Coaching Social Responsibility to Techno-Savvy Teens

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**A parent writes: I've recently become aware of just how badly teenagers treat each other over the internet and through texting. What should I do?**

The amazing advancements of communications technology have transformed the social lives of today's teenagers. Opportunities for maintaining friendships, creating new relationships and other contacts are virtually unlimited. But along with this explosion of socialization comes ample opportunity for abuse. The mixture of adolescent thoughtlessness and the tempting private portals of technology breeds much potential for socially irresponsible behavior. Deliberate ignoring, postings of malicious gossip, mean-spirited or threatening texts, and other shameful relational aggression in teens is often left unchecked by parents.

If you are concerned about how technology is contributing to the social erosion of teenagers, and some ideas about thwarting this process, read on:

**Don't be lulled into the popular belief that your teen is "basically a good kid" and therefore treats other kids well.** The truth is that good kids mistreat other good kids in a myriad of ways. Recognize the real possibility that your child might at times be using their cell phone or internet connection for more than well-meaning contact with peers. Moreover, consider the prospect that your child may be the target of peer cruelty perpetrated through technology. Even more likely is that if either of these types of social mistreatments take place the last people to find out about it is parents. Tell your teen that you are aware that all of these things are happening, and you want to speak with them about just how prevalent it is in their life.

**The sober reality is that parents must become informed about the technology lives of their teenagers.** It is easy to rationalize a hands-off policy by telling oneself that teenagers need their privacy. Parents should not fool themselves into this position either. Especially in today's world, teens need monitoring and feedback about their social behaviors. Through disclosure and discussion, parents can gradually roll back the amount of supervision of technology as teenagers get older and good judgment prevails. Teens will more readily accept this supervisory role if parents put it into effect at younger ages. Stress that your intent is not to interfere, but to stay informed and guide them when necessary.

**Warn children and teenagers of the social responsibilities and risks that are part of Communications technology.** A "social code of contact" should be discussed with consideration of the values you want your teen to display and what they should expect from others. Rules about when they need to inform parents of violations can be clearly spelled out. Parents should explain that further complications can occur when kids do not come to parents for help with tricky social situations, and that your help will come without embarrassment or criticism. Urge them not to solely rely upon the advice of their friends, since this counsel usually comes with limited social perspective.

**Stress that the best guiding light for socialization is to "find the kind way of contact."** Unfortunately, kindness is often in short supply among adolescents. Encourage your child not to stoop to this level, and instead, return messages promptly, accept appropriate

requests for favors, and attempt to be helpful not hurtful to peers, even if they are not close friends. Warn them not to fall prey to the social errors that technology makes so tempting, and to try to take the “higher road” of treating others well even if they so clearly see how others accept social abuse and other shameful behaviors.

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