

## SUMMARY

### **OUR KIDS AND THE MEDIA: WHAT'S NEW?**

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At the first forum of the 2010-2011 PCN year, Erin Walsh spoke to parents and educators on the many ways to maximize the benefits and minimize the harm of media on the family.

Speaking to an inquisitive group on October 4, 2010, Ms. Walsh pointed out that every generation has to re-define what it means to care for its children. The challenge for 21<sup>st</sup> century parents, is to include in their consideration for the needs of children, the many “screens” in their lives and their impact.

Ms. Walsh noted that digital technology is not inherently good or bad, but it is powerful. Whether such technology is in fact good or bad, depends upon the manner in which it is used. It is essential that parents have ongoing conversations with their children about how they are using technology.

Asked what excites and scares them about technology, the audience responded with the following examples:

#### Excites

Expanding social relationships  
Lightening the backpack load  
New ways to express creativity  
Improved information fluency  
Improved economic opportunities  
Keeping in touch through video media

#### Scares

Cyber-bullying  
Reduced attention span  
Lack of privacy  
Security issues  
Loss of social skills  
Amount of time spent with media

Ms. Walsh pointed out that, as with past generations, “whoever tells the stories, defines the culture”. In the digital age, the storytellers do not always tell a positive story. Moreover, looking at brain development, research now shows that brain development is not complete until people reach their mid-20’s. Teens in particular have periods of critical brain development that can be influenced by good or bad “storytellers”.

There are typically three spheres of influence that impact brain development; namely, family, community and society. Historically, the family and community have had a larger and longer impact in the lives of young children. With the advent of digital technology, the role of society as a sphere of influence is starting much earlier. By way of illustration, Ms. Walsh set out the following:

- 8-18 yr. olds average 53 hours per week using entertainment media, not including phones. Taking into account multi-tasking with multiple forms of media at one time, that number rises to 71 hours per week;
- 90% of college students have cell phones averaging 3500 texts per month;
- 42% of college students claim to be able to text blindfolded or under a desk;
- 73% of teens use social networking sites;
- 28% of babies under the age of 2 have a tv in their rooms. 71% of children 8-17 years old have a tv in their rooms; and
- 42% of teens report that if they could not text their “life would end or be worse”.

Ms. Walsh notes that based upon this, it is clear that the 21<sup>st</sup> century storytellers are media-based. It is therefore critical that parents understand the role of media in their children’s lives and stay up-to-date on new media trends.

New trends in media include:

1) Sharing content:

-digital media is everywhere, replacing the technologies we grew up with. Facebook is not the only social network in use but there are many other social networking sites where users share personal information and images.

2) Convergence:

-more and more devices are being made to “inter-connect”. Phones are becoming the single tool used for computing, photography and video and the device for the young. Other devices are made to quickly link into existing tools, making immediate sharing of information possible.

3) Social Mapping and Location-Based Apps:

-new applications have been developed which allow the user to be located by friends anywhere. Your child may be found by friends (or others) through use of these locating devices. In addition, advertisers use location-based apps to

personalize advertisements. For example, a store may tweet an ad for a sale to your child as s/he walks by the store.

Information in general is now portable and personalized. Social networking is the way in which young people connect with others and extend friendships. Ms. Walsh pointed out that if facebook users formed their own country, it would be the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest in the world.

As a parent, one must set and influence learning goals on-line. Parents must support a move toward interest-driven forms of new media use. That is, research has shown that the more interest parents show in the sites their children are using, the more parents are able to drive their children's computer use towards learning (rather than simply social networking, games etc.).

This is the "golden age of the amateur experts" and parents must ensure that kids are getting to the right sites to support their learning goals and demonstrate how to use social networking for positive change.

Ms. Walsh showed a number of sobering videos, showing the scarier side of posting images and social networking. Parents must be diligent in discussing "think before you post" rules with kids. If your child would be uncomfortable having an image posted on the school bulletin board, it should never be posted on line. Children need to understand clearly that such images can never be removed, and their impact can be devastating.

Also, parents must discuss and enforce rules about privacy settings on websites, especially for social networking. Default settings on Facebook maximize openness and need to be changed and reviewed regularly to ensure privacy is maintained. If your child has an excessive number of "friends" on Facebook, s/he needs to consider whether "friends of friends" should have access to information, or whether privacy settings should be changed to reduce access to "family or friends "only, or other customized groups.

The number one protective factor is kids who have involved parents who understand what their children are doing on-line. These children, statistically, are the most careful and computer saavy.

In terms of smart social networking, Ms. Walsh suggests the following rules for children:

- Never share your password except with a trusted adult;
- Always post and speak on-line as if your profile were public;
- Protect all personal information;

- Check privacy settings frequently; and
- Understand that social networking is a privilege and not a right and that you as a parent need to be able to check their Facebook page from time to time to ensure safety.

On the topic of cyber-bullying, Ms. Walsh points out that in the digital age, bullying has moved from the playground into the victim's home. It makes the victim feel unsafe no matter where s/he goes. The bully feels anonymous and lacks the typical consequences. However, more children are likely to be bullies or bystanders than to be bullied on-line. It is therefore important for parents to counsel children that if they would not say it in-person, they should not say it on-line. To help in a situation of cyber-bullying:

- Do not forward a bullying message;
- Unfriend or block a bully on Facebook;
- Speak to the parent of a bully;
- Do not assume bullying is not going on.

Another trend of "sexting" was discussed. Ms. Walsh surprised the audience with the following statistics:

- 15-20% of 12-17 year olds have sent messages with a sexual image;
- 30% of 17 year olds have done so; and
- 39% of 12-17 year olds have received a sexually suggestive message.

Ms. Walsh noted that in certain states it is a felony for the recipient of the sext to possess the image as it would constitute child pornography. She pointed out that what to do about sexting should not be driven by fears of the technology but by understanding adolescent development. That is, teenagers are thinking about sex often and are less likely than adults to consider the consequences of their actions. Considering that it has never been easier to transmit images quickly and permanently, sexting is a serious issue.

Parents should communicate with their children about sexual decision-making. They should find out what their children are doing on-line and remind children that they can never "un-post" an image. Even sending an image to a trusted friend or boyfriend can result in the message being forwarded intentionally or unintentionally. An image is never really private once it is sent.

Ms. Walsh also discussed software tools such as content blockers and content filters. Every internet provider provides such tools. For the youngest users, content blockers are most

appropriate as they will create a list of sites where the user may go. In the case of older users, content filters will remove sites with inappropriate content. Content filters may also be purchased that include tracking services so parents may review the sites visited by the child.

With content filters and tracking used on phones and other devices, Ms. Walsh advised that 90% of cyber-bullying could be prevented as children refrain from inappropriate uses of devices when they know they are being even periodically monitored.

Finally, Ms. Walsh discussed the important issue of decreased attention spans caused by over use of digital media. She discussed the difference between reactive and focused attention. Reactive attention is expanded by the use of video games and internet use as the brain is “rewarded” by points and hits with use. However, focused attention, or higher level theoretical and integrated attention is shortened by the overuse of games etc.

In parting, Ms. Walsh emphasized that nothing replaces parental involvement in ensuring children use digital media safely, appropriately and for the correct period of time. It is essential that parents inform themselves about how their children are using their devices and guide them towards using them for learning.

## **TIPS:**

**Privacy Settings:** Adults should monitor Facebook’s privacy settings which can change frequently. Walsh advises parents to disable the default setting of “open to everyone” so that Facebook pages do not show up on a google search of someone’s name.

**Numbers of Friends:** Ask how many friends your child has on Facebook. The idea of control or privacy is obsolete if they’ve given access to large numbers of “friends.”

**Social Mapping:** Applications such as “Foursquare” that track your location and let your friends know where to find you are the new thing now. Be cautious of making your exact location widely available to anyone and anticipate a future of receiving personalized ads sent to smart phones based on tracked locations.

**Recommendations for Reviewing Technology, Applications, Etc:**

- [www.common sense media.org](http://www.common sense media.org) - an excellent resource for assessing content
- [www.parent further.org](http://www.parent further.org) – part of the Search institute website offering advice for parents

**Smart Conversations Applying to Social Networking, Gaming, Cell Phones, etc:**

- Never share a password except with a trusted adult

- Think of your online profile as public information no matter what
- Protect personal information

Research shows that the number one protective measure for youth using technology is a caring adult who asks questions. Walsh recommends that parents let their children know that social networking is a privilege. As a part of that privilege, parents will have some access to their accounts and will check-in intermittently. Technologically-savvy kids with involved adults make better choices.