The Ultimate Back to School Guide for Today's Digital Kids (and Parents!)

As today's digital kids head back to school this year, they'll need more than a backpack filled with notebooks and other traditional school supplies. Most teens will be re-entering their classrooms with their Smartphones in tow. Some will use them for educational purposes while others will keep them silently tucked away until after school when they can freely surf the web and swap social media updates with classmates. Either way, it's important that they're equipped with skills and resources to stay productive and keep themselves safe. Preparing a digital kid for back to school season can seem overwhelming. To help we've developed this essential guide, including 9 tips for preparing your tech-savvy teen for a successful school year.

1. Find out about your school's student technology use policy.

Every school has a Student Technology Use Policy, but these policies differ from school to school. As you're signing the mountain of paperwork your child brings home on the first day of school, be sure to look for out for this important piece of paper. If your school has a Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) program, there may be a separate policy that students must abide by when using their own devices in class. For instance, students may be required to keep these devices out of sight unless instructed by a teacher to retrieve them. There may also be consequences for using the devices for non-educational purposes such as texting and engaging in social media. Be sure that you and your child are aware of the rules as well as consequences for breaking them. Clearly communicate to your child your expectations that she abide by these guidelines.

Some teachers have additional rules for technology use in their specific classrooms. Some teachers will allow cell phones to remain on during class as long as they are on silent mode, for example, while other teachers may ask that phones be turned off until class is over. Read the course syllabi carefully with your child and discuss each teacher's expectations regarding device use. Reach out to the teacher(s) regarding any questions that you or your child may have.

Takeaway: Talk to your child about any policies in place regarding technology use at school.

Next Steps:

- **Become involved.** Ask your child's teachers how they address digital citizenship in the classroom as well as how they respond to problems.
- **Talk to other parents** about their child's tech use to keep your finger on the pulse of what's "trending."
- **Attend PTA meetings and other school wide events** to stay informed about the role technology plays in your teen's school day.
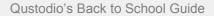
Resources:

- Sample Technology Use Policy. View an example of a Student Technology Use policy from Cupertino High School.
- The Next Revolution in School Tech: Bring Your Own Device. Learn more about a popular initiative that encourages students to bring their Smartphones and tablets to school for use in the classroom.
- Common Sense Media's Digital Literacy and Citizenship Classroom Curriculum. Get informed about a free digital citizenship curriculum available to teachers of grades K-12.

2. Develop a home technology use policy.

It's important to know how your child is using technology at school, but it may be even more crucial to develop a home technology use policy. Your teen's tech habits after school and on the weekends can have a direct impact on her academic success, not to mention her overall well being. Of course, there is no one-size-fits-all policy that will work for every family. As a parent, you know your child best, and while it's important to be informed on the potential effects of screen time as well as the dangers that exist online, it's also good to trust your instincts. As you're devising your home tech use policy, you'll want to ask yourself some questions, including:

- Will you allow your teen to use screen time for entertainment? If so, what types of activities do you want to encourage?
- Are there certain types of websites, games, or apps that are off limits?
- What family activities will be screen-free?
- Is your child allowed to use social media? If so, which platforms are approved? Which are banned?
- How much screen time will you allow during the week? What about on weekends?

Takeaway: Decide how you want your child to interact with technology at home and clearly communicate those expectations.

Next Steps:

- **Evaluate your own technology habits** and take steps to become a better digital role model.
- **Check in often with your teen.** Express a genuine interest in the role technology plays in her life.
- **Take regular technology breaks with your teen.** Go for a walk together, play a board game, or just hang out. Show her the rewards of good old-fashioned fun.
- Resources

Resources:

- [Designing Family Contracts for Technology Use](#) Read about one mom's iPhone contract with her 13 year-old son and get expert advice on how to draw up a contract for tech use with your teen.
- [Mediline Plus: Screen Time and Children](#) Find out what pediatricians are saying about the dangers of too much screen time.
- [You Are Your Child's Tech Role Model](#) Discover what messages children receive when their parents are tech-obsessed.

3. Talk to your child about netiquette.

The term "netiquette" is short for Internet etiquette. Before sending your child back to school this year, it's important that you discuss considerate, appropriate use of the Internet. This is particularly true if your teen has a new device or has been granted permission to use a new social media platform.

While netiquette guidelines are always changing as new media is developed and societal expectations fluctuate, there are some basic principles that your child should be aware of before he or she can be trusted to use the Internet responsibly. Some of these are listed below:

- Will you allow your teen to use screen time for entertainment? If so, what types of activities do you want to encourage?
- Avoid using all capital letters as it is considered "shouting."
- Use emoticons in casual conversation, but don't overdo it.
- Never share another person's email address or username without their permission.
- Don't say something online that you wouldn't say to a person's face in real life.

Keep in mind that specific forums and social media platforms may have different rules regarding acceptable use. These rules may be spoken or unspoken. Instruct your child to familiarize himself with new applications and venues before participating in them.

Takeaway: Be sure your child knows how to communicate clearly and respectfully online.

Next Steps:

- **Ask your child** about new social media apps, forums, and other communication channels she is using online.
- **Consider monitoring your child's social media activity** to ensure he or she is practicing good netiquette.

Resources:

- Netiquette: Rules of Behavior on the Internet Discuss these guidelines for appropriate email communication with your teen. Explain that many of these guidelines can extend to other forms of digital communication as well such as texting and chatting via social media.
- Netiquette View Princeton University's guide to netiquette.
- Pop Quiz: Digital Etiquette Take BrainPop's digital etiquette quiz with your teen to test your netiquette skills.

4. Talk to your child about netiquette.

Cyberbullying is one of the top concerns among parents whose teens are online, and unfortunately, much of the fear surrounding online abuse is warranted. Bullies have always existed, but the Internet and social media have given kids new ways to be cruel to one another. In many ways, cyberbullying can be worse than traditional playground teasing. Cyberbullies tend to be bolder and less relenting, and many of them assume that they won't be caught as long as they hide behind their computer monitors. Since today's teens are always connected, victims of cyberbullies can have a hard time getting away from the abuse. Perhaps most concerning, the majority of victims never tell their parents that they're being targeted.Tell your child that it's ok to ask for help, from you or from another adult. Also, make sure they understand that people who feel the need to put others down are actually suffering from low self-esteem themselves.

As scary as cyberbullying is, there are things that responsible digital parents can do to reduce the risks of their child falling prey to an online bully. Start by having an open and honest conversation with your teen about the reality of cyberbullying. Make sure your child knows that it's critical to report any type of abuse to a trusted adult. It's common for teens to call each other names on social media sites, and it can be difficult to to distinguish between playful teasing and abusive name-calling. Teach your child to discern the difference. Empower your teen not to be a bystander and most importantly, let him know that he can always come to you for advice.

It's also important to emphasize the danger of engaging in any sort of disagreement online or via text messaging. Tell your child that the very nature of an argument that unfolds over text or social media means that there is a permanent record of the exchange. Things can turn in an instant online, and a careless statement made in the heat of the moment can be used later to make your child look like the bully.

Takeaway: Teach your child to be on the lookout for cyberbullies and to reach out for help from an adult if necessary.

Next Steps:

- **Inquire often about who your child is talking to online.** Get to know their social media network.
- **Beware of apps such as Ask.fm and Omegle** that are notorious for being playgrounds for bullies.
- **Surround your child with a strong offline support system** that she can rely on should a cyberbullying incident occur.

Resources:

- StopBullying.gov Find information and resources regarding cyberbullying from various government agencies.
- Tell Me What You See, Even If It Hurts Me Read about the dangerous trend of teens asking strangers for reassurance online and how it can lead to cyberbullying.
- Top 50 Chat Acronyms Parents Need to Know Familiarize yourself with your teen's online lingo.

5. Talk to your child about netiquette.

You've heard the phrase, "things aren't always what they seem." Well, nowhere is this statement truer than on the Internet, particularly social media platforms. If you're active on social media yourself, then you know how easy it is to fall into the trap of believing that all of your friends' lives are perfect based on their social media profiles. Add to that a dose of typical adolescent angst, and you could have a recipe for low self-esteem as well as a heightened risk of depression and eating disorders.

A good way to illustrate the concept of edited reality to your teen is to show her one of your social media profiles. Point out that while you try to put your best foot forward online, the profile is hardly a complete view of your life. Instead, it's likely a highlight reel of your best moments. Tell your teen that the same is true of her peers and even celebrities.

Takeaway: Reassure your child that no one is as perfect as their social media profile suggests.

Next Steps:

- **Keep an eye on your teen's mood and self-esteem.** Take note if it changes after using social media.
- **Don't let your child become overly obsessed with appearance.** Make a point to compliment her inner qualities and provide opportunities for her to develop them.
- **Be sure your teen has an offline support group** that embraces her for who she truly is.

Resources:

- Move Over Glossy Magazines. Now Social Media Makes Young Girls Hate Themselves This recent article from Slate will make you rethink how much time you want your teen to spend on social media.
- 11 Facts About Teens and Self Esteem Learn more about teens and self-esteem and get involved at DoSomething.org.
- Help Teens Develop a Healthy Body Image Get tips on how to build your teen's self-esteem from WebMD.
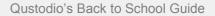
6. Stress Online Privacy.

Online privacy is a big issue for teens and grown-ups alike. If your teen doesn't know how to protect her privacy online, the consequences could be dire. Sharing inappropriate pictures with others via social media or texting, for instance, could harm your child's reputation and even have legal consequences. Even if your teen is aware of the dangers of sexting, she may not know that sharing personal information such as her location or school name, for instance, can also be harmful. As hard as it is for most of us to grasp, online predators do exist, and they often use the Internet to find and groom their prey. Of course, there are other dangers of oversharing online as well such as identity theft. Here are a few basic guidelines to share with your teen regarding online privacy:

- Take note if it changes after using social media.
- Keep it to yourself. Ensure that your child knows not to share identifying information online such as his address, phone number, or the name of his school.
- If your child has a credit card, be sure he knows to use it at trusted sites only and to never share account information with anyone, online or off.
- Geolocation is for parents only. Teach your teen to turn off location features when sharing messages or photos via social media.
- Nothing shared online is ever truly private. Some of the most popular apps amongst teens promise anonymity and send self-destructing messages. Be sure your child knows not to succumb to a false sense of privacy.
- Scrutinize photos before sharing. Tell your teen to look for objects in the picture that might reveal their location or other personal information, such as a school jersey, for instance.
- Explain the dangers of sexting, including loss of reputation and even legal trouble.

Takeaway: Teach your teen that some things weren't meant to be shared online.

Next Steps:

- **Check in with your teen often to review online privacy guidelines.** Digital peer pressure has a way of lowering standards for some teens.
- **Look out for apps like Snapchat and Whisper** that send messages that disappear within seconds. These can give teens a false sense of security and tempt them to share things they normally wouldn't.
- **Remind your teen to respect others' privacy online** as well.

Resources:

- [Teens, Social Media, and Privacy](#) Find out what teens think about privacy online.
- [Freedom Online Is An Illusion](#) Learn how to teach kids about playing it safe online by appealing to their sense of rebelliousness.
- [Social Media Privacy Tips for Teens](#) Useful tips on how teens can play the social media game without giving away their privacy.

7. Encourage healthy and productive screen time.

Technology is here to stay, and in many respects, that's a very good thing. The Internet, Smartphones, and digital media have introduced so many new ways to enhance productivity and communicate with clients, coworkers, family members, and friends from around the world. The key is learning how to use technology for our benefit rather than our detriment and teaching our kids to do the same.

Healthy technology use isn't only about finding the best apps for learning and creating. It's also about knowing when to step away from the screen. Teens need to hear from parents that too much of a good thing can be a bad thing. Be sure your child is taking regular tech breaks. Give him the opportunity to see the benefit of doing so.

Takeaway: Show your teen how to get the most out of what technology has to offer.

Next Steps:

- **Engage in digital media with your child.** This will show him that you're interested in his online pursuits and can be a great bonding experience as well.
- **Recommend educational apps** that gamify learning.
- **Model a healthy tech-life balance** for your child.

Resources:

- [The Upside of Selfies: Social Media Isn't All Bad for Teens](#) Find out about the positive impact social media can have on kids when used responsibly.
- [Video Games May Provide Learning, Health, Social Benefits, Review Finds](#) Video games have gotten a bad rap, but there appears to be real benefits to gaming. Find out what they are.

- [Best Apps for Kids Ages 13-17](#) Check out Common Sense Media's guide to the best mobile apps for teenagers.

8. Help your teen build a positive online reputation.

Today's college recruiters and employers are turning to social media to find out more about their potential candidates. What your teen posts online today can have an effect on his or her academic and career opportunities in the future, for better or for worse.

As a proactive digital parent, it's up to you to make sure your child understands just how important his online reputation is. Impress upon him how a single keystroke can impact his foreseeable future. To illustrate, you may want to use some examples in the media. Unfortunately, there are new stories about people who self-destruct online popping up every day.

Takeaway: Teach your teen how his online activity can influence his future opportunities.

Next Steps:

- **Google your child's name periodically** to monitor her online reputation.
- **Remind your teen to put her best foot forward on social media sites** such as Facebook.
- **Help your teen set up privacy settings** on social media networks so that he can choose to share messages and photos privately(See #6: online privacy).
- **Remind your child to update professional profiles** often with his latest accomplishments and awards.

Resources:

- [LinkedIn Profile Checklist for High School Students](#) Learn how to help your teen set up a profile on LinkedIn, the largest social media site for today's professionals.
- [Don't Google Me: How Your Online Reputation Can Ruin Your Career](#) This Forbes article illustrates how things posted online today can follow your teen into his career long after.
- [They Loved Your GPA. Then They Saw Your Tweets](#) Find out what college admissions officers have to say about students' online reputations.

9. Look for warning signs.

Try as you may to be a good digital parent, it's nearly impossible to shield your child from every threat. Thus, it's important to keep an eye out that something's gone wrong in your child's digital life.

As we've discussed in this guide, there are many risks associated with Internet and social media use, particularly during the back to school season. We can teach our kids how to avoid and minimize these risks, but it's impossible to eradicate them altogether. That's why you need to look out for warning signs that could alert you to a potential problem. Here are some of the indicators that your child needs a tech intervention:

- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Change in eating and/or sleeping habits
- Anger or agitation when away from devices
- Losing track of time online
- Poor academic performance

Takeaway: Look for changes in your teen's behavior and seek assistance if necessary.

Next Steps:

- **Google your child's name periodically** to monitor her online reputation.
- **Remind your teen to put her best foot forward on social media sites** such as Facebook.
- **Help your teen set up privacy settings** on social media networks so that he can choose to share messages and photos privately(See #6: online privacy).
- **Remind your child to update professional profiles** often with his latest accomplishments and awards.

Resources:

- When Technology Takes Over Your Life Get information on technology addiction from WebMD.
- High Wired: Does Addictive Internet Use Restructure the Brain? This is your child's brain online.
- Can Boot Camp Cure China's Young Internet Addicts? Find out how the Chinese are dealing with teen Internet addiction.

Final Thoughts

Being a digital parent is hard work. Fortunately, there are tons of resources available to help you protect your kids from online threats and ensure that they benefit from the many engaging and educational experiences the Internet has to offer. As you read this guide, you likely picked up on one recurring piece of advice—talk to your teen! Communicate, discuss, impress upon, emphasize, reiterate. Then, when you're finished, get ready to do it again. Your child is your very best resource if you'll let him be. Approach your child with interest, not judgment. Engage in media together. Teach one another. But above all, just communicate. Kids who feel comfortable discussing things with their parents are a lot less likely to end up in trouble, both online and off.

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