

Excerpted from TALKING BACK TO FACEBOOK: *The Common Sense Guide to Raising Kids in the Digital Age* by James P. Steyer. Copyright © 2012 by James Steyer. Excerpted with permission by Scribner, a Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

## Introduction

It's 6:30 p.m.—dinnertime at our house—and food's on the table. I call seven-year-old Jesse, who's out on the street riding his bike, and he slowly strolls in with a big grin on his face.

“Hey, Dad,” he says, “can I borrow your iPhone after dinner so I can play that bowling game on it for ten minutes?”

I laugh. He knows the answer, but he's asking anyway.

I start rounding up our other three kids. Carly, fourteen, is in the living room, bopping her head rhythmically while she listens to music on her iPod. I stand in front of her, loudly intoning—to penetrate her earbuds—that it's time for dinner.

“Just a sec, Dad,” she says, nodding her head. “Lemme finish this song.”

I have no idea what she's listening to, and I still haven't seen our seventeen-year-old, Kirk, but I know where I'll find him. I walk into the family room, where Kirk is glued to the big-screen TV, clutching his Xbox controller and playing his favorite video game, FIFA Soccer.

“Kirk,” I tell him, “dinner's ready.”

“Can't I finish the game, Dad?” he begs. “Just a few more minutes.”

“Nope! That's enough video games for today. You've hit your one-hour limit. It's time for dinner, now! But after that,” I say, “why don't we toss the baseball outside? I'd like to see that new curveball you've been talking about.”

He grunts, switches off his controller, and mutters a few monosyllables as he follows me to the dinner table. The other kids are already sitting down, including Lily, who just graduated from high school.

“Hey, Daddy, how was your day? Can I borrow the car tonight?” she asks, sticking her cell phone in her shirt pocket. “I just saw on Facebook that there's a party, and all my friends are going.” She gives me that adorable grin that always works.

My wife, Liz, and I smile at each other. We're glad to have all the kids at home for a family dinner. We try to eat together at least four or five times a week. All phones and devices are strictly banned at the dinner table, parents' included. It's an important ritual: forty-five minutes or so of completely unplugged, screen-free time in a family life that's overflowing with digital media. Like most kids today, Lily, Kirk, Carly, and Jesse live much of their lives in a digital world. Technology is their native language, and as devices converge and become more capable and mobile, they're using them—far more easily than Liz and I—to connect, create, and communicate constantly, from almost anywhere, about virtually everything.

As parents, where do we draw the line? How do we balance the obvious benefits of computers and other digital technology with the growing risks of addiction, distraction, loss of innocence, and lack of privacy? With our kids' digital reality changing so fast, how do we even know what they're being exposed to, what we should worry about, and what common sense rules we should set?

Personally, new digital technology often seems overwhelming to me. I feel like I'm always playing catch-up, even though it's my job as founder and CEO of Common Sense Media, the nation's leading authority on the effects of media and technology on kids. The more I speak to education and child development experts and thousands of fellow parents and teachers around

the country, the more I'm moved by the enormity of the changes occurring before our eyes with so little discussion and understanding of their impact on kids and society.

### **What's at Stake for Childhood and Adolescence**

Howard Gardner of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, who developed the idea of multiple intelligences, calls this an "epochal change." He compares the revolution in digital media to the invention of the printing press because of its extraordinary impact on the way we communicate, share information, and interact with other human beings. It's hard to believe that the biggest technology challenge parents faced in 1990 was controlling their kids' use of telephone *landlines*. Boy, have things changed, and our kids' social, emotional, and cognitive development skills have been profoundly affected. At times, it seems like they're subjects of a vast, uncontrolled social experiment. And it's an experiment that has dramatic implications for our notions of childhood, learning, and human relationships. As parents and educators, we have to engage with this new reality and influence it, as well as our kids, in healthy, responsible ways.

The fact is, kids are thrown into this brave new world from the day they're born. When parents post cute pictures of their babies in adorable outfits and poses, they're creating the first outlines of their kids' digital footprint. By the time they're two, more than 90 percent of all children have an online history, and many have figured out how to take pictures and watch cartoons on their parents' smartphones. At five, many are typing on a computer keyboard and downloading and playing games on cell phones and tablet computers. I clearly remember the day when our daughter Carly, at age six, "Googled" herself for the first time.

By seven or eight, some kids have phones of their own, and they're playing in virtual worlds and staring at screens when they're together with friends. At ten or eleven, they're downloading and streaming Web content, playing online games like World of Warcraft, and begging for smartphones and Facebook accounts. By twelve or thirteen, most kids have Facebook pages—with or without their parents' permission. They're using technology in the classroom and texting friends or Facebooking them instead of talking to them in person. Kids are getting online at home, at friends' houses, at the library, and on the bus. As they become teens, they fully inhabit a virtual world with online and offline identities and special languages, social rules, and relationships—usually with no adult supervision. They're performing, creating, and posing for invisible audiences—often unaware that, even when they change and mature, their online errors of judgment and personal postings might not go away. There's no "eraser" button, and the consequences of youthful mistakes can be enormously painful.

For the past five years, I've been witnessing how social networks, especially Facebook, have transformed the lives of my students at Stanford University, where I teach classes on civil rights, civil liberties, and children's issues. The technology has literally changed the way people relate to each other, get together, and present their image to the world. Interestingly, when I polled my class recently, more than half of my students said they wished Facebook didn't exist. Several of them said they didn't like the way it drained so much of their time and affected their interactions with friends and peers. Many told me that Facebook can diminish the quality and depth of personal relationships and weaken their basic communications skills. But, of course, they *had* to be on it, they said, because everyone else was.

Facebook, the world's largest social network site, was cofounded by Mark Zuckerberg and his Harvard friend Eduardo Saverin in 2004. It started out as a social networking tool designed exclusively for students at Harvard, but it quickly spread to students at other elite

universities like Stanford, Yale, and Columbia. Soon after, Facebook expanded to hundreds of colleges across the nation, demonstrating the extraordinary, viral nature of the Web, especially social networks. In 2005, Facebook opened its site to high school students, and the following year, it welcomed a fast-growing number of adults.

Like other social network sites, Facebook basically operates as a system of interconnected personal profiles—essentially easily customized personal homepages, for which even technological Luddites can choose profile pictures and add many more photos, “status updates,” and personal information. In addition, Facebook users can also comment on each other’s photos and click the “Like” button on a particular image, post, or Web page if they want to give it an electronic “thumbs-up.” The problems come when vulnerable youngsters define themselves by the “Like” button or when comments about photos turn mean, cruel, and hateful, as they often do.

Personally, I think social media sites like Facebook and Google Plus are great ways to connect and stay in touch with old and new friends. I know a lot more about the lives of my old high school buddies, for example, now that many of them have contacted me on Facebook. I’ve also seen how LinkedIn has been a source of great professional connections for friends and colleagues, who use it to stay in touch with work associates, find employment opportunities, and recruit job candidates. Along with Craigslist, LinkedIn has helped revolutionize the hiring process.

But the truth is, kids use social networks differently from adults, in ways that can be hurtful and unhealthy. My eighteen-year-old daughter, Lily, for example, rolls her eyes when grown-ups talk about the positive social experiences they have on Facebook. “When kids go on Facebook,” Lily explains, “it’s a completely different experience—you have no idea.” Instead of using Facebook and other social networks to strengthen face-to-face relationships, she says, many kids, especially teens, use them *instead* of real human-to-human interactions. Posting and text messaging are quick, efficient, cold ways to communicate, especially when you don’t have to be sensitive to the emotional nuances of facial expressions and tone of voice. But these new forms of electronic communication can also be cruel and damaging, and anonymous online communities can instantly amplify the impact and pain of bullying, gossip, and social exclusion.

One fifteen-year-old girl at a school near our home committed suicide after she discovered, via Facebook, that she hadn’t been invited to a slumber party. That’s a tragic and extreme case, but kids in every town, every day, witness or suffer from cyber-bullying. With popular apps like Honesty Box, which allow users to send anonymous, untraceable messages, many kids feel empowered to post anything to and about anyone, no matter how hurtful or untrue. Other top apps, like Compare People, encourage kids to compare and rank themselves in dozens of sensitive categories—like cutest, sexiest, and smartest—against other kids in their social network. And teens build massive “friend lists” on Facebook or “followers” on Twitter to assess and compare their popularity. At a stage of life when peer acceptance is absolutely vital and self-esteem can be very fragile, these impersonal digital tools are often abused, with consequences that can be harmful for millions and tragic for a few.

I’ve been trying to get a handle on what Facebook truly means for kids and the broader society ever since 2007, when I met Mark Zuckerberg at a conference at Google. Today, Facebook is the giant, eight-hundred-pound gorilla of social media. It claims nearly a billion members worldwide, up from only a few million six years ago. It is now the top-visited website in the United States, surpassing Google, and it’s literally revolutionizing the way young people communicate, build relationships, and express their identities—with virtually no thoughtful

analysis of its impact. If Facebook were a country, it would be the world's third largest in population, trailing only China and India. And just like those other emerging global giants, we ignore its growth and power at our own risk.

I decided to call this book *Talking Back to Facebook* for two reasons. First, Facebook, to me, is the most potent symbol of the digital revolution and the way it's impacting kids and teens. Second, many of the parents and teachers I encountered while researching this book told me how helpless they feel dealing with Facebook and the onslaught of 24/7 digital reality that it represents. They feel isolated in their concerns about how social networks are affecting their kids' way of relating to themselves and others, and they feel overwhelmed and powerless to do anything about it. The speed of change has simply been so rapid that they didn't see these changes coming, and they feel blindsided by the impact.

But parents have the right—indeed, the obligation—to speak up and be heard. They have the right and the responsibility to assert control over how they raise their kids and about new technology platforms that are playing such a powerful role in their children's lives. I wrote *Talking Back to Facebook* to empower parents, first and foremost, as well as teachers and young people. The purpose of this book is to give you some of the basic knowledge and information you need to understand what's going on, as well as a voice in determining the impact on your own kids and our broader culture. Parenting can and *does* make a huge difference in kids' lives—and informed, common sense parenting is absolutely essential in this dizzying new digital age.

The issues, of course, are far bigger than Facebook and other social media. There are now approximately 2 billion Internet users across the globe, and more than 5 billion people own cell phones. The implications of this connectivity are simply mind-boggling. According to a recent Nielsen study, the average thirteen- to seventeen-year-old now exchanges 3,339 text messages a month; that's about 111 *a day*.<sup>1</sup> But their phones aren't just for texting and occasional phone calls. Young people also use them for listening to music, filming videos, snapping and sharing photos, and going online. Sure, they use their computers to do homework. But they also use them to socialize, stream video, and create movies and songs. They're not just watching TV, listening to iPods, and playing video games. They're inhabiting a virtual universe that's shaping their reality, setting their expectations, guiding their behavior, and defining their interests, choices, and values.

Whether we like it or not, kids are now spending far more time with media and technology than they are with their families or in school. Clocking in at nearly eight hours a day on average (or nearly eleven hours per day when you include multitasking), that's more time than they spend doing any other single activity.<sup>2</sup> What messages about life are they absorbing? Whose messages are they listening to? What are they seeing and learning? And what do we know about the impact on their development and social and emotional health?

We may think of our kids' online, mobile, and technological activities as their "digital lives." But to them, their plugged-in, networked world *is* life. It's displacing and replacing the real, physical world of interaction and communication that's always been the core human experience. I was recently in a room with three twelve-year-old girls who were sitting on a couch just inches away from one another. Although they were having a conversation, they weren't talking to each other. They were texting. They made no eye contact and never glimpsed one another's expressions or body language. Instead, they sat there staring at their smartphones, fingers flying, exchanging digital messages. That shift from face-to-face to digital

communication is an enormous change, and we haven't even begun to fully understand, or to conduct research on, its enormous impact on kids and society.

Make no mistake. This is a huge change that's occurring at warp speed. When most of us were tweens and teens, we weren't sharing details of our personal lives with a vast, invisible, online audience. We weren't constantly distracted and interrupted by text messages and IMs in the middle of school, homework, and face-to-face conversations. If we did have computers, they were usually tethered to a table or a desk; they had physical boundaries and didn't go everywhere with us like they do now, in the form of powerful mobile phones—pocket-size minicomputers—that let kids access online information wherever they go. Our parents could protect us, to some extent, by controlling our access—like keeping kids out of the deep end of the pool until they're strong enough swimmers. But now, digital media and technology are everywhere; even Mount Everest has 3G phone service. Cell phones enable kids to jump on the Internet and go anywhere, from anywhere, at any time—often without their parents' knowledge or supervision. Instead of staying in the safe end of the pool, children and teens today are swimming in a vast ocean of information and media impressions. Because we can't always keep them out of dangerous waters, it's more important than ever to give them the skills they need to navigate, play, and explore safely, and to stay afloat.

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<sup>i</sup> The Nielson Company, "U.S. Teen Mobile Report: Calling Yesterday, Texting Today, Using Apps Tomorrow," Nielson Wire, October 14, 2010; accessed at [http://blog.nielson.com/nielsonwire/online\\_mobile/u-s-teen-mobile-report-calling-yesterday-texting-today-using-apps-tomorrow/](http://blog.nielson.com/nielsonwire/online_mobile/u-s-teen-mobile-report-calling-yesterday-texting-today-using-apps-tomorrow/) on November 6, 2011.

<sup>ii</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation Study, "Generation M," January 2010.