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7 ways to support your child in being digitally responsible without contracts

Parents and educators agree that in the age of "Generation Text" it is important to be prepared to help children become responsible citizens of the digital world. What they don't agree on is how to go about this. While some flocked to follow the advice of the overbearing mom whose iPhone gift came with contractual strings, other parents, educators, and teens alike were appalled by the disrespect and contempt conveyed by such an approach. Ensuring our children are safe and responsible online does not require heavy-handed, authoritarian rules to be forced upon them. Instead, being involved in your child's digital world can be fun. It can also help you and your child develop an open an honest relationship that will help you to grow closer rather than causing a wedge.

Here are ideas to get you started on peacefully being supportive of children in their online lives.

1) Set an example. You are your child's most important role model. Be the digital citizen you want your child to be. Share and discuss your digital life decisions and actions with your child in the same way you would share your physical world decisions. This includes prioritizing and balancing online activities with face to face interactions and discussing digital etiquette. Ask your child what they think or suggest -- it can lead to a great conversation.

2) Be in their world, but don't over do it.
The best way to help keep your child safe online is the same way you keep them safe in life. Be involved in their world, but allow them to develop independence. For example, you may take your children and their friends to the mall or the movies and bring them home but you don't necessarily watch the movie with them or follow them along as they shop. You know who they're with and you ensure they're safe. It's a good approach to take online, too.

3) Ask your children to teach you.

Today's children are digital natives and are often technologically savvy. Ask your child to teach you how to use his or her favorite platforms and discuss them. This is a great way to learn about your child's online behavior.

4. Help your child create a positive online reputation.
A positive online reputation is important for academic, career, and social success. Encourage your child to be respectful and communicate positively with the online community. Explain that it's not always easy to delete offensive or questionable content.

5) Get real.
The best way to reach children is by modeling good behavior and discussing real life situations and outcomes as they come along rather than scaring them into being good. Discussing real life/real world consequences both positive and negative is a great way to help your child think about and internalize values and responsible behavior. It can help them feel more comfortable about discussing their own situations with you.

6) Discuss online safety, but don't be a "helicopter parent."
Have ongoing conversations with your child about online etiquette and safety. Remind your child not to give out his or her phone number, home address, or any other important information without your consent. Encourage your child to discuss with you the online forums s/he is involved in that may include people they do not know face-to-face as well as ways to determine who should be blocked or reported. It's also important not to hover. Allow your child to develop independence online, just as he or she is increasingly independent in the physical world.

7) Encourage offline activities.
To achieve success, your child should be focusing on exploring and developing their passions, talents, and interests and tending to responsibilities with family and friends. Spending an adequate amount of time offline and outside is also important for a child's social success, and health and well being.

Now that you have an idea of how to support your child at home, consider talking with the parent coordinator or librarian at your child's school to find out what's happening there to support students in becoming responsible digital citizens. You will also want to review your school's Internet Acceptable Use and Policy and/or related guidelines regarding social media use.

For more ideas and free resources visit
http://www.commonsensemedia.org/advice-for-parents or
http://www.edutopia.org/mobile-devices-learning-resource-guide

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