Protecting Your Teens Online

BY KRISTOPHER SCHAAL

Two years ago, I became a youth pastor at age 32. The assignment has been challenging, but I am enjoying my work and learning a lot. Looking back, I can see that I underestimated some things going into youth ministry – for instance, the age of my body and the amount of free pizza a 17-year-old boy can consume 😜 .

On a more serious note, I also underestimated (1) how addictive technology is for teens and (2) how much trouble a teenager can get into with only his smartphone. Almost every time a teenager at our church or Christian school has gotten into serious trouble in the past two years, a smartphone was involved.

I've also noticed there tends to be a huge gap between what parents know their teenagers are doing online and what those same teens are actually doing. (For instance, according to Covenant Eyes, parents estimated their teens spent two hours per day online, whereas they actually spent five hours per day online. Also, 71 percent of teens admitted to hiding online activity from their parents.)

As a dad, I would jump to defend my children from a "bad guy" trying to hurt them physically. I'm sure you would do the same. Does that same intensity translate into protecting the minds and hearts of our children online?

The Dangers are Real

- 93 percent of boys and 62 percent of girls are exposed to **Internet pornography** by age 18.
- **Suicide** is the second leading cause of death among 18-24-year-olds worldwide, and studies have shown a link between lots of social media use and teen suicides.
- There was a sharp increase in **cyberbullying** and online conversations about **violence** among teens last year.

To make matters more difficult for parents, most teens today interact online through an array of apps that can be difficult for parents to keep up with.

- For instance, did you know **TikTok** is notorious for obscene language and sexualized videos — many of which are posted by minors?
- Did you know that the **Kik** app is often used to avoid being tracked by parents and law enforcement?
- Did you know that a curious teenager can access pornography through any app that integrates with Twitter, including the **YouVersion Bible** app?
- Did you know **Tumblr** is infamous for pornography? In 2018, it got so bad that the app was banned from Apple's app store due to videos of child sexual abuse being posted. Today, Tumblr officially bans porn but allows sexual themes and nudity.
- Are you up to date on your video games? **Grand Theft Auto V** is one of the three most popular video games right now. In GTA, you are a gangster who commits premeditated crimes like murder and armed robbery. You can even do drugs or visit a strip club (all with excellent graphics, mind you). In one harrowing scene, you even torture your victim.

Three Levels of Protection

As you can see, the dangers abound! How can dads protect our teens? *We need three levels of protection*. Let me explain.

We have a pool in our back yard. We also have young children. What steps do we take to protect them?
1. A fence
2. Swim lessons

3. Supervision

Imagine if we began teaching our preschoolers to swim and supervised them while swimming, but then neglected to put up a fence and let them play out back by themselves. That would be gross negligence! What if we put up a fence and supervised our children while swimming but never actually taught them to swim? They'd still be wearing floaties at age 18! What if we began teaching our children to swim and put up a fence, but then let them play in the pool by themselves? Again, no parent would do that. *All three levels of protection are necessary.*

What does this illustration have to do with protecting our teens online?
1. The fence = **filtering**
2. Swim lessons = **training (discipleship)**
3. Supervision = **accountability**

So how do we protect our teens?

1. Build Fences (Filtering).

First, I want to point out that *the simplest way to limit access to dangerous content online is to not give your teenager a smartphone.* This may seem obvious to some parents, but studies show that 95% of U.S. teens own a smartphone. However, as we sometimes ask our kids, "Just because your friend jumps off a cliff, does that mean you should?" Just because 95 percent of U.S. parents allow their kids to have smartphones, does that mean we should? Is it worth it, given the risks?
However, *even if your teenager does not own a smartphone, you still need to set up filtering for your other devices.* Does your teen have access to a tablet? Xbox? Smart TV? Chromebook? Kindle Fire? Any of these can be used to access the Internet. (Of course, if your teen does have a smartphone, filtering is even more important.)

There are three main ways to filter the Internet.

(Free) Filter using clean DNS providers.

Did you know you can block pornography on your home wireless router for free? The same method can be used to set up filters on individual devices when they connect to other networks or data. Check out this helpful article by Protect Young Eyes to learn how to set up DNS-level filtering.

(Free) Filter using parental controls.

Most companies offer parental control functions on their devices. For instance, in iOS, you can establish daily screen time limits, flag nudity in private iMessages, turn off AirDrop (to help prevent cyberflashing), and even set limits on how certain apps are used.

This extremely helpful resource from Protect Young Eyes provides step-by-step instructions for setting up parental controls on almost any device. Just be aware that parental controls don't work for all apps. (For instance, YouTube is especially tricky to filter.) *This is why you must understand all the apps your teenagers are using. Also, don't allow them to download new apps without your permission.* (In fact, you may just want to disable the app store.)

(Optional) Filter using additional software.

Many accountability software companies like Net Nanny, Covenant Eyes, and Bark offer filtering.

Objection: "That sounds like a lot of work!" Answer: "No one said raising teenagers was easy!"

Objection: "My teens can figure out a way to bypass the filter." Answer: "That doesn't give you the right to be negligent. Filters are important. They protect people from accidental exposure and force them to think twice about stupid decisions online."

Objection: "I can't shield my teens from everything!" Answer: "You're right — which is where Step 2 comes in."

2. Teach them to Swim (Discipleship).

When it comes to protecting teens online, building a fence is the most urgent step you must take. *However, teaching them to swim is even more important for long-term protection.* This step starts with reading Scripture, praying together, building relationship, and having spiritual conversations. *However, it also includes purposeful conversations about the dangers they will face online.*

Two words to remember here are "early" and "often." For dads with young children, did you know you can start warning them about pornography in age-appropriate ways while they are still in preschool? The books, Good Pictures Bad Pictures (ages 6-11) and Good Pictures Bad Pictures Jr. (ages 3-6) equip parents to do that. If you're looking for the same type of book for your middle schooler, try There's WHAT on My Phone? (ages 11-14).

However, don't just read the book together. Look for ways to engage your teens on these matters in everyday life. Here are some tips for having those conversations.
- Ask questions to find out how much your teen already knows.
- Be factual, open, and honest.
- Be careful to present topics like sex in a biblical light.
- Present role-playing scenarios like, "What should you do if someone texts you an inappropriate picture?" Does your teen know how to identify a potential predator?
- Make sure your teens know they can ask you anything and that you are always ready to talk if something is bothering them.
- Plan for lots of short conversations instead of one long lecture. Your teens need regular instruction about these matters, and you need to know what is going on in their lives!
- Most importantly, use these conversations to point your teens to Christ and the gospel.

If you have done your homework on Step 2, you may feel confident about how your teenager will do when faced with temptation. That is great! However, no matter how mature your teenager is, please do not skip Step 3!

3. Provide Supervision (Accountability).

When I was in college, my girlfriend (now my wife) came for a visit. At one point, we informed my dad of our plans to go swimming in our pool after dark. Dad said that was fine but that he would sit on the back porch and read. That was a good example of loving accountability. My dad had no particular reason to distrust me, but he was also realistic about human nature. We all need accountability!

Teens need accountability for their actions online. One of technology's biggest dangers is that it promises secrecy. "No one will ever know what you searched for in Google." "That picture you just sent in Snapchat will disappear in one day." Of course, the biblical response is that God sees everything (Prov 15:3) and your sin will surely find you out (Num 32:32). However, teenagers need to know that their parents are checking up on them, too.

How can you supervise your teenager online?

Buy accountability software.

What's the difference between filtering (discussed earlier under Step 1) and accountability software? *Filtering blocks access* to websites, apps, features, etc., you don't want your children to use. *Accountability monitors activity* on everything else you allow. There are lots of accountability software options on the market, but the two I

would recommend most are <u>Covenant Eyes</u> and <u>Bark</u>.

Covenant Eyes is user-friendly and has great customer support but is limited in that it can't monitor activity in apps such as Facebook. Bark is better because it monitors many apps such as Facebook and Instagram. However, be aware that no software can monitor everything! (For instance, Bark cannot monitor Snapchat on iOS.) Therefore, it is important to understand your accountability software and block dangerous apps which cannot be filtered.

Be curious about all aspects of technology your teen uses.

We cannot afford to "have no clue."

Agree to do technology together as a family.

Create an account on all the social media sites your teen uses and follow them. If your teen plays video games, ask to play with them sometimes. (This can also be a helpful way to build relationships!) Watch movies together as a family and discuss them (instead of watching on your separate devices).

Keep the use of technology to public spaces.

Don't allow technology in bedrooms or bathrooms and require kids to "turn in" their phones every night. (FaceTime in a teenager's bedroom is a bad idea.) Also, try to avoid situations in which your teenager might face especially strong temptation to misuse technology (*like sleepovers, for instance*).

Know the passwords for all your teen's devices and accounts.

You shouldn't be "locked out" of any aspect of your teen's digital life. Just like you can grab the key and enter their bedroom if necessary, you should be able to log in to Messenger and read their texts if you need to.

It is important to establish these expectations early. Don't wait until your daughter has had Instagram for six months before asking for her password! Make mutual accountability part of your home's digital culture from the very beginning.

A Final Question

Dads, what if your teenagers used technology the way that you do? You can make all the rules in the world, but your actions always speak louder than your words. Do you have filters set up on your phone? Are you willing to submit to accountability? Paul said, "Follow me as I follow Christ" (<u>1 Cor 11:1</u>). Is there something you need to confess and seek help with? Will you do it today for the sake of your kids?

It's a wicked world out there, and our flesh is drawn to it. Let's do everything we can to protect our teenagers (and ourselves) online.