

CHAPTER 1

Landscape

What Today's Social Media World Looks Like for Tweens and Teens

A few years ago, I was walking through the hallway of a middle school when Danielle stopped me. “You’re the lady who gave that presentation last week, aren’t you?” she asked me. Sitting on the floor of the school hallway, Danielle looked at me with knowing brown eyes. Her school uniform had an end-of-the day rumple to it, and her ash-blonde hair was pulled back loosely in a ponytail. It was a couple of weeks into the school year. I had given a presentation on back-to-school wellness to her and her middle school classmates the week before and had returned to give a corresponding talk to parents that evening.

“Your presentation was super helpful. A lot more than I thought it would be,” she volunteered. She quickly shared that she was in the seventh grade and was waiting for her mom to pick her up after school. Enjoying our conversation and curious to get her feedback, I asked what part of the presentation she found most useful.

“Well,” she started slowly, “all last year I had a profile on Ask.fm.¹ Lots of kids at my school are on it. Most nights, I would go into my room to do my homework, but I was really spending hours on Ask.fm. Have you used Ask.fm?”

I nodded.

She went on to reveal that she never told her parents about her profile on the site, because Ask.fm, like many social media sites, including Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat, has a minimum age requirement of thirteen years.² (Some apps ask users to be eighteen.)

As a sixth grader, she was twelve years old when she first created her Ask.fm account and wasn't even supposed to be on the site.

"People posted mean things on my profile page," she continued, her voice softening, "and I didn't know who was saying what, and it stressed me out so much. Pretty soon, I couldn't focus. It got hard to concentrate, and sometimes I would stay up late thinking about what people were saying. A lot of nights I had a hard time sleeping. But after your presentation, I realized I had choices on how I spent my time, and I wanted this year to be different—so I went home and deleted my Ask.fm account."

"Wow," I replied, both surprised and impressed by her decisiveness and courage to take action. "How do you feel?"

"I feel amazing," she gushed, her face beaming with a huge smile. "It's as though a big weight has been lifted off of my shoulders. In the last week, I've gotten my homework done a lot more quickly and have time to do whatever I want. I feel like this is going to be a great year."

A few moments later, I ran into the principal and asked if she knew of Ask.fm or had ever used it. The principal gazed at me with a look of slight obliviousness and shook her head. A few hours later, I asked the three hundred parents in the audience how many were familiar with Ask.fm. Only two raised their hands. This discrepancy, I soon realized, was part of our new challenge for social media wellness.

I became a social media "expert" somewhat by accident. Like many adults in my mid-thirties, I came of age in a time of nascent social media opportunities. Even though I grew up in the Silicon Valley, I wasn't that interested in the Internet as a high school student, and I only vaguely remember using my high school email address to trade five-line emails with a pen pal from the Midwest in a corresponding chemistry class. In 2001, I started an educational consulting firm with the goal of helping students with organization, time management, personal purpose, and overall wellness. Our main office is located in the heart of the Silicon Valley, but back then, there was no Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Musical.ly, Tumblr, YouTube, or WhatsApp.

About a decade ago, I noticed a shift in the way students managed their distractions and completed their work. At the time, they did most of their homework on worksheets or loose-leaf paper and then stored it all in hardback binders. Schools typically gave students written day planners to track assignments (whether or not those were used is another story altogether). My work was focused on helping students develop and manage their time so that they had more time for fun and rest, and the organizational system I developed became encapsulated in my first book, *That Crumpled Paper Was Due Last Week*. As a result of the success of that book, I began traveling to schools around the world, helping administrators, teachers, parents, and students promote academic success and personal wellness in the school and greater community.

Through my work, I've regularly seen students' grade point averages (GPAs) improve from a 2.5 to a 3.6 within six months, and I've helped college students on academic probation improve to a B+ average simply by transforming when and how they do their work. In addition to the improvements in test scores and overall grades, I believe the most important indicators of success are our students' increased confidence and engagement in their school and greater community. Once students design a system that works for them, they feel more in control of their lives and are excited to take healthy risks, try new activities, and get involved in a way they might not have before. They become purposeful, thoughtful, and resilient young leaders who are more likely to set audacious goals *and* improve their overall wellness with better sleep and nutrition habits. My work has always been about helping students dream big and make daily choices and develop habits around their own personal values. It is amazing to watch students go through this process, and positively influencing young people to make intelligent choices at such a pivotal time in their lives is extremely gratifying.

Over the past decade, I've witnessed first-hand the effects of technology and social media in the classroom and on young adults' lives more generally. As more and more schools brought personal technology like computers and tablets into the classroom, I soon realized that all the traditional strategies we were employing were not enough. In the beginning, I noticed how the technological creep that was the online social world created another layer of distractions that needed to be addressed in my daily work with students. What began as a trickle of diversion—Facebook was first focused on college students,

after all—quickly became a watershed of distraction (and disturbance) with the prolific abundance of iPhone and Android use and an explosion of instantly accessible free mobile apps.

I developed expertise around social media because I knew that doing so was a professional imperative. It created a crucial lifeline to help me reach students who were increasingly disconnected from adults who could—and should—provide guidance at a critical time in their social and emotional development. I began giving presentations to school faculty and parents on the new “language” of social media, because I realized that they were in need of a translator to thread the connection between the older generation’s pre-social media experiences and today’s younger generations’ way of living a life online.

Though students have long managed to find distractions anywhere and at any time, new social media innovations, especially anonymous and ephemeral social media apps and live-feed video, present new challenges for students and adults. Students who once identified food, daydreaming, pets, and siblings as major distractions are now far more likely to name certain social media apps or online websites. One of my high school seniors proclaimed that he spent the majority of his waking day on “the entire Internet,” and many of my other students admit doing the same. Another one of my students, a high school sophomore, recently listed her main distractions as the following:

1. Snapchat (x 100)
2. Instagram
3. Facebook
4. YouTube
5. Thinking about my life
6. Sleeping

Like many teens today, this young woman looks to online sites and mobile apps as a way to connect, communicate, and acquire new information. I will be the first to admit that technological innovation has improved all of our lives in many ways, and we all know that the story is nuanced and more complicated than technology being simply good or bad. Over the past decade, we—and by *we* I mean

parents, educators, and students—have experienced a seismic shift in communication and interaction that we are only now beginning to understand and address. Much of the current work around students and technology addresses and highlights the challenges but doesn't always provide crucially needed practical solutions.

According to 2015 Pew Research data, 92 percent of teens go online every day, which comes as no surprise to people who work with teens (see Table 1.1).³ What's disconcerting, however, is that 24 percent report being online constantly—their phones are mere inches away from their heads when they hit the pillow, and they think nothing of waking up in the middle of the night to check notifications and respond to messages.⁴ Girls are much more likely than boys to send and receive texts, and girls between the ages of thirteen and seventeen send by far the most text messages, nearly 4,000 text messages on average per month, which works out to well over 100 text messages per day.⁵ (Those texting statistics are dwarfed quickly by the number of messages sent through messaging services like Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp, which, combined, have 60 billion messages sent through their systems *each day*.⁶) Twenty-five percent of American teenagers admit to being connected to a device

TABLE 1.1 Teens and Social Interaction: Texting Is Only Part of the Story

COMMUNICATION PLATFORM	PERCENTAGE OF TEENS WHO USE PLATFORM	PERCENTAGE OF TEENS WHO USE PLATFORM DAILY
Texting	88	55
Instant messaging	79	23
Email	64	6
Video chat	59	7
Video games	52	13

Note: For many teens, texting is the dominant way that they communicate on a daily basis with their friends. Along with texting, teens are incorporating a number of other devices, communication platforms, and online venues into their interactions with friends.

Source: Pew Research Center. (2015). More than half of teens text with friends daily. Retrieved April 7, 2016, from http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/08/06/teens-technology-and-friendships/2015-08-06_teens-and-friendships_0-02/

within five minutes of waking up.⁷ The latest research suggests that teens between the ages of thirteen and eighteen spend about nine hours per day using some form of entertainment media, and tweens between the ages of eight and twelve use nearly six hours per day of entertainment media.⁸ This time does *not* include time spent online during school or while doing homework.⁹ And because so much of that time is spent on media multitasking, or using multiple forms of media at once (texting while listening to music, for instance), students can actually pack far more hours of actual use into that daily time.

What gets lost or overlooked in this shift toward technology is the importance of carving out and creating time for some of the most crucial elements for child and adolescent identity development—solitude for self-reflection, opportunity for greater self-awareness, and, quite simply, sleep.

In many communities today, it is commonplace for students to have a mobile phone at their disposal, ostensibly “for emergencies” and “just in case.” Given some of the horrific events of the past two decades—9/11; Hurricane Katrina; the school shooting in Newtown, CT; and other tragedies—it is understandable that many parents feel more comfortable if their children have a phone. At the same time, today’s tweens and teens are spending more time online and are shifting their personal efforts to maintaining and building an online presence. What gets lost or overlooked in this shift toward technology is the importance of carving out and creating time for some of the most crucial elements for child and adolescent identity development—solitude for self-reflection, opportunity for greater self-awareness, and, quite simply, sleep.

THE NEW LANGUAGE OF TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL MEDIA

In the summer of 2014, I gave a presentation to a group of women on the impact of social media in our everyday lives. The women in the audience were between eighteen and forty-five years old, and most were active on some form of social media. At that time, Snapchat was

still gaining momentum and popularity, and most of Snapchat's primary user base was under twenty-five years old. When I mentioned Snapchat to the audience, the majority of women under twenty-five were readily familiar with the app and in many cases had downloaded it onto their mobile devices. Most of the older audience members, however, were unfamiliar and somewhat uninterested.

This same sort of generational divide is currently happening with many students, educators, and parents. Over the past fifteen years, we have seen a remarkable shift in language and communication, and this shift has directly affected tween and teen wellness inside and outside of the classroom. Since I gave that talk in 2014, Snapchat has exploded in popularity, and new apps and messaging tools continue to change the way students interact, communicate, and consume content. In many ways, social media has created a new language of communication, and different generations are using and understanding the options differently. Students download and use new apps on a regular basis, and teachers, with all their other responsibilities, may not have the time or inclination to stay informed on all the latest social media trends. Recently, a teacher at a school I worked with was dumbfounded to learn that nearly all of her students were using a mobile app *during class* that she barely even knew existed. A head of school at a prestigious independent day school told me that he didn't need to keep up with all the different social media trends because "everything will change in six months anyway." Even when teens need their parents' support and guidance, they are less likely to seek it if they think their parents won't understand the problems they face, in particular with regard to their online activities. A 2015 study by Common Sense Media found that 25 percent of teens who are online think their parents are in the dark (knowing only "a little" or "nothing") about their online activities. A slightly larger percentage (30 percent) think their parents are similarly uninformed about their use of social media.¹⁰ Even adults who want to stay involved and informed face a constant struggle to understand the new language of social media, which has new dialects and nuances evolving on a seemingly daily basis. Plus, in many ways, keeping up with all the changes is exhausting. Nancy Jo Sales, author of *American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers*, traveled around the country documenting the social media habits of tween and teen girls, and revealed that after some days of researching, she would "have to sort of just sit for a while and take it all in."¹¹

Over the past five to ten years, technology has utterly transformed the way students think, learn, communicate, and process information. In her recent TED talk, “We Are All Cyborgs Now” anthropologist Amber Case explores the long-lasting impact of being dependent on devices for our everyday functioning.¹² Students in today’s learning environments face the ultimate paradox: The same devices and tools they are required to use to complete much of their schoolwork also serve as their main sources of distraction from getting any of that work done. More and more schools encourage students to use laptops and tablets in the classroom. According to data from the U.S. Department of Education, teachers at public schools reported that 69 percent of their students use computers during class most or some of the time. Internet connections were available for 93 percent of computers located in classrooms and for 96 percent of the computers brought into classrooms.¹³ Many independent schools and private schools throughout the United States and abroad have implemented one-to-one tablet or computer programs, or have similar programs in the works. More and more public and charter schools are doing the same—and with the price of a new Chromebook hovering around a few hundred dollars, it can be far cheaper to buy a Chromebook than to separately purchase all the textbooks it could potentially store. Regardless of whether or not a school has a one-to-one (or one-to-many) program in place, it is important to recognize that many schools are moving toward increasing the amount of educational technology in the classroom. Students spend at least some of their time online completing homework, and online socialization and distraction sneaks in and becomes a deterrent from completing work. How easy is it for students to block the Internet, when they need to use the Internet to complete their homework? Not so easy, as many of my students readily attest.

Early on, I realized that knowing the abbreviated language of texting and how to post Instagram photos or send Snaps gave me crucial credibility with students, and made them more open to listening to my recommendations and working with me to find pragmatic solutions. Students relax when they realize I am not against social media, and that I simply want to help them devise healthy ways of managing their work and life that are in accordance with their own vision of personal and academic success. In the end, my work is all about empowering students to align their daily behavioral choices with their goals and values. Through my work, I’ve personally developed greater empathy

for our youngest generation's struggles with technology and social media, because it didn't take long for me to recognize how much time *I* could spend perusing my Instagram feed or doing "research" on the latest popular apps when I wanted to procrastinate. In the midst of my research, I found that my iPhone was filled with so many social media apps that it could have been mistaken for a teenager's phone. I added flattering filters to photos, shared interesting articles, liked others' check-ins at worldwide hotspots, and messaged friends and family internationally without affecting my data plan. All of those little moments of connection and communication quickly added up to a whole lot of time.

Regardless of their level of awareness around current social media trends, parents, teachers, and administrators are typically at a loss for how to support students because they do not fully appreciate the problem. And this is a significant issue, because 58 percent of teens say their parents are the biggest influence on what they believe is appropriate (and inappropriate) online.¹⁴ Although most adults over the age of forty can remember a time in their school days when they felt slighted or were stressed by sex, drugs, alcohol and/or social and romantic relationships, virtually none has a memory of being broken up with via text message two days before prom and having the whole school discover and discuss the breakup via multiple social media networks.

Social media shouldn't be seen as strictly positive or negative. Instead, it should be addressed as a new language and cultural shift that provides different opportunities to connect and communicate. In some ways, it provides another layer for potential interaction and socialization. This new language and cultural shift creates a whole host of challenges that this book attempts to address and navigate. When parents and educators aren't comfortable speaking the "language" of social media, they are less able to provide relevant guidance and reassurance for the multitude of new issues students juggle online and in real life. They are also less able to be a proactive, preventive resource, because their inability to connect may keep young people from reaching out to them as a support or resource. In many ways, parents and educators now have the added responsibility to learn and become comfortable with this new way of communicating and interacting so they can provide young people with the tools and structure needed for self-control and safety.

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It's true that every generation, in some ways, has its own new language, and it's easy to underestimate this sense of generational divide or drift. But there are many reasons why the stakes are higher now and prescriptive solutions are needed more desperately than ever before. We'll look at some of the reasons as they relate to social and emotional development in Chapter 6, but for now, one of the key issues is how more and more young people seek advice and guidance from peers or an anonymous online media community instead of seeking support from the adults in their lives.

Some of this movement away from parental influence is, of course, a normal part of development. As kids grow up, they rush to create their own community away from the influence of their parents as a way of separating from them. But the key difference is that today's parents and educators, on the whole, remain dangerously unaware of the new language and culture that social media and related technology create for our youngest generation. Other books delve into the issue in greater detail, and I provide a resource list at the back of this book. My focus is on how we all need to build better awareness and close this language gap so we can promote overall wellness for today's tweens and teens. The goal for my work has always been to help young people develop the skills they need for future success and happiness, and social media has simply created an added layer that must be addressed.

Think back to Danielle's story at the beginning of the chapter. Danielle's after-school devotion to Ask.fm is an example of risky online social behavior. Her parents thought she was in her room doing homework, and her quiet and diligent nature made it impossible for them to think anything else was going on. Her social standing and popularity was important to her, and being on Ask.fm had somehow been deemed cool by her peer group. Danielle's online experience clearly had an adverse effect on her well-being, and she didn't have support strategies in place if something didn't go as planned. My presentation resonated because I used the language of

social media she was comfortable with, and conveyed my message without being judgmental or creating fear. As a result, she was able to reframe her thinking and realize she had choices around how she spent her time. When she ultimately decided that this school year would be different, she proactively made the choice to spend her afternoons without the daily drain of negative online interactions. She was able to get the guidance she needed in order to make choices to promote her overall social and emotional wellness—in part because I spoke her language.

SO MUCH HAS CHANGED, YET SO MUCH REMAINS THE SAME

I was recently speaking to a group of summer camp directors and senior administrators at a large conference in the Northeast, and many were frustrated and confused about the paradoxical role that social media plays in their work. Many camps, like schools, use social media to highlight how a positive camp experience provides the opportunity to take healthy risks, make lifelong friendships, and promote an inclusive community. However, camp directors of both sleepaway and day camps are sometimes at a loss for how to deal with certain issues, like campers posting photos of counselors online without permission, or overzealous camp parents who take helicopter parenting to a new level by trying to “friend” or “follow” counselors online as another way to check up on their children (for example, sent via Facebook Messenger: “*Is Johnny doing okay in your cabin?*”).

In the past few years, camp directors have dealt with more issues around day campers going home at the end of the day and posting certain photos or comments on social media. In the same way that social media has created a world where the school day no longer ends at 3 p.m., the camp world no longer ends when the camp day or session is over. Sleepaway campers might wait until the end of summer when they are back home to re-create a secondary camp experience online, but the exclusionary nature of certain postings and photo tagging creates the same heightened challenges that schools experience around online socialization—which in many ways goes against the very tenets of a camp’s mission. For example, a camper could post a photo of the campfire on Instagram and tag all the other campers in his or her designated group of friends, silently and subtly signaling

who is part of the group (#squad) and who is not. More and more, camp directors and senior staff spend hours fielding calls and emails from concerned parents whose children feel slighted and excluded as a result of after-camp postings. On some level, it is important for kids to understand that not everyone is included in everything all the time, but at the same time, it is also crucial for camps to use social media as a learning tool for the greater life lessons that are an essential part of personal development—namely, developing empathy and compassion for others, and working collaboratively to foster a sense of community and belonging.

My consulting with camp administrators made me realize how very few, if any, of these camps had a written social media policy for parents, staff, and campers, and many didn't really know where to start. Like school administrators, many of them felt overwhelmed and under-informed.

I wasn't too far along into my presentation before one of the camp directors put me on the spot. "How are we supposed to monitor and enforce social media when so much of it happens off camp grounds?" I could hear the frustration in her voice, and I recognized an argument that is often used by school administrators: We can't (or won't) deal with a social media issue if it happens off school grounds.

"Well," I replied, "you have certain rules at camp, right? Rules and policies that people have to follow to be part of the camp community, don't you?" She nodded.

"Most of those rules focus on issues around socialization, self-regulation, and safety," I continued, "and you've hopefully created a camp culture and sense of tradition that people want to return to again and again? I mean, many of you have camps that have the same campers return year after year." She nodded again, and by then most of the rest of the room was in agreement.

"Here's the thing: There are always rules and policies that we are expected to follow in order to remain a part of a community, whether that is a school community, camp community, municipal community, or our greater world as a whole. Ultimately, we always have a choice, but in order to remain part of a community, we generally have to follow a certain set of rules and guidelines. This isn't that different. I encourage you to reframe your thinking

and approach social media as an opportunity to teach the things we always seek to instill in young people—integrity, resilience, determination, kindness, leadership, and personal values. If people don't follow the rules, there are consequences—and one of the consequences might be that they are no longer able to be part of the community. If you've spent time creating a unique and inclusive camp culture, that is not a risk your campers will want to take." I likened it to the many schools I have dealt with that have suspended or expelled students because of social media issues, or to communities where children and young adults have been prosecuted based on evidence found on social media.

Suddenly, something clicked. I wasn't asking them to use social media policy to threaten campers or to create a sense of fear. Instead, I encouraged these summer camp leaders to reframe their thinking and use social media as a tool to teach the same important life skills they had been instilling in campers for decades. I wanted the camp directors to use social media to create and implement policies as a way to help campers understand they had choices around how they spent their time online and in real life, and how those choices had potential benefits and consequences.

Many of the underlying issues teens and young adults encounter as a result of online experiences existed long before the dawn of the Internet. It's not as though feelings of insecurity or inferiority began when people started using Facebook or Instagram, or that children started making questionable decisions with the advent of Snapchat. In reality, insecurity and poor decision-making are rather typical experiences for many tweens and teens. Most adults can recall a time when they somehow felt excluded in their younger years—perhaps by not making a sports team or winning a leadership role, or not being included in party or prom plans, or feeling as though everyone else was better/smarter/stronger/better-liked than them. Many can also recall how they did something that was ill-advised or, for lack of a better word, dumb. Social media use didn't cause these feelings or decisions, but it's easy to see how social media expands and amplifies such feelings to near-overwhelming levels while creating a long "paper" trail that can radically alter the long-term consequences of bad choices.

Our role as parents and educators is to help young people identify and process their feelings, to provide them with opportunities to

reflect and build self-awareness and their own set of personal values, and to encourage them to create coping strategies and find resources when things don't go as planned. This role has certainly become more challenging with the increased opportunities for ephemeral and anonymous online interactions, which I discuss in greater detail in Chapter 2. And, there are things we now need to think about and address earlier and more thoroughly than ever before. Regardless, it remains our responsibility to help students understand that their online and real-life experiences and interactions are more intertwined than they've been led to believe. We also need to collectively reframe our thinking about the importance of speaking the language of social media, and recognize that building a greater awareness provides us with the opportunity to enhance our conversations with tweens and teens around real-world personal and academic development issues. In doing so, we can encourage the next generation to be values and purpose-driven, engaged, and enthusiastic members of their school and greater communities.

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HOW SOCIAL MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY AFFECT THE OVERALL EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

In 2010, I began visiting schools and learning more about their classroom technology and, in many cases, helped them understand how to more effectively implement their tablet and computer programs. I realized quickly that schools regularly spent a great deal of time and resources updating their classroom technology to state-of-the-art levels and thinking through the logistics of giving every student a computer or tablet. These same schools had not thought through their social media use policy, especially as it dealt with faculty-student-parent interaction and off-campus postings and occurrences. Many schools assumed that whatever happened off campus would stay off campus (they were wrong). The few who did develop technology and social media use policies rarely extended their policies to

include the actions of both faculty and parents. Many school administrators felt stuck because they didn't fully understand all the different options or potential issues and became overwhelmed over the new apps and updated devices becoming available every day. As one issue is addressed, another issue pops up.

Today, many schools have a terms-of-use policy for technology and social media, in many cases reacting to past incidents by putting preventive measures in place. Still, many administrators, educators, and parents struggle with how they can use social media as an opportunity for a greater teachable moment. It's hard to know how and when to create programming that encourages students to better manage themselves in a world of so many options. I encourage parents and educators to think about family and school policies through the lens of three Ss—*socialization*, *self-regulation*, and *safety*. Later chapters suggest specific tools and ways to present the conversation, but let's take a moment now to think about how social media has affected the overall educational experience through each of these contexts.

Socialization

A few days before the recent school year was set to start, I was running a small-group workshop for incoming ninth-grade boys at a high school near our office. The workshop focused on organization, time management, distractions, healthy risks, and overall wellness and goals. It was developed as a way to help students ease into the transition to high school. At one point, I asked the teens, "If you were going to need to have an important conversation with someone, how would you go about doing so?" I was trying to encourage them to seek out healthy communication styles.

Without missing a beat, one of the young men enthusiastically raised his hand to respond, "Facebook Messenger!" I was bemused, thinking more along the lines of a face-to-face conversation as the ideal way to avoid potential misunderstanding and miscommunication. He genuinely believed that using the online intermediary would allow him to be clearer in thought and expression for a tough conversation, and he's certainly not alone. In her book *Reclaiming Conversation*, author Sherry Turkle describes how more and more families choose to "fight over text" instead of having a face-to-face dispute.¹⁵ Parents and students sometimes believe fighting over text allows them to

maintain composure in the face of a difficult discussion. In reality, it can actually prevent kids (and adults) from building crucial skills that come from having tough conversations face-to-face, where facial reactions provide powerful nonverbal communication tools typically unavailable through a screen.

Handling disputes via social media can actually prevent kids (and adults) from building crucial skills that come from having tough conversations face-to-face.

Social media adds a layer of complexity by altering how and when students socialize with one another, and changes how young people communicate and interact with their teachers and parents. For most students, the social part of the school experience no longer ends at 3 p.m., with conversations and content shared long after the final school bell rings. With social media, the secondary social experience begins at 3 p.m., and home, more specifically a child's bedroom, no longer offers a sanctuary from the challenges of navigating tween and teen friendships. As a result, there's less time for social and emotional processing, and less of an opportunity to slow down and regroup from a negative social interaction, that, given a little time and space, might seem more manageable. For students struggling socially in the hallways and cafeterias, going online after school can become yet another reminder of the world in which they may or may not feel as though they belong. (Conversely, it can also provide an opportunity for them to feel connected to others outside of their immediate school community, which I'll discuss more in Chapter 6.) Even those who feel a sense of connectedness may also experience low-grade anxiety about what they might be missing out on if they are not online and available. You might have heard students refer to this situation as "fomo" or the *fear of missing out*. This underlying anxiety quickly affects how they are or are not able to self-regulate during and after school hours.

Part of this anxiety also stems from the complicated way social media interactions blur the lines of friendship. After all, the notion of what constitutes a friend has shifted. When I was writing my second book,

The Myth of the Perfect Girl, I ran several focus groups of middle school and high school girls. One middle school girl explained how there were several classmates who would chat with her online every afternoon for extended periods of time, but wouldn't greet her in the hallway the next day. Their conversations online were warm and friendly, but the next day, it would seem as though they had never met. She felt confused as to what constituted a genuine friendship, and the juxtaposition between friendly online chatter and real-life silence became anxiety provoking for her. With Facebook, our "friends" can include our closest friends from childhood, our accountant we see once a year, and the college classmates we haven't spoken to in fifteen years. When adults talk about their friends, there are various degrees of friendship that sometimes need to be classified (but are often overlooked). *Is she a close friend, or an acquaintance I met once who likes and comments on my online postings?* Another of my students, a high school sophomore, had long drifted away from friendship with one of her classmates, but neither could bring themselves to end their Snapchat streak, a novelty that develops when users send photos or messages to one another every day. The Snapchat streak was now over 270 days long, and even though neither girl would reach out to the other for any other reason, the prospect of ending the streak seemed overwhelming.

Middle school and high school have always been, in some greater sense, about developing important interpersonal social skills and critical thinking. If you ask an adult what they most remember about school, it might be a teacher or a class, but more likely it would be related to a social experience or interaction. Navigating relationships with peers, teachers, and parents can be complicated and exhausting, especially when there are so many lessons learned and moments of self-discovery. Friendships shift, alliances fade, and who-likes-who and does-he/she-like me takes hours of thinking and processing time, time that no longer seems to exist in today's always-on, always-available social world of online and real-life relationships.

In later chapters, we'll delve deeper into the social and emotional effects of social media on teens, especially as they relate to identity development and empathy, but for now understand that social media has changed socialization for tweens and teens such that the school day never seems to end.

Self-Regulation

When students come into my office for the first time, I usually spend part of that session asking where and when they complete their work, where their phone is while they complete work, what other websites or media are open when they are trying to complete work, and what they believe to be their biggest distractions. Most of my students say they complete their work in their room, with their phone nearby. Students quickly admit that they might have several different tabs open for websites they might need to complete their work or sites they might want to peruse to take a break (online shopping, YouTube, Tumblr, ESPN). It never takes long for them to begin media multitasking while doing their homework. Even though they initially believe otherwise, students begin to realize that the small trickles of distraction combine to create an environment in which little is completed with any sort of efficiency.

Part of the challenge around self-regulation is related to perception—many students don't fully recognize how much answering a few texts here or there, watching a few YouTube videos, sending a Snap, or scrolling through their Instagram feed affects their ability to do work. Research shows that nearly half of teens admit to watching television or using social media while completing their homework, and most believe that media multitasking has no effect on the quality of their work.¹⁶ Two-thirds of those who media multitask while completing work don't believe watching television or texting has any impact on the quality of their work, and over half say using social media has a negligible impact on the quality of their work.¹⁷ As someone who has worked with thousands of sleep-deprived, stressed-out, anxious tweens and teens, I beg to differ. There's long been a myth surrounding the potential of multitasking to improve productivity, which I explored in *The Myth of the Perfect Girl*. The reality is that multitasking results in nothing being completed well.

During my presentations to students, I typically give an example of the incremental creep of text message conversations. It goes something like this: In the middle of completing math homework, you notice a phone notification because you have a text message from someone—*who could it be?* Maybe a friend, or perhaps a romantic interest. It could be a relative asking a quick question, or a teammate wanting to know when practice starts. Receiving a text message creates a

sense of urgency, and the natural inclination is to answer the message. But then what happens? It's not as if you then fully return to completing math problem #3 once the message is sent. (Students usually nod in agreement.) More likely, you sit and wait for a response, to which you might need to think up a funny, witty, and spontaneous reply. Thirteen messages later, you are still on math problem #3—and you've convinced yourself the past half-hour has been dutifully spent on math homework. If you are in your room, your parents likely think you are hard at work as well.

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Whenever I give this “math problem #3” example, nervous laughter erupts from the audience, because nearly all tweens and teens who message their friends experience a similar scenario on an ongoing basis. It's no secret that students struggle with self-regulation, especially when it comes to understanding how to compartmentalize work so they can remain productive and focused. Some of this struggle is developmental and is affected by where tweens and teens are in terms of brain development. Boys' brains are still developing until they are about twenty-four years old, and girls' brains aren't fully developed until they are around twenty-one years old.¹⁸ The prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain that regulates impulse control and sound decision-making, still has a good ways to go for many tweens and teens, and the pleasure principle often reigns supreme. Various forms of media often provide an instant gratification and distraction that can be hard to overcome in the face of longer-term goals related to academic performance and overall wellness.

When it comes to helping students with self-regulation, adults often make the mistake of coming from a place of punitive anger and frustration about distraction and off-task behaviors. In reality, adults have their own struggles regulating technology and social media use. Research suggests that adults check their smartphones an average of once every six minutes—or over 150 times *per day*.¹⁹ Some 93 percent of 18–29 year olds admit to using their smartphones to avoid being bored, and 57 percent of phone users report that their phone use leaves them feeling distracted.²⁰ Today's employers go

to great lengths to try to manage employee productivity during the workday, blocking access to personal email or websites that might be distracting, hiring consultants to provide professional development around increasing mindfulness, and managing technological distractions so that work can be completed more efficiently.

Given the issues adults in the workplace experience related to online distractions and productivity, we need to shift our perspective and understanding of self-regulation and create opportunities for students to develop their own intrinsic motivation to make behavioral changes. At the same time, we also need to provide students with concrete tools to make those changes. Later chapters will suggest strategies for promoting a shift away from multitasking toward compartmentalization and single-task focusing, and finding ways to encourage time and energy management on a daily basis.

Safety

I encourage parents, educators, and students to think about safety in terms of offering protection rather than creating a sense of punitive fear. Safety issues have become far more complicated over the past five to ten years, and from an online perspective it's important to recognize issues related to privacy, data mining, and how and where tweens and teens are sharing information in cyberspace. When we think in terms of physical and emotional safety, parents and educators have to work with students to create emergency and contingency plans for when something doesn't go as planned and to help students feel as though they can reach out to multiple people and places if they make a decision that puts them in harm's way.

One of the first schools I consulted with on technology policies decided, for financial and logistical reasons, to have students' families purchase iPads instead of giving students school-issued devices. Since the tablets were owned by the families, students kept their devices year round, and the school had little say on what apps and games students used or added to the devices. In one case, a middle school girl began using her iPad to communicate with someone she thought was a fifteen-year-old boy through Minecraft, an open-world game that allows players to build designs from textured blocks. Though Minecraft is most known as a game focused on creative building, it has a social component that allows players to communicate and

interact with one another. When law enforcement officers showed up at the family home to inform the young girl and her parents that she was actually spending her time communicating with a man in his mid-forties in another state, the parents rushed to blame the school. The parents reasoned that it was the school's fault for making students use iPads and thus exposing her to potential harm.

There were several issues in this case, namely, that schools should generally issue devices and create policies and guidelines for parents and students around smarter choices and appropriate use. This school had no policies in place and provided no real guidelines for parents (this has since changed). At the same time, many parents blame schools and are frustrated with tablet and computer programs that encourage students to be online for many hours in the day. Parents often fail to realize that the mobile devices they readily purchase for their children (smartphones with cameras and videos, for example) can be bigger triggers for the onslaught of school social-networking disasters. When Andrew Davis was the head of the middle school at Crystal Springs School in Hillsborough, California, he noted that nearly all of the disciplinary actions regarding social media and device misuse involved students who were using devices brought from home and purchased by their parents.²¹ The school had a one-to-one tablet program, and in some cases, parents remained unaware of their children's use of personal devices. As with most other schools, students could bypass school filter systems by using their mobile phones on school grounds. Yet, when the mobile phones were used on school grounds in a way that resulted in disciplinary action, parents were quick to assume the school-issued tablet was to blame.

When we think of social media, technology use, and safety for tweens and teens, one of the first things that come to mind is the need to protect young people from chatting and meeting with potential predators online. This increased vulnerability is especially true for students who might feel socially isolated at school or within their community. At the same time, issues related to online and in-real-life safety go beyond protecting young people from interacting with strangers and potential predators to also include serious topics such as data mining, privacy, and security. For instance, when a school has students sign up for a free file-sharing service to store and turn in assignments, the students are exposed to potential data mining and are regularly exposed to targeted advertisements. Imagine my surprise when

I asked a group of two hundred students what their biggest distractions were when they were completing homework and one blurted out, “The ads that pop up when I use [a popular file-sharing service]!” I glanced over at the school principal, who looked chagrined as she realized the school’s requirement to set up free accounts on the file-sharing service had caused this problem.

Even though ad-free educational accounts were an option, the school was unsuccessfully attempting to save tens of thousands of dollars by having students create free accounts (though nothing is really free, and the ads clearly came with a cost). A later conversation with school administrators revealed that in requiring those fifth- and sixth-grade students to sign up for free accounts on the file-sharing service, the school was also making the students indicate falsely that they were thirteen years old, which was the minimum age according to the service’s terms of use. Shortly after my presentation, the school principal told me the school decided to pay for the educational accounts.

In addition, many classrooms use educational sites and apps that may have dubious data-security practices or questionable data-mining practices, making students’ personal information and records vulnerable to being unknowingly stored or exposed. Hundreds of companies, including Facebook and Google, use data to target ads, and how and what is being targeted at students based on their search practices can lead to a host of questions that don’t necessarily have clear answers.²² A February 2015 *New York Times* article entitled “Uncovering Security Flaws in Digital Education Products for Schoolchildren” reveals how software engineer Tony Porterfield discovered the website his children were assigned to use to complete a reading assessment had a number of security flaws that made it easy for unauthorized users to potentially gain access to students’ names, voice recordings, and skill levels.²³ Similar vulnerabilities expose students using educational tools as part of their classroom learning experience to hacking, identity theft, and unsolicited contact from strangers. Reporter Natasha Singer notes that “some privacy scholars, educators and technologists contend that federal protections for student data have not kept pace with the scope and sophistication of classroom data mining.” Even though the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) places limits on how student information is handled, those limits often don’t extend to the free apps and sites teachers use in the classroom to supplement their daily instruction.²⁴

There are so many unique layers to address when we think about maintaining and supporting the safety of tweens and teens, but foundationally, parents, educators, and students need to work together to offer support and find solutions. During a recent Q&A after a presentation to parents, one mother cornered me and begged me to tell her exactly what she needed to do to keep her daughter safe. As much as I want to be able to provide a simple solution, I told her what I tell all parents and educators: There is no one-size-fits-all answer. Designing successful solutions requires a nuanced and flexible approach, and building awareness is the first step.

SUMMARY

Social media creates a new language of communication and connection and, in many cases, widens the generational divide between children and the adults they may look to for guidance. Tweens and teens today often look to their peers and an entire online media culture for advice and input, and adults need to become more aware and understanding of how this new language is key to helping young people grow up into thoughtful, resilient, active members of the school and greater communities. Even though social media and related technology introduce new layers of complexity to learning and relationships, we still hold many of the same values for our children, and we need to find better ways to reach kids and give them the tools and resources they need to make better decisions. In terms of how social media and technology affect students' educational experiences, it is helpful to think of the ways in which socialization, self-regulation, and safety play a role. Today's tweens and teens socialize differently with one another and have a difficult time self-regulating when experiencing the ultimate paradox: The device they need to use to complete their work is their biggest distraction from getting work done. When we think about maintaining and preserving the safety of students, it is important to remember the growing complexity around maintaining students' safety. It is not simply a question of having them avoid meeting unsavory strangers online. They also must find ways to protect their privacy, identity, and personal data as they use more and more educational apps and online tools.