

WELL | FAMILY

# Rules for Social Media, Created by Kids

By DEVORAH HEITNER JAN. 5, 2017

The challenge of growing up in the digital age is perfectly epitomized by the bikini rule.

“You can post a bikini or bathing suit picture only if you are with your siblings or your family in the picture,” said one middle-school girl who was participating in a focus group on digital media. In other words, don’t try too hard to be sexy and you’ll be O.K. in the eyes of your peers.

By high school, the rules change. At that stage, a bikini picture often is acceptable, even considered “body positive” in some circles.

As an educational consultant, I lead workshops on digital media at schools around the country, giving me an unusual glimpse into the hidden world of middle and high school students. While parents sometimes impose rules for using social media on their kids, the most important rules are those that children create for themselves.

And these often unspoken rules can be dizzying.

Girls want to be sexy, but not too sexy. Be careful which vacation photos you share so you don’t seem to brag. It’s O.K. to post photos from a fun event, but not too many.

In one focus group I held recently with seventh-grade girls in an affluent suburb, all of the girls were avid Instagram and Snapchat users. It was clear that they understood the dynamics of presenting a persona through the images they posted. It was also clear that they had a definite set of rules about pictures.

Aware of their privileged socioeconomic status, they talked about how it would not be O.K. to share vacation pictures of a fancy hotel, using the example of a classmate who had violated this rule. Like many unspoken social codes, this one became vivid to these girls upon its violation.

As part of a school project the girl had displayed pictures from her vacation at a foreign resort. Her classmates considered it an immature form of “bragging,” and said other kids had gone on even “better trips” or lived in “amazing houses” but “knew better” than to post about it.

The same girls identified another peer as “too sexual,” a judgment some parents even encouraged. A few said their moms did not want them to hang out with a particular girl because she “acts too sexy.” One of the girls expressed this sentiment in a group text that included the peer in question, leading to hurt feelings and conflicts.

Middle school can be an especially complicated time for girls. They are experimenting with social identity, even as their always-on digital world intensifies the scrutiny. Many want to be seen as pretty (even sexy, in some ways), but also as innocent and as “nice.” This is an impossible balancing act. Parents can help by suggesting more empowering alternatives to posting bathing suit pictures.

Another group of seventh graders (of mixed gender and in a different community) told me the rules regarding how many pictures to post from an event. There was a sense of what was acceptable and what was not. Posting one to three images was fine, they said, but all agreed it was “obnoxious” to “blow up people’s phones” with a huge stream of images from a party or event.

These kinds of images can lead to feelings of exclusion as well. Imagine watching a party unfold, in real time, on Snapchat or Instagram, when you aren’t there. The experience can be absolutely devastating to tween and teenage children.

When I asked these seventh graders about it, they said that it happened all the time, and that it can be hard to deal with.

With their lives constantly on display, it's a challenge for even well-intentioned tweens to avoid making others feel excluded. The "rule" was that it is "better not to lie or make excuses" if you are with one friend and another friend wants to hang out. Better to be honest and say, "I have plans," than to lie and say, "I have too much homework," then take a risk when sharing images of yourself out with friends later.

Parents often feel as if their children's smartphones are portals to another world — one that they know little to nothing about. A study released last month found that fewer than half of the parents surveyed regularly discussed social media content with their tween and teenage children.

But parents need to know that their child's peers have created their own set of rules for social media, and that they should ask their kids about them. What are you "allowed" to post, and what seems to be off-limits? Are the rules the same for boys and girls? Why or why not? Can you show me an example of a "good" post, or a "bad" one? Does social media ever stress you out (and can you give yourself a break)? How can kids in your group make group texts or social media nicer for everyone?

In a study published last summer, researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, found that the pleasure centers in teenagers' brains respond to the reward of getting "likes" on Instagram exactly as they do to thoughts of sex or money. And just as parents try to teach children self-control around those enticements, they must also talk to them about not falling victim to behavior they will regret when craving those "likes."

As parents, we don't want our kids to make a big mistake online: writing something mean in a group text, posting a too-sexy picture or forwarding one of someone else. According to a Pew Research Center survey, 24 percent of teenagers are online "almost constantly," so it's essential that they know how to handle themselves there.

Getting your children to articulate the unspoken rules can be the first step in helping them be more understanding of their peers. When we observe our children

harshly judging others who have a different sensibility about the use of social media, they need us to set aside our judgments about their world, and help them cultivate empathy for one another.

Devorah Heitner is the author of “Screenwise: Helping Kids Thrive (and Survive) in Their Digital World.”

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