Raising Consciously Connected Youth

Reflections during the 2017 Innovative Learning Conference at Nueva School

By GLORIA MOSKOWITZ-SWEET, MY DIGITAL TAT2

Seven years ago, I received a call from a high school administrator asking for my help. A hate site had been created that targeted some students at the school. She was struggling to understand not only what she was seeing, but what to do about it. Parents were angry at the school for not responding quickly enough. The administration felt that because this happened after school hours, the responsibility lay with the parents. Everyone was pointing fingers at somebody else.

So much has happened since then. Progress has clearly been made, but we are all continuing to grapple with the challenges of parenting and educating in a world where there is no longer a separation between online and offline — it's just "life" for kids who have never known a world without digital technology, who have never seen a phone that wasn't also a camera.

In our work at My Digital TAT2 over the past 6 years, we have had the privilege of working with over 20,000 children and teens in advisory groups, small classroom settings, and large assemblies. We have seen the incredible power and opportunities kids have to connect, create, imagine possibilities, and envision solutions to real world problems.

We have also seen the challenges of digital overuse, the impact of techno-perfection on self-esteem and body image, the exposure to inappropriate content that once seen cannot be unseen, and the impact of online hate not only on the target, but on all the bystanders.

We hear far more about the challenges, but as parents and educators, focusing on negativity and fear will not help equip children and teens with the tools they need to use technology and social media in safe, ethical, and responsible ways.

How do we raise mindful, consciously connected kids? In our experience, early education is key. Before children are using social media, they are often playing Minecraft and other online games, skyping with family and friends all over the world, watching YouTube videos, and even creating their own videos and content. Entering their world with curiosity and engaging their natural playfulness and empathy is where we begin. Our goal is help them utilize their critical thinking skills to recognize when they are being manipulated by online marketing; to read their body signals to understand the feeling of being wired and tired from screens in the last hour before going to bed; to learn how to stand up for themselves and others when a griefer (a player in a multi-player video game who deliberately harasses, excludes, or annoys other players in order to cause havoc) destroys their carefully created world on Minecraft, often their first experience with cyber bullying; to question what is "real" from what is "fake" information and to search for the truth.

We have found that this early prevention before their world widens and their supervision decreases helps them navigate their future social media lives in a more mindful, conscious way. As parents and educators, we need to start this conversation early and continue to stay connected as we transition from being their managers to being their consultants. It's these ongoing conversations that support positive digital use.

We recently worked with 500 ninth graders at Mountain View High School. They shared with us that most of what is posted online are the highlight reels, carefully curated selfies, photos of parties that leave others out, memes that are funny, but sometimes hurtful. We asked them to think of two things that they are proud of but never post. In a large room packed with students, we did not expect what followed next.

One by one, many shared the stories they were proud of: passing out handmade cards with a little money to the homeless, working with autistic children, standing up for young children gaming online who are being trolled by older kids or adults, creating online forums to support Syrian refuges, singing in senior care centers to bring some joy to the elderly. After each story, they spontaneously applauded one another's creativity and compassion. Listening to their stories is what inspires us and why we leave every student workshop and discussion group with hope for the future.

Raising consciously connected youth comes from engaging kids, not through fear, but with acceptance and curiosity, and challenging them to see that they have the power and responsibility to make our world, both online and offline, a more compassionate place.