

Teaching online civility

Every family has a moral code – what they consider to be right and wrong, how they treat people, and what behaviour is acceptable. Children learn this moral code at home through their parents and other family members. Every family is different, but all want their children to be kind, compassionate, respectful and responsible.

Creating your family's social media policy

The core to any social media policy – be it in the workplace or at home – is that the same rules that apply to offline behaviour apply to online behaviour. The only difference is that a mistake online is seen by many more people and is often challenging to fix.

The Mayo Clinic posted a [12-word Social Media Policy](#) to give businesses a starting point. However, their guidelines can apply to us all. They are:

- Don't Lie, Don't Pry
- Don't Cheat, Can't Delete
- Don't Steal, Don't Reveal

But families need to add two more: don't be mean, keep it clean. Why? Because cyberbullying and sexting (sending sexually explicit messages and images, primarily between mobile phones) are a real concern.

Cyberbullying

Bullies have always existed. Most of us remember a child who tormented us in the playground or in our neighbourhood. Today, social media allows bullies to remain anonymous and to spread vicious comments or photographs not just around a school, but into cyberspace where it remains forever for anyone to see.

While parents can't control the behaviour of other children, they can teach their own kids not to be passive bystanders and thereby, intentionally or unintentionally, part of cyberbullying. It is, after all, the bystander who is most complicit and who has the most power to stop the cycle of violence.

In her book, *The Bully, the Bullied and the Bystander*, Barbara Coloroso quotes a holocaust survivor who lists three actions that will change a bystander into a witness: "Pay attention, get involved and never ever look away."

As part of the family moral code and social media policy, children should be encouraged to be witnesses who will speak out against injustice.

Here are some tips to get you started:

- **Have a discussion with your children and teens about bullying and cyberbullying, emphasizing that neither is acceptable behaviour.**
Talk about why it takes more courage to stand up to bullying than to do nothing. However, they should not put their own safety at risk. If they feel unsafe, they should tell a parent or a teacher.
- **Discuss the difference between telling and tattling.**
If someone's safety or well-being is at risk, it's not tattling.
- **Encourage them to support the person being bullied.**
Verbal and emotional support can go a long way in the recovery process for the bullied victim.
- **Talk to them about what they post and share online.**
Written comments, photos and videos all form part of their 'digital footprint' and remain in cyberspace forever.

- **Tell children and teens to avoid emotional posting.**

This can inadvertently hurt them and others. Advise them to take a deep breath and calm down before expressing feelings and thoughts to others – either face-to-face or online.

- **Make a zero-tolerance policy about discussing sex online or through texts.**

Teach your kids to disengage immediately and block any unknown people who make contact with them, and report any inappropriate texts or images sent by people they know, like school mates.

- **Be a role model.**

Children emulate the adult behaviours around them so let them see you treat people with courtesy and respect and speak out against behaviours that hurt and victimize others.