

Streaks, Likes, Followers, and Friends

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The Impact of Social Media in Girls' Lives

Without a doubt the element of girls' lives that has changed most markedly in the past 10 years has been the proliferation of social media. In the past several years we have seen the profound ways in which social media can influence the political climate, galvanize social movements, and create rapid, viral awareness of new issues. We have also observed the ways in which individual social media use has a profound impact on girls, their relationships, their mental health, and their perceptions of themselves and their abilities—both online and IRL (in real life)!

Have you ever been with a group of teen girls all sitting side by side one another staring at their respective cell phones? It is easy to wonder why they wanted to be together since they aren't even speaking to one another. But unless one is looking for a collective group eye roll, they shouldn't attempt to be funny with a quip like "Hey girls, are you all texting each other?" Because it is at this point that the girls may actually start texting each other—maybe even with a comment about how out of touch the adult seems to be.

The reality is that most adults *are* out of touch with the social media landscape of teens today. Even if we consider ourselves tech-savvy, are active on social media ourselves, and have all of the latest tech

gadgets, the way we understand and use technology is fundamentally different from that of today's generation of girls. The majority of adults who are currently raising or educating school-age children did not have cell phones, and definitely not smartphones, when they were in middle school or high school. Many remember getting their first phone in high school, college, or young adulthood, and they chuckle at the thought of the giant, gray, brick-size phone with an antenna and a green screen that was their induction into the technological era.

Today, the majority of U.S. girls have smartphones by the age of 10 and begin engaging with social media between the ages of 10 and 11. Overall, 95% of teens have access to a smartphone, and 45% report that they are online "almost constantly" (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Even if girls don't have smartphones, they are quite adept at using technology as many have been using an iPod, iPad, or tablet since they were toddlers. When these devices are connected to Wi-Fi, they essentially have all of the features of a smartphone at their fingertips: cameras, messaging, Wi-Fi calling, video chatting, interactive app usage, location tracking, and social media access, to name a few. The only additional feature that an actual smartphone provides is the ability to access all of these amenities when a Wi-Fi connection is not available.

Social Media Use Among Girls

By the time girls are in high school they report spending up to six hours per day using social media and eight or more hours per day engaged with all types of technology (Hinkelman, 2017). Social media has become a primary tool for communication and connection among youth and adults alike, and it is often the place where people get their family updates, school information, news, recipes, jokes, entertainment—the list goes on. The majority of all social media users report checking their social media sites at least once per day, with high school girls checking on average 8 to 10 times per day.

There is variability in the ways adults and teens report using social media. When adults are asked, most of them report the desire to stay connected to family members who live out of town, to stay in touch with friends from high school or college, and to stay abreast of news,

current events, and issues that are of interest to them. Girls report using social media to stay connected, to know what is going on with their friends, to communicate with their friends, and to follow their interests. They talk about the importance of being active on social media so that they aren't "left out." In my interviews with girls I hear statements like these:

Sometimes I just post random stuff so that I stay part of the conversation. It's like if you aren't posting, then you are basically invisible—you aren't in the room. It doesn't matter that much what I actually post, just that I have put something out there.

—Lizzie, 15

Posting or commenting on other people's posts keeps you part of the group. So you go through and "like" or comment on everyone else's posts so they know that you've seen them. Even if you don't actually like the post, you need to basically acknowledge that you saw it. So everything that my group of friends posts, I "like" when I see it. Sometimes friends will actually send a text and tell me, "Hey, I just posted something. I need you to go on Instagram and 'like' it."

—Madison, 17

There is a lot of pressure to post certain kinds of things on social media because everyone wants to present themselves in a certain way. You want to be cool but not like you are trying too hard. You want to look pretty but not like you've spent a ton of time trying to look a certain way. It's supposed to look effortless, but really it takes so much time.

—Chantel, 14

Girls maintain their activity on social media so that they stay part of the conversation and aren't forgotten by their peers. It is as though each post is a little reminder that is saying, "Hey, I am still here! Don't forget about me!" And while social media is the new tool for communication and connection in our society, the way it is used among teens, young adults, celebrities, influencers, and politicians is

now not just for connection but also for status. How many friends or followers do you have? How many likes did you get on your post? Who liked your post? Through my research I have learned that there is a distinct difference between whether my mom liked my post and whether my crush liked it.

Trying to Understand and Stay Connected

When I conduct workshops focused on technology and social media with parents and educators, I am continually asked the question “How do I get them to put their phones away?” or “How can I convince her that social media is not real life?” Adults are continually frustrated by both the amount of time and the psychological investment that girls place around social media. It is as though there are competing realities: the in-person, synchronous, in-the-moment conversations and connections that are happening in real time and the online, asynchronous communications and engagements that are a constant, unending narrative and continuous feedback loop shaping the decisions and behaviors of our teens. Both have a substantial role in shaping youth behavior; however, increasingly, the immediate nature of communication via social media can shift opinions, perceptions, and behavior in marked ways.

Many adults who work with or parent girls have a hard time understanding the importance that girls place on their social media persona and presence. While it is true that adults may also invest a great deal of time into curating their own online profile, in general, there is a significant disconnect between the way teens and adults use and understand social media. Much of this disconnect is based on the fact that today’s parents of school-age kids did not grow up with social media. They did not live in a state of constant connectedness where there was an ongoing and incessant feedback loop. Their earliest memories around friends and dating did not center on decoding texts and emojis or scanning posts for clues about interest or attraction.

The generation of adults who are currently parenting and educating girls can still remember a time *before* that first cell phone. When calls had to be made from a home phone or (gasp!) from a pay phone. A time when dates and plans to see one another were made in person or on the

landline, when maps or printed directions were required to find out how to get to new places. A time when going to a coffee shop meant ordering what you wanted to drink and then actually standing there and waiting for it. This generation made relationships the “old-fashioned way.” They spent time with people because they had common interests. They had long conversations about ideals, views, and perspectives.

Doesn't this all sound so very nostalgic—those simpler, easier times before technology took over our lives? If any part of that last paragraph sounded cozy and familiar to you, you may sometimes wish that things still operated that way. Because most of us have a tendency to think that the way that we did things was the “right” way. That our communication, our relationships, our hobbies, and our interactions with friends took place in the way these types of things *should* take place. This approach worked for us, so to us it is “normal” and perhaps even what we see as ideal.

However, the adult generation has also established a new normal. We are the generation that did not grow up with all of the technology, but we have brought it into our lives so voraciously that it is now an extension of ourselves. We sync our phones, our cars, our thermostats, our security cameras, our music, and our watches. We rarely find ourselves more than a few feet from our cell phone, and we instantly panic if we temporarily lose track of that magical device. In short, we have quickly assimilated to this new normal, but at times we still long for the “before.”

Girls today don't have the “before.” They are not able to make a comparison between life before and after technology because, if they were born any time after 2000, they have never known life without the sophistication that the digital boom has afforded. They were born into a hyperconnected society where life and relationships move at a rapid pace, where the flow of information is constant, where communication is steady and robust, and where the feedback they receive from others is often unsolicited and incessant. Disengaging from this means that they miss out, that they aren't included, or that they fall behind. Girls are developing relationships in entirely different ways from how most of the adults in their lives forged relationships. Group texts, interest groups, video chats, and interactive apps

have replaced passing notes, sleepovers, long phone conversations, and football Friday night hangouts. The new normal is that girls are available, accessible, and immediately responsive.

"I feel like she is totally overreacting!"

I just don't understand why she is constantly connected to that phone. It is literally like an extension of her body, and she freaks out if she can't check it constantly. Lately, she has been complaining a lot about a specific group of girls that are the "popular" girls. My daughter has been trying to be a part of that group since we moved to this school district, and she has had moments where she has been included but many more where she has been excluded. I watch her follow the every move of these girls on social media, and it is crushing to watch her completely deflate when she realizes that she wasn't invited to the party or the sleepover. I tell her to put the phone away and quit caring so much about what these girls say, think, and do. She screams at me that I have "no idea" what she is going through and storms out of the room in tears.

—Danielle, mom of a 12-year-old girl

Responding to this situation is complicated and emotional. On the one hand, it is so hard to watch our girl try so hard to connect and still be excluded and hurt by her peers. But on the other, it is frustrating to realize how much value she places on the opinions of a group of 12-year-olds. It is hard to know how to respond to something for which we may have a limited frame of reference, and using the line "I know how you feel" can be wholly inadequate and inaccurate. We actually don't know how she feels at this precise moment, so we shouldn't tell her that we know or try to convince her that we know. We can't diminish the emotions that she is having; instead, we should ask her how she feels. We should allow her to be the expert on her life in this precise moment and invite her to let us in to understand it. She may be feeling embarrassed, excluded, angry, sad, annoyed, or any combination of these. The intensity of her emotions might be amplified by the fact that she perceives that everyone else knew that

she was excluded as well because—different from what it may have been for us—everything is on blast online for everyone to see.

For today's girls social media is an inextricable part of their relationships. They are using their online connections as a social barometer, gauging their popularity, relationships, and at times perceived value based on the feedback that they receive from others. Where we once thought of the lunch table as the place where social hierarchies evidenced themselves, we now see group chats and number of followers as the visible indicators of who is "in" and who is "out." A group chat can start with six or seven members, and then without warning, one girl can be left off from the conversation—intentionally or unintentionally—and the conversation proceeds without her. Plans are made, parties are discussed, and she is initially oblivious to the fact that she has been excluded. Only later, when she sees the posts from the party that she wasn't invited to, does she realize what has happened.

As a group of eighth-grade girls who attend a small private school explained to me,

Our teachers have this rule that if you have a group chat, everyone in the class has to be on the chat. But that makes no sense because you aren't close friends with everyone. You are going to have people that you are closer with than others—that's just the reality. They don't understand that sometimes you just want to talk to your closest friends and that should be fine.

I can certainly understand their perspective, because it is true. None of us are friends with everyone equally. We have relationships that are stronger than others and individuals who we connect with in more meaningful ways than with others. Hopefully, we have learned how to savvily navigate our relationships to avoid overt exclusion and hurt feelings and how to nurture the relationships that are the most satisfying and sustaining for us. We might not always do it right, but years of experience has taught us how to (hopefully) not mess it up all the time.

We have to help girls navigate both their individual and their group relationships in open and communicative ways. Unfortunately, this can become more complicated when the primary form of communication is through electronic communications and social media.

Cues are missed, body language is absent, and the nuances of face-to-face interactions are conspicuously missing. For these reasons we are often biased against communication via technology.

Do You Have Tech Biases?

Did you have a smart phone in middle school? Did you have the opportunity to text a friend and get an immediate response? Did you know everything that every one of your peers was doing in real time? These are some questions to assess your own biases as they relate to engagement with technology. Rate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:

1 = *Strongly disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Agree*, 4 = *Strongly agree*

1. I think relationships are best formed in person rather than online.
2. Communication is most authentic when it is face-to-face.
3. I first met my closest friends in person, not via technology.
4. Talking with someone versus texting or emailing is always the better way to communicate.
5. Girls put too much value on what people think of them online.
6. Digital life is not real life and shouldn't be given as much attention or importance.
7. If people would just put their phones down more often, the world would be a better place.

If you find yourself strongly agreeing with these statements or have noticed that you have made similar statements to girls, you likely carry some biases regarding the value of social media and technology. If you made these same statements to girls, how do you think they might respond? Likely, you will identify at least a few areas where there is a clear disconnect between your perceptions and theirs.

This disconnect can contribute to frustration, misunderstanding, and a lack of open communication between girls and adults. As Nikki, an eighth grader, explained, "Basically, anyone who is like, over 35,

doesn't understand social media. They don't really get it, and they don't think it matters." When girls hear from adults that they "spend too much time on their phones," "shouldn't care about what people online think about them," "let social media dictate their emotions," or "are wasting their time online," it causes girls to be less open with adults about their digital lives.

Let's think about this for a moment. If I am into something that I know you think is stupid or a waste of time—Star Wars, cat videos, board games, Netflix marathons—I will likely make a conscious decision to ensure that I *never* talk to you about that thing. I will go out of my way to not bring it up with you because I want to avoid your indifference, judgment, or ridicule. I feel as though you don't get me and you aren't even making an attempt, so why should I bother trying? This is often what girls experience when it comes to communicating with adults about what is happening for them—both good and bad—online. We don't get it, we don't make serious attempts to understand, and we think it is useless and a waste of time. Girls know this too, so sometimes they just stop trying.

"I think social media is a stupid waste of time. I just don't get it."

I think Snapchat is the devil. It is literally the worst thing that has ever been invented, and I told my 11 year-old daughter she is not allowed to have it on her phone until she is 13. She is allowed to have Instagram as long as I am following her and I can see what she is posting. But absolutely no Snapchat; it is entirely too dangerous, and quite frankly it is stupid. My 13 year-old daughter is on it and is obsessed with her Snapchat streak. When our family was going on vacation and I told her that we would not have internet access for a few days, she literally started crying and told me that I was ruining her life because her 300+ day streak would be ruined. This is literally one of the dumbest conversations we've ever had, and I am at a complete loss at what I should do here.

—Nate, dad of an 11-year old and a 13-year old girl

If you are wondering what a Snapchat streak is (don't worry you are not alone!), it is when two people send at least one photo to each other within a 24-hour period of time. If you and I are in a Snapchat streak, I snap you a photo—of anything. It can be a photo of my foot or the floor. Then you snap me a photo back. Once again, of anything at all. We keep this going every day without fail, and we earn virtual trophies along the way as we lengthen our streak.

This might not capture our interest, but for many girls this streak is an indicator of a robust friendship. The fact that this other person is thinking about me every day and that we have committed to this personal connection is a tangible demonstration of our friendship. It is akin to the modern-day note passing in the hallway. Missing a day on the Snapchat streak means that we have to start over—literally on day 1. It means that the past 300 days that we were “on fire” simply goes away as though it never existed.

If we approach our conversations with this girl from our position that this is a complete waste of time—“This is so stupid! I don't understand why you spend so much time on this”—or that she is ridiculous for having this reaction to the situation—“If she is your true friend, it shouldn't matter if the streak ends”—it is likely that she will quickly learn that this is one of the topics that she can't openly discuss with you. Later, if she finds herself in a sticky situation on Snapchat—maybe she is observing bullying or perhaps she is receiving unsolicited photos that make her uncomfortable—she'll remember that you think Snapchat is “stupid,” and she'll work to figure it out on her own. Because in her mind figuring it out on her own is easier than hearing you say, “I told you so.”

Impact of Social Media

Researchers have a difficult time reaching a consensus on the impact of social media in the lives of teens—in part, because the research is relatively new and also because to measure the relative impact of social media use *exclusively* while removing the impact of all other variables is actually quite difficult. To understand both the positive and the negative impacts of social media, we have to look at the correlations between specific behaviors and societal trends to come to a conclusion.

Contrary to the negative light in which social media is often presented, girls report that there is a great deal about social media that they like. They like knowing what's going on with their friends, they like feeling connected to their peers, and they like being part of something bigger than themselves. According to the Pew Research Center's survey of 784 teens, nearly 8 in 10 reported that social media makes them feel more connected to their friends, and nearly 70% reported that it helps them interact with a more diverse group of people and contributes to their feeling that they will have people to support them through tough times. Teens generally rate their social media use with more positive than negative feelings—they feel more included, more confident, more authentic, and more outgoing than they do without social media (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).

Despite these overwhelmingly positive feelings, there is clear evidence emerging on the negative mental health impacts of social media. Between 2009 and 2015 there was a 33% increase in adolescents exhibiting high levels of depressive symptoms, with 31% more dying by suicide. This increase was found to be nearly entirely driven by females (Twenge et al., 2018). In trying to isolate the causes of these increases, Dr. Jean Twenge and her research team took a deep look into teens' activities, both screen time and non-screen time related. She found that adolescents who spent more time on activities that involved some type of screen (phone, tablet, computer, TV, etc.) were significantly more likely to have higher depressive symptoms than those who spent less time.

The Girls' Index™ research had similar findings. The amount of time that girls spend engaged with electronic devices was correlated with increased reports of sadness and depression. Among the nearly 11,000 girls from fifth to twelfth grade who completed the survey, we found that the girls who spent the most time—eight or more hours a day—engaged with technology were five times more likely to report sadness and depression six or seven days per week. This group was also the least likely to report having supportive friendships, participating in extracurricular activities, or enjoying coming to school. Twenge (2018) found that among girls exclusively, more social media specifically was correlated with increased depressive symptoms. It is important to be cautious in the interpretation of these findings

because the data do not tell us specifically that social media use causes depression but, rather, that there is a relationship that exists between the two. The question that remains is whether or not girls already had increased levels of sadness and depression and so they use social media more often or they spend extensive amounts of time using social media and, as a result, develop increased levels of depression?

When researchers look at the variables that are connected to decreases in depressive symptoms, they find that more social interaction, consuming print media versus digital media, and participating in sports and exercise all contribute to lower levels of depression. While the initial temptation may be to simply limit the time that girls spend on social media, the fix is not quite that easy. A girl's engagement in lots of other positive activities is also critical to her overall well-being and mental health. We have to focus on decreasing the time she spends on social media while we simultaneously increase her interest and engagement in many other activities: sports, clubs, workshops, reading, exploring, camping, traveling, crafting, and creating.

Social Media and Safety

We are really strict in our house about technology and social media use. Our kids didn't get phones until they were 13, and they were forbidden from using any social media until they were 15. Then they were allowed to use it, but ONLY if we were friends and I could monitor what they and their friends are posting. The kids know that we track their whereabouts on our phones, and we also monitor the content of their text messages and social media posts. Basically, I get a copy of every keystroke, photo, post, etc. that they make. When they were younger, I would sign into the iPad while they were in their rooms texting and I would sit in the living room and read the conversations they were having in real time. When we talk about what they send to others and what they post online, I reiterate that everything is permanent and that the choices that they make today will impact their lives forever. Making a stupid decision now will keep them from getting into college or getting a job later. I make

sure that they know that if they even think about sending or receiving a nude photo they can be on the sex offender registry for the next 30 years.

—Amber, parent of 15-year-old and 17-year-old daughters

At first glance this seems like a pretty involved and sophisticated parent, right? A parent who is diligent with strict parameters and consistent monitoring in an attempt to keep their child safe. She is definitely *not* one of the 61% of parents who rarely or never monitor their child's use of social media (Hinkelman, 2017).

Parents, and the world of internet safety tools, are trying desperately to keep up with the rapidly advancing technology that kids can access. Unfortunately, the way we understand and use technology is changing faster than ever. It often feels that as soon as we get a handle on the latest app or trend, it becomes quickly outdated and replaced by a faster, more sophisticated, more intuitive option.

While Amber is putting forth great effort in her attempt to keep her girls safe, there are some critical issues that are important to note and discuss:

1. *They can only have social media if we are connected, so I can monitor what they are posting and seeing.* This may be the most common strategy that parents implement when initially introducing their kids to social media, and while it is a laudable effort, it may prove to be a bit short-sighted as we all have the ability to control who sees what content within our feed.

Regardless, if you are “friends” with or “following” another person on social media, they have the easy ability to control what you can see from what they post. From limiting your access to specific posts to ensuring you can't see their full friend list, privacy settings and viewing controls allow for customized experiences for each user. Making a post that “everyone, except Mom” can see is a real thing, as is making a post that only 10 of my closest pals can see.

Often, when girls experience high levels of parent monitoring, they create an alternate social media profile.

On Instagram, the fake profile is called a “finsta,” or fake insta. The finsta is where they post all of the “authentic” and “real” content—basically a place for the stuff they don’t want their parents to see. Girls describe this alternate profile as the platform where they are their true selves and they can “look normal” or “be silly” without being judged, whereas their “regular” page has to be perfect. Ironically, the curated, beautiful life that they work so hard to construct is the one that they knowingly identify as fake, while the finsta is considered the more authentic profile.

Adequately monitoring the activity of an avid user of social media can turn into a full time job, particularly as girls make more social connections, friends and followers. When girls have 500+ connections, it can be hard to monitor all of the interactions, direct messages, group chats and posts that all of their friends make. And when social media “handles” (i.e. the username that someone uses instead of their real name) don’t reveal a person’s identity, girls may unknowingly accept friend requests and connections from acquaintances they have met just one time or even strangers who are trolling for connections. While girls report wanting to keep what they post private, specifically from parents and teachers, over 40% report accepting friend requests from people that they don’t know (Hinkelman, 2017).

2. *They know I track their whereabouts and their activity with monitoring apps and programs.* Parents today have the ability to track their child’s location (or at least the location of the child’s phone). They can know if their teen is driving faster than the speed limit, can receive a report on each text message and email that they sent on a particular day, can monitor their social networks for signs of depression or suicidality, and can be alerted if potentially risqué photos have been sent or received.

One of the most obvious challenges here is that the software and apps used for these purposes can be easy for kids to simply uninstall or figure out how to work around. I’ve heard many of the strategies: “I just leave my phone in my

locker or at my friend's house, and it looks like that is where I am" or "My mom monitors my iMessages through the iCloud, so we just use WhatsApp instead" or "Sometimes I just shut my phone off and tell my parents that the battery died."

This is not to say that keeping track of kids is useless or a waste of time. Rather, it is not a fail-proof approach to keeping kids safe. Kids today are savvy and curious. Many see the parental limits, surveillance, and tracking as a challenge for them to work around, and they uninstall or circumvent the monitoring devices. Of particular concern is when the parental monitoring takes place without the knowledge of the teen. When they invariably discover the situation, it can do little more than create increased distrust, angst, and consternation in the relationship.

3. *I tell her everything is permanent and that the decisions that she makes now will have life-long consequences.* There is some truth to this statement, but it is also an intense scare tactic. Much like the "scared straight" programs of the 1970s and 1980s that were designed to whip kids into shape so that they never do drugs or become juvenile delinquents; these approaches don't often resonate with adolescents who are often living in the moment. Developmentally, adolescents tend to perceive their experiences and emotions as completely unique and see themselves as relatively invincible. Teens routinely engage in risk-taking and sensation-seeking behaviors, often without regard for the consequences.

If you work in schools or are parenting tween or teen girls, it's likely that you've been exposed to programs that focus on digital footprints, digital dangers, digital citizenship, or privacy and etiquette online. These programs and workshops often provide good information on what kids might be getting into online and include insights into the latest trends and usage patterns. However, where many of these workshops fall short is that they focus primarily on all of the horrors and the things that could potentially

go wrong, rather than helping students build the actual skills and competencies they need to navigate their digital world. There is no all-or-nothing mentality when it comes to helping girls stay safe on social media. There must be a hybrid approach that combines expectations, monitoring, and limit setting alongside skill building and open communication.

What Can We Do?

Acknowledge the importance that connection to technology and social media engagement play in girls' lives and relationships. When girls are spending up to eight hours or more a day using technology and social media, we have to recognize that this investment of time is also a prioritization of their peer relationships and connection to others. Developmentally appropriate for this age, teen girls often define themselves and construct their identity based on their relationships with others. They are consistently navigating and negotiating their interactions, and the presence of technology has amplified the value, importance, and longevity of these interactions. Their phone is their perceived connection to the world, and for some, it can be completely devastating if taken away. Rather than minimize the value or importance of technology and social media, we need to acknowledge its importance while also seeking opportunities to amplify other relevant forms of care and connection.

Stay informed about the technology and social media landscape, even if you are not using it yourself. If technology and social media aren't your thing, don't worry; you don't have to turn into a Silicon Valley tech guru in order to be relevant to today's girls. However, you do have to at least try to stay educated and informed so that you can share a common language and understanding of a very important priority in her life. Take time to learn about the most common apps that teens are using, the YouTube stars that they are into, and the interests/groups they are following. As you learn, use this knowledge to foster open communication and to create points of connection so that she'll share more openly with you because she sees that you "get it."

Work with your girls to set reasonable time limits and shared expectations regarding technology and social media use. Girls get really frustrated when adults simply try to impose random and arbitrary rules, particularly surrounding their technology use. While there is clear evidence that time engaged with social media can have negative implications, simply restricting its use does not adequately address the concerns. We know that it is not simply less time using the technology that matters; it is also ensuring that there is more time for engagement with other healthy and prosocial activities. Help girls examine not only the amount of time that they spend using social media and technology but also how they use these tools. When we recognize that not all social media engagement is negative and detrimental, we can begin to identify its healthy and supportive aspects. From communicating with peers who they don't spend much time with to connecting with others who share similar hobbies or interests, girls' online interactions have the potential to provide support, reduce isolation, and increase engagement.

For most of us, it is easier to feel motivated to do something when we have a say in the process or some agency in the decision. Instead of simply stating, "I have read some new research and have decided you can now spend a total of two hours per day on your phone," you might start a conversation with her about what she thinks is a reasonable amount of time and how she came to that conclusion. You might use the "screen time" function on her phone to understand how much time she is currently spending using her device and how, specifically, she is spending that time (social media, school work, YouTube, messaging, etc.).

Implementing limits is much easier if this conversation happens as soon as a new technology is introduced to a girl—for example, when she gets her first phone. It is much more difficult, but not impossible, to backtrack into an agreement after the fact, but your negotiating skills will need to be much stronger!

Instead of reinforcing scare tactics, focus on teaching the actual skills girls need to navigate their electronic world. The skills that girls need to effectively and safely navigate social media are nearly identical to the skills that they need to navigate tough situations in real life.

If I can teach a girl to use her voice to decline an unwanted back rub while she is standing at her school locker, I can also help her use her voice to refuse to send a risqué photo of herself to a peer who solicits the image. If she can appropriately and confidently stand up to bullying or disrespect in person, then teaching her how to do that via technology should be relatively straightforward. The assertiveness and the refusal skills that she would utilize are the exact same set of skills—they are just being applied in different environments.

It is important to consider whether your girl has the skills to stand up for herself, share her opinion, appropriately disagree with someone, and set boundaries. If you rarely observe her speaking her mind or enforcing a boundary, it is likely that she struggles with these skills or perhaps doesn't have opportunities to practice and hone them. Help her find her voice in low-risk environments and situations, so that when she finds herself in higher-stakes scenarios, she knows what to do and how to react. As she becomes more adept at these strategies, she can more readily apply them in a variety of settings.

Unfortunately, when it comes to technology, we often fail to recognize that there are lots of skills that girls need to develop and practice to be effective digital citizens and to be safe consumers of digital content. By teaching girls how to effectively communicate with others, set appropriate boundaries, refuse certain activities, and know when to engage an adult in the conversation, we are helping them develop the competencies they need to navigate their lives and relationships more effectively.