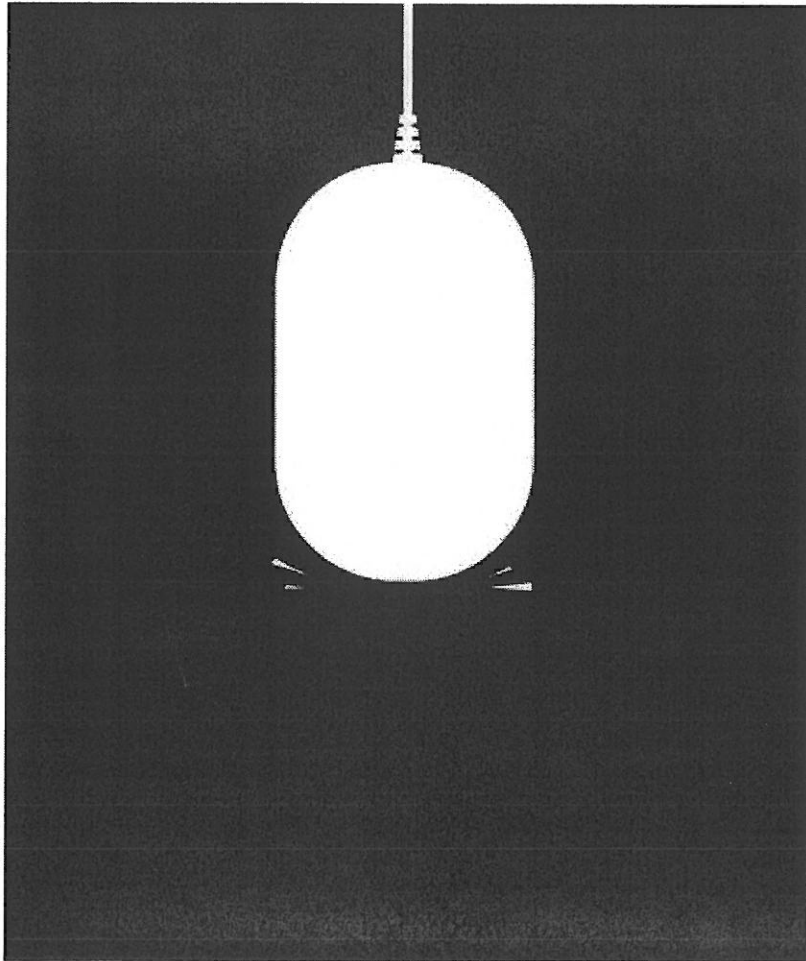# Parenting Against the Internet

What are our kids doing online, and how can we protect them from danger?

By Genevieve Field   September 2016 Real Simple Magazine

NOMA

Nadine*, a stay-at-home mom, thought little of it at the time: She was preparing food in the kitchen, and her son, Ethan*, a popular, adventuresome 12-year-old, appeared beside her. "Mom?" he said, not meeting her eyes. "I broke my iPod Touch. I'm really sorry." Nadine gave her son a hug and told him not to worry about it. She and Ethan's dad prided themselves on staying on top of the technology use of all of their children, activating the

parental controls on family computers and insisting that no screens enter the bedrooms at night. They had been planning to hold out on buying their son an iPhone, unsure if he was ready for the responsibility. But Ethan, who had a history of ADHD and anxiety issues, seemed to be thriving in school. Maybe he was ready after all.

A few months later, Ethan got a surprise: an iPhone. Always Eagle Scout polite, he hugged his parents and disappeared to his room—not to set up his new device, as Nadine thought, but to cry. "I was so oblivious," Nadine told me recently, through tears. She had no idea that Ethan had broken his iPod on purpose, trying to kick a spiraling pornography habit that now, with the Internet once again in his pocket, he would be unable to resist. "He was begging me to help him manage his technology," says Nadine. "It was just much too powerful for him."

Powerful, indeed. American teens absorb an average of nine hours of entertainment and social media a day, according to a national survey by Common Sense Media. Let's pause for a moment: nine hours, every day. (How is this possible? Some of those hours are simultaneous—Facebook plus music, say.)

Between their distractions and ours, it's hardly any wonder that, according to a study by the technology security company McAfee, nearly a quarter of parents struggle to keep up with their kids' digital lives, and 70 percent of teens hide at least some of their online behavior.

Is ignorance bliss, or does our inattention put our kids at risk? Many mental-health experts are standing up to claim the latter. Daniel Sanderson, Ph.D., widely known as "Doc Dan," is a clinical psychologist and the clinical director of Star Guides, in St. George, Utah, a therapeutic rehabilitation program where teens can receive treatment for the newly minted behavioral disorder known as "problematic Internet use," an umbrella term for any use of technology that causes impairment or distress. As he explains: "Young adults, adolescents, and little kids are all 'digital natives,' born into a world where connections are formed and life is lived online. They *will* be exposed to the negative realities of the Internet." Three of

the biggest threats to kids right now, according to Sanderson and other experts I spoke with: pornography and its creeping convergence with real life; communities that romanticize depression, self-harm, and suicide; and excessive gaming that can alter—and sometimes take over—young lives.

It's time to turn to professionals and families who have been there to ask what may be the most important parenting question of our time: When kids get lost online, how can we empower them to return to us healthy, safe, and strong?

Too Much, Too Soon

Nationwide surveys of students have found that as many as 93 percent of boys and 62 percent of girls have seen pornography in adolescence. Ethan was 17 when he began to open up to his dad about his secret life. He said that he had first stumbled upon Internet porn by accident, before parental controls were set up on the home computers. That was in third grade. By ninth grade, he revealed, he had become obsessed with viewing sexually explicit images—but he left out the fact that many were of girls he met on social media and, even closer to home, at school. Floored, Ethan's parents installed better blocking software on his phone, sent him for counseling, and prayed. But the iPhone blockers missed Instagram and Snapchat. And despite wanting to stop, Ethan was soon spending hours every day "connecting" with other young people through porn.

Another thing Ethan didn't confess: On several occasions, sexting with girls he had met on social media led to real-life hookups that left Ethan depressed and ashamed. Not that anyone could tell. To his parents, friends, and many social-media followers, he seemed fine: busy, confident, grinning in photos posted online. "We just didn't get it," says Nadine. "People have to realize, if your child was exposed to heroin and he said, 'I'm having a hard time with heroin,' you wouldn't say, 'Well, you just need to stop. Let's put some blocks up.' If you've never had the problem, you don't realize how deep it goes."

Sadly, Nadine's heroin analogy may not be far off the mark. Scientists are just beginning to discover that many electronic pastimes trigger the release of dopamine, the same feel-good neurotransmitter that drives substance addictions. Each time we see an arousing image or slay a virtual dragon in a video game, we get a hit of dopamine. And the more dopamine the highly malleable young brain gets, the more it rewires itself to crave whatever produced that hit. Over time, higher and higher doses are needed to feel the same effect. Robert Weiss, a licensed clinical social worker specializing in digital media and human sexuality and the author of *Closer Together, Further Apart: The Effect of Technology and the Internet on Parenting, Work, and Relationships*, explains: "Adolescence itself is a very traumatic time. What if you find this incredibly affirming, powerful experience? Odds are you will return to it." For a child who gets his or her fix from porn or gaming, the chase can become so consuming that sports, hobbies, and real-life friendships fall by the wayside. Like young substance addicts, says Weiss, "these kids are missing out on important social development. They may wake up at 23 and [realize] that they haven't had a relationship and they're not doing well at work—they're failing."

Parents need to have multiple conversations with their kids about what they are encountering online. One way to establish openness is to share about your own media use. "Then let them know that their use of technology is something you want and need to hear about," says Weiss. When it comes to social media, experts suggest letting kids lead the conversation: Ask them to walk you through their apps and games and how they work. As for talking about adult material, explain why viewing it when you're still growing up can be stressful, misleading, and risky. Remind them that the Internet is not private, and that their information and viewing habits are most likely being tracked by outside servers, which could lead to unwanted, even dangerous, attention. "Encourage them to establish their own boundaries while stressing that you are always within arm's reach online," says Weiss.

A great way to get the balance right, say experts, is by installing, with your child's knowledge, age-appropriate blocking or monitoring software. For the youngest kids, that means turning on parental controls in the settings of mobile devices and computers. But

there are also more customizable blocking apps, like Net Nanny (netnanny.com). For kids 12 and up, experts recommend installing a tracker such as the UKnowKids app, which allows kids to self-manage their social-media use but delivers regular reports to parents. Your child can look, but he's going to have to talk about it with you later. And if that talk ends up being about the 17 practically nude Instagram users he started following yesterday, Weiss emphasizes the importance of remaining calm and steering clear of a "gotcha" mentality. "The goal is never to shame our kids," he says. "We're talking about their sexuality and their sense of self here." Parents of tweens and teens might want to highlight that sentence, as it holds a potent secret: Acceptance is the way in. We may not admire the sexual landscape in which our kids are coming of age, but it's a reality. Our tolerance, not our judgment, is our greatest tool for supporting them.

Trish*, the former captain of her high school cheerleading squad, watched porn from a young age and used it as a coping mechanism when she felt stressed about school and family relationships. "I remember waiting for people to leave the house so I could watch it and numb out," she says. Does she wish her parents (who are still in the dark about what she was doing) had restricted her digital access? Or at least prepared her for what she might be seeing online? "I would have gotten to [porn] whether they were restrictive or not," says Trish. "And if my parents had come to me about what was going on, I probably wouldn't have talked to them. But if they had said, 'There are other people you can talk to,' I would have been open to that." Instead—as with many adolescents who get hooked on porn, say the experts—the next step was acting out. Trish texted nude photos of herself to a stranger she had met on Twitter. "My school friends thought I was one way," she says, "and behind closed doors I was another way."

Sadness Seeking Sadness

Perhaps nowhere are girls trying on secret lives and identities more than on Tumblr, the highly visual platform where blogging communities form around thousands of topics—from

bands to beagles, fashion to…subjects you hope your child will never Google, let alone blog about.

Although still less popular than Facebook and Instagram, Tumblr is used by 23 percent of all U.S. girls ages 13 to 17, according to the Pew Research Center. The platform does not track its 300 million–plus blogs by subject matter, but a few hours of exploring will confirm that "depression blogs," which may include depictions of self-harming, eating disorders, and even suicide, are abundant. In my interviews with nearly a dozen depression bloggers over the past year, a certain personality type emerged: that of a high achiever who works overtime to keep up appearances while secretly struggling. As Jill*, 16, a precocious California high school sophomore, explains, "Tumblr is where you show the side of yourself you don't want your parents and people at school to see." Jill's middle-school experience in one word: "Awful." She was "a Goody Two-shoes with no social awareness," who was shy and lonely. At home, she clashed with her family. "They thought I was just being 13," she says. "But I was depressed. I self-harmed a lot. I still have scars all over my wrists."

Jill started a Tumblr devoted to her passion at the time, Japanese anime, then one day searched "#depressed, #harm" just to see "what was out there." What she found was an endless feed of images and quotes that seemed to spring from the darkest corners of her own imagination: arty photos of gaunt young women, GIFs of edgy teen actresses voicing (in subtitles) things she couldn't; and 20-point Helvetica half-thoughts like "Because why would someone like you ever choose someone like me?" Then there were the graphic shots of bleeding cuts and angry scars, the song lyrics about overdosing, the reblogged suicide notes. "Looking at it was like relating: They have scars, and I have scars. It was almost hypnotic—and comforting in a strange way," says Jill. Over the next six months, she returned to Tumblr's depression and self-harm blogs dozens of times. But gradually, she says, "I realized that the more involved with that community I got, the worse I felt." Impressively, Jill eventually shifted her focus from self-harm and depression blogs to apps like Instagram and Snapchat, which, despite their own booby traps, promote engagement with real-world friends rather than strangers.

Ideally, all kids would recognize that steeping themselves in unhealthy images and mantras is more harmful than therapeutic. But, of course, the adolescent brain, with its still developing prefrontal cortex, has little capacity to play the tape forward. In 2012, a British teen, Tallulah Wilson, jumped in front of a train after becoming immersed in Tumblr's self-harm community. In an open letter, the girl's mother wrote that her daughter had "entered a world where the lines between fantasy and reality became blurred. It is every parent's worst nightmare." She pleaded with Tumblr to remove the sorts of blogs she believed may have triggered her daughter to take her own life.

Tumblr did not comply. When asked why such blogs are still flourishing, the company's counsel and director of trust and safety, Nicole Blumenfeld, responded: "There is the dark side of all of this, but there is also the side where people are reaching out and helping and supporting one another. So, while we do remove some content that users flag as triggering, it isn't going to solve any of the underlying problems as to why someone is posting that content. And that's why we like to couple it with trying to do more proactive stuff." Last year, her small team launched Post It Forward, a campaign to destigmatize mental illness and promote wellness, and the site floods at-risk users with PSAs and crisis-hotline numbers. Independently, Tumblr users have created Tumblr Suicide Watch, which encourages bloggers who notice any suicidal posts to report their findings and offer help.

Despite efforts like these, vulnerable young people continue to be triggered by the proliferation of self-harm, pro-anorexia, and "thinspiration" communities online, says Jamison Monroe, the founder of Newport Academy, whose centers offer treatment for depression, trauma, adolescent substance abuse, and problematic Internet use. He stresses that these online nexuses are unlikely to promote dangerous behavior in mentally healthy teens, who may only view them out of curiosity and a need for connection. Still, that may be of little consolation to the parent who has just stumbled upon her daughter's self-harm blog. What should a mother do?

Advises Monroe: "Talk to your child, calmly, about what you've seen, and don't be afraid to ask the hard questions. Has she ever self-harmed? Thought about suicide? Then listen, but don't try to figure this all out by yourself. Talk to a therapist. It's not about infiltrating their personal lives— it's about staying involved."

Only A Game? Not Quite

There is no clear consensus on whether video games are addictive, but "Internet gaming disorder" is included in the latest Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders as a condition warranting further clinical studies. Already, substantive research confirms that even in short, regular doses, the unnaturally bright light, vivid colors, and excessive dopamine and adrenaline triggered by electronic games can disrupt sleep, cause mood and behavioral issues, and contribute to what is unofficially known as "failure to launch syndrome," extreme difficulty in making the transition from adolescence to adulthood. As is seen with heavy Internet-porn users, excessive gamers may think like addicts, finding their nongaming lives flat and unsatisfying. This is especially true of those who play fantasy-based MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games), such as World of Warcraft. Girls who play MMORPGs may be more likely than boys to blur the line between their virtual and real personas—confiding in, forming attractions to, and even meeting in real life players they only know as avatars. Male players, in particular, may make the leap from electronic games that feature gambling to free online gambling to electronic gambling—betting real money.

Cause for concern? Definitely, says Melanie Hempe, who founded Families Managing Media, a website and outreach program that helps families make informed technology choices. "Kids are not equipped to handle the stresses that come with gaming and porn and violent media," says North Carolina–based Hempe, who has four children. In time, the need for adult oversight should become more clear. "Parents who are taking this on today are five years ahead of our culture."

Adam, now 24, was the first and last of Hempe's children allowed to play electronic games. He got a gaming console when he was about 11 (back in 2002). Hempe would set the kitchen timer for 30 minutes, maybe an hour, and let her son play military games until the ping. There were occasional power struggles, sure, but Hempe didn't worry about Adam's screen habits until he got his first laptop, in ninth grade. "The smaller your kid's screen, the more you lose control," says Hempe. Now Adam could play World of Warcraft in his room whenever he had spare time, unbeknownst to his parents. (If you've ever tried to pry a laptop from a high schooler's hands, you know it's not easy.) He progressively withdrew and dropped out of piano and tennis lessons. Hempe felt that something was not right, but friends told her not to worry. Wasn't Adam a straight-A student? In his senior year, he got into a top-tier engineering college. "I thought he would outgrow games," says Hempe. "Now I know: If you're a big gamer in high school, you're going to be a big gamer in college."

Almost 20 percent of high school boys and more than 10 percent of girls game for 26 or more hours a week, according to the National Survey of Student Engagement. And almost half of college gamers admitted in a Pew Research Center survey that their habit keeps them from studying. For Adam, academics weren't the only problem. He had spent so many childhood hours living as his World of Warcraft avatar (cultivating relationships and maintaining rank in the game benefit from constant play) that he had never learned the social and coping skills necessary to thrive in college. Free from all parental oversight, Adam failed by the end of that first year.

Adam did not return to college. He is now in the United States Army and has served in Iraq. "They love him because he's so smart," says Hempe. "The military gives him structure, but [gaming] will always be a struggle for him." In 2014, motivated by her family's saga, Hempe founded Families Managing Media. When it comes to identifying whether your child is a healthy gamer or one who needs help, she says here's a place to start: "If you or your child can list three real-life things they honestly like more than gaming, they're probably OK. But if they can't, it's time to sit up, pay attention, and make some changes."

Finding a New Natural Order

Sometimes we all need a wake-up call. Nadine, whose son Ethan was struggling with porn, says hers came when another mom discovered Ethan, two months shy of his 18th birthday, with her daughter, who was a couple of years younger. He had cut school to hook up with her after a social-media exchange. "Ethan could have landed in jail and on a sexual-predator list," says Nadine. When she and her husband confronted Ethan that night, he broke down. Because Ethan had been struggling for so long, nearly a decade, and was engaging in increasingly risky behavior, the family opted for unusually extreme measures, a wilderness-therapy program.

Douglas Adams, the late author of Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, famously summed up the human relationship to technology: First "everything that's already in the world when you're born is just normal." Then "anything that's invented between then and before you turn thirty is incredibly exciting and creative and with any luck you can make a career out of it." Finally, "anything that gets invented after you're thirty is against the natural order of things and the beginning of the end of civilization as we know it, until it's been around for about 10 years, when it gradually turns out to be alright, really."

Will the kids be all right? If we pay attention, engage with the challenge, and turn off our own phones long enough to focus on theirs, they have a pretty good shot.

Name has been changed for privacy.