

### Digital Citizen

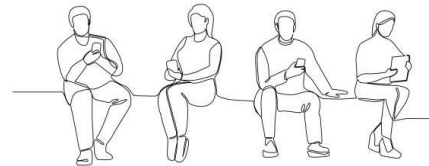
#### Introduction

We have officially reached a point in history where we have an entire generation of people who have grown up using digital media. From their first moments of life, they have been introduced to technology, that provides them access and connectivity to the entire world. We see little ones in strollers playing with cell phones and iPads before they can even walk and talk. This new generation is already consuming and creating content at astronomical rates. However, it is important to note, and studies have shown that digital media consumption is addictive, both physically and psychologically. Participating in social media produces the same neurological response as using an addictive substance. Specifically, when a person receives a notification that a post has received attention, such as a 'like' or a 'mention', the brain naturally receives a rush of dopamine causing the person pleasure and a sense of satisfaction. This exact same response can be compared to individuals using addictive drugs (Hilliard, 2019).

In our day and age, many adults suffer from media addiction; however, young people suffer this addiction at a much higher rate, as they have been exposed to digital media content since birth. We are providing young persons with access to a world of information and people without providing them with the tools, guidelines, and education about how to use the Internet safely. Our goal in this article is to provide a framework for parents and young persons, in order to understand our role as a digital citizen and how we best to navigate content, with a focus on practicing good cyber hygiene.

#### What is a Digital Citizen?

Anyone who uses the Internet, creates and/or consumes content, as well as interacts with others virtually, is a digital citizen. Most people consider the traditional means of connecting to the Internet, such as cell phones, tablets, and laptops or PC's as the vessel to connect to the internet. However, what many people fail to remember is that most gaming consoles and applications are also allowing gamers to connect and engage with individuals around the world. Many young people have access to at least one of the devices stated above and, in some cases, more than one. As such, it is our responsibility to begin educating the younger generation as to what our responsibilities are as digital citizens, and what the difference is between connecting and interacting with someone face-to-face and online interaction with others. It is crucial to reinforce this mindset, as it is easy to lose the human element when heavily utilizing social media and gaming consoles.



#### Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying has become a serious problem for both young people, and adults. As part of working with our young people, we need to be clear about what constitutes cyberbullying. The analogy that seems to resonate with children is when a friend or classmate is being bullied at school during lunch or at recess. Most of us have an instinct to stand up for the victim or at minimum alert an adult about the situation. The reason for this is our human emotions are triggered when we witness someone getting hurt or upset. We feel compelled to help because we are a witness to the situation. That same human connection should carry with us when we are interacting with people online. Unfortunately, for most people it does not. It seems like the opposite occurs. Rather than defending the victim, people hide behind their online identity and in turn encouraging the negative behaviors, causing even more harm to the victim. The harm deriving from these kinds of interactions are far greater for young people as their sense of self and social skills are still developing. Cyberbullying causes damage to all involved parties. The victim obviously suffers the pain of being isolated and ostracized. On the other hand, the young people who partake in the bullying also suffer from stunted social interaction skills. As a result, these individuals tend to have higher rates of depression, social anxiety in groups, and lower levels of empathy and compassion towards others. Instead, we need to teach our young people to be an "Upstander." According to *The Bully Project*, an "Upstander" is someone who recognizes when something is wrong and acts to make it right. Creating a sense of pride in our young people and encouraging them to take a stand for others will benefit them on many levels in the long run.

## Private vs. Personal Information

There is a lot of discussion right now surrounding privacy. People have become astutely aware of how their information has been misused for over a decade by companies and social media platforms. However, many individuals are unable to differentiate between what they should and should not share online.

Understanding the distinction between personal and private information, will allow children from a young age to create good cyber hygiene habits and protect themselves from future data exploitations. The easiest way to describe private information is data that is unique to that individual. For instance, your name, student identification number, and social security number are unique identifiers assigned to just you as a person. Additional private information that you may have in common with someone else but is still classified as private would be your address and telephone number. However, people often forget to explain to young people that username and password information are also private. We should be clear on that with youngsters. Young people often have a much higher level of trust with others and are willing and more comfortable to share credential information with “friends.”



Personal information is information about you that could be in common with others. Examples of personal information can be your hair color, eye color, favorite food, and favorite sports. Sharing this information is acceptable, but only under certain and specific conditions. Educating children about when it is appropriate to share personal information is very important. They need to understand that even personal information can be used in harmful ways. When we share enough personal information about ourselves, people can begin to build a profile of who we are and target us for negative purposes. Thus, staying safe should always be a top priority when engaging with others online.

Nowadays, social media platforms are being used by young people daily. Many of these platforms are not even known to adults. Taking an inventory of what platforms your child is engaging with is important to make sure that the platforms they are using are age appropriate and safe. When allowing your child to participate in social media you need to check their privacy settings to make sure that people do not have access to your child through the platform, teaching them not to accept connections, and/or messages without your permission.

## “You Won’t Believe This!”

Fake news plagues the internet now more than ever. Disinformation campaigns are in full force for myriad of reasons. Before the Internet, it was easy to tell a credible news source from one that was less credible. Reporters were the people we relied on to investigate stories and report back “unbiased” information about what was going on in our communities, country, and around the world. Today, it is difficult for adults to discern what is true and what is not, and arguably, nearly impossible for our youngsters. It is crucial to teach our youth how to take the time to investigate information they see online, in order to ensure it is credible and reliable.

Most people are curious by nature. Many content creators use this curiosity to their advantage, creating headlines and images that include famous people and outrageous claims with the hopes that peoples’ curiosity is piqued, and they will click on the “story.” In many cases, the content generator will pay site owners per click. When a person clicks on the story it will bring them to another site that is riddled with more clickbait and, in some cases, potentially harmful content such as malware. This is what is known as “clickbait.” It is used a lot on social media sites, and unfortunately, we ALL fall victim to clickbait at one time or another.

When using the Internet to research information, there are a few items to look out for to ensure that an article is “newsworthy.” News articles have several distinct parts that help to separate them from other content:

- Headlines that are realistic,
- Bylines that include a real person as the author, not just a “screen name”,
- Date it was written/published,
- URL with the title of the article,
- Section title that states ‘News’ rather than ‘Opinion’, and images that match the content of the article

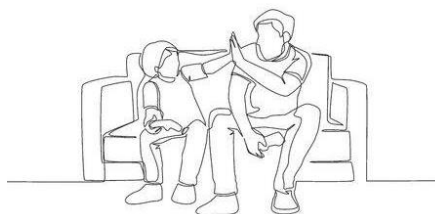
Typically, a news article will include related articles, as well as advertisements and sponsored content around the body of the article. Website owners often use these tools to generate revenue through their site. Learning to discern which information is valid and can support the research being done versus clickbait will help young people to be able to conduct more efficient and fact-based research as they get older. Opinion pieces have some value but knowing when material is based in fact or opinion is key to forming one’s own ideas.

## Finding Balance

Finding balance when it comes to digital media consumption is very tricky business now more than ever. Where students used to spend most of their days in class at school, they are now spending all their time at home. At school they may, or may not, have engaged in web-based platforms such as SchoolTool or Google Classroom, but there was a decent amount of personal interaction with others during the day. How do we strike a balance between media consumption and personal interaction when we are faced with conditions that do not allow us to interact with others regularly?

Balanced media consumption can be compared to balanced nutrition. In the right combination, there are incredibly positive results. In response to the global pandemic, schools have had to pivot from traditional classroom learning formats to implementing 100% online learning platforms. Children are behind a screen much more than they were just five weeks ago. That means that our “portions” of digital media consumption need to be adjusted. The way we do that is determine by the *What?*, *When?*, and *How Much?*, as well as factoring in that there is going to be a percentage of the day used for educational purposes.

When we look at the “what” of this equation, we want to determine what media is being consumed (or created), what platforms are being used (social media, streaming platforms, etc.), and what devices are being used to consume/create such content. In determining the “when” portion of this equation, factoring in that there needs to be assignments completed for school based on teachers’ requests, we need to look at when media is being consumed or created. Look at what time of day and how many days a week your child is engaging in “screen time” outside of the required context of online learning. Examining “how much” digital media is being consumed is the last piece. Not only looking at how much digital media your child is consuming collectively, but also at one time and how often is particularly important. Be sure to take note whether your child is consuming media during times like dinnertime or right before bed. These may be great times to cut back if need be.



Raising children in a digital world is both challenging and exciting. Our young people are true global citizens with the ability to make friends from all walks of life and every corner of the planet. We need to learn to embrace this changing landscape while at the same time preparing them on how to navigate the good and the bad in the same way we do in all other aspects of their lives. We will only become more and more connected as technology continues to evolve. Creating proper cyber-hygiene habits from a young age is setting our youth up for positive engagement as a digital citizen.

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## Reference

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