

Self-Expression and Identity Online

This discussion guide will help you facilitate a conversation with parents about how your students explore their emerging identities online. Use the following questions and stories to get parents thinking and talking about this issue. You may also want to show the Self-Expression Parent/Teacher Intro video and hand out the Self-Expression and Identity parent tip sheet to help spark the discussion.

What's going on with your kids?

Questions to encourage parents to share experiences, concerns, and solutions

1. In what way does the Internet give kids the freedom to act differently online than they would offline?
2. What are some positive examples of online identity exploration? Negative?
3. How can parents encourage their kids to be true to themselves online?
4. Kids today are in constant contact with their friends and are used to getting ongoing feedback on their behavior. How do you think this is impacting the way kids develop their senses of self?

What would you do?

Stories to discuss, role play, and deepen conversation

Elementary school child

Gloria finds a printed copy of an email that her nine-year-old daughter Alana sent to her friends. The email appears to be a personality survey, circulated as a chain letter. "Answer all of the questions below and send this to ten of your friends! If you don't, you'll have bad luck for a whole year!" the email reads. Gloria is impressed by how introspective her 4th grade daughter is. She lists everything from her pet peeves, to her dream job, to her favorite quotation. As Gloria reads on, some questions make her feel uncomfortable. Why would Alana share the name of her least favorite teacher online? Or the name of her crush? Did she answer all questions truthfully? And should she worry about Gloria's privacy?

- » Should Gloria be worried that Alana is sharing personal feelings online?
- » Does it matter whether Alana answered the survey honestly? Why or why not?
- » Many kids do not realize that their emails can be circulated and archived beyond their control. How can parents communicate this to children in a way that makes sense to them?
- » Why are online personality surveys so popular among kids and preteens? Do your kids take surveys like these?

Elementary school child/Middle school tween

Thirteen-year-old Ben and his ten-year-old sister Lucy play *Free Realms*: a virtual world for kids. To create an avatar, they first have to choose to be male or female, human or fairy. Then they design their avatar's appearance, deciding everything from nose shape, to skin color, to hairstyle and clothing. Ben's avatar looks nothing like his real-life, blonde-haired, freckled self. In *Free Realms*, Ben is a muscular, green-haired wizard with a thick beard. Lucy, on the other hand, created a fairy that looks just like her — with the exception of wings. "We can change our appearance anytime we want. It's so cool," says Ben at the dinner table one evening. "And I can even be a boy fairy online if I wanted, and nobody would know I was really a girl!" adds Lucy.

- » How do virtual worlds foster kids' creativity and imagination?
- » What is the difference between a 'real life' identity and a 'virtual world' identity? In other words, to what extent do you think kids relate to their avatars?
- » What is the difference between creating an alternate persona in a virtual world and pretending to be someone else on a social networking site, instant message, or email?
- » What are some social benefits that virtual worlds offer kids who might be shy in real life? Dangers?

Middle school tween

Alison, a seventh-grader, recently posted a video of herself singing online. After all, Justin Bieber wouldn't be famous if it weren't for Youtube! One day, Alison comes home from school in tears. She explains to her mother that some strangers posted rude comments about her video, criticizing her singing and commenting on her appearance. After seeing the comments herself, Alison's mom tries to comfort her daughter by pointing out all of the supportive posts her friends wrote in her defense. "I'm so embarrassed," Alison sobs, "Why would anyone say such mean things? They don't even know me."

- » What advice would you give Alison's mother?
- » In what ways can online public exposure boost kids' self-esteem? Spark self-consciousness?
- » Do you think people are more inclined to insult people on the Internet? Why or why not?
- » How can parents encourage kids to abide by the rule "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all" on the Internet?

High school teen

Start a discussion with parents of high schoolers by sharing this quote from *Flirtexting*, a book by Olivia Baniuszewics, Debra Goldstein (2009):

"This is your change to experiment with being more open about your feelings in a controlled environment. Text is taken a lot more lightly than a phone call, e-mail, or F2f (face to face). Therefore, it allows you to take more chances in life and in love. Use text as your testing ground to say things you might be hesitant to say in person. If it ever backfires, you can always just say that you were only kidding. Did he not hear the sarcasm in your text?"

- » How might teens use text and instant messaging to experiment with self-expression?
- » Think back to when you first became interested in flirting and dating. Was it a big deal to talk on the phone? Write a letter? How has today's dating scene changed as a result of new media and mobile innovations?
- » Text messages are often kept confidential, away from parents' eyes. What are some ways that parents can talk to their kids' about the content and tone of their text messages— romantic or platonic — without invading their privacy?

Frank and his son Greg are friends on Facebook. Lately, Frank has been noticing that Greg's posts seem a little out of character. He's a really great kid who has always been pretty shy, but he sometimes comes across as rude or snarky in his status updates and comments on mutual friends' walls. Frank has also noticed that Greg posts links to articles from humor sites that can be pretty nasty, but they get lots of "LOL" posts from his friends. Frank is worried that his son is acting out online to get attention in ways that he doesn't in person and isn't sure how to talk to his son about the posts.

- » Should Frank be worried about Greg's posts?
- » How should Frank talk to Greg about how he's portraying himself online?
- » Why might adolescents crave public feedback from their peers online? Do you think adults want this kind of attention, too?

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