

Navigating a Social Landscape

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One of the greatest things about summer camp is that it provides children today with an easy vehicle for the creation of lifelong friendships. At Southwoods we foster these special relationships after the summer by holding our fall reunion, a winter weekend getaway, and sending out newsletters that share information and encourage campers to stay connected with their bunkmates. This continued connectivity gives life to things like giant sleepovers, invites to bar and bat mitzvahs, and all the endless phone calls, emails and texting that help keep our campers up on what is going on with one another. It is also important to note that some girls and boys move into these continued social connections at different places in their maturation. We really enjoy hearing about all the positive interactions that take place with our campers throughout the year.

While these new forms of staying connected make it easier for our campers to stay in touch, they also provide access to others that may have negative intent. Bullying isn't new, but using the computer to bully has brought many new elements to this unacceptable behavior. Cyber bullying allows kids to say unkind things, spread rumors, and send inappropriate pictures; all without having to see or experience the impact these things have on the intended target. In some cases there is even an added element of anonymity, as the bully is able to hide under the cover of an anonymous screen name. These are issues we as adults need to be watching to prevent.

I-Safe America, an organization promoting Web safety, surveyed 1500 students in 4th through 8th grade, and found that 42 per- cent have been bullied online, and 53 percent admitted to saying something mean or hurtful to someone else online. Adolescent impulses today frequently find release through computers, multi-use cell phones and PDAs. Often, there's no time for reflection—questionable messages go rocketing off to as many names as you can cram into a contact list. Dr Ann Frisén, Professor of Psychology at the University of Gothenburg says that these victims of Internet bullying or "cyber-bullying" have no refuge. Victims may be harassed continuously via SMS and websites, and the information spreads very quickly and may be difficult to remove.

Research continues to show that most of the time parents are not fully aware of the computer use of their child, how long or what sites they visit or the problems and dangers associated with its use. We have collected some strategies to help parents outline their child's computer use and their parental expectations.

First, TALK to you kids. Ask them about cyber-bullying and if they know someone who has been affected, including themselves. Help him or her understand how easily words can be misunderstood, misinterpreted, and taken out of context to cause hurt feelings when there is no voice tone or body language to go along with those words. Explain "they should not say anything on the internet that they would not say directly to someone's face or in front of their own parents".

Remind them that their email and text messaging is not private; a mean remark or an inappropriate picture can easily be forwarded and they may be judged by many on what they write or send. Every so often just click the history button on your child's browser to see what sites they have been visiting.

Outline and enforce rules for staying safe on the Internet. Keep computers in a public room in your home. Set up parental controls so you can monitor the chat rooms your child visits. Learn what controls are available through your Internet Service Provider. If you're not satisfied, you can switch providers or purchase software to accomplish the same end.

Caution against joining in on bullying: voting on a poll for the ugliest kid in class is as bad as creating the poll in the first place. If you find that your child has been a part of bullying, DO NOT IGNORE IT. Encourage your child not to respond to bullying online. Encourage them to talk to an adult so that the adult can get involved, if necessary, to trace the offensive message.

Above all, make sure you have stressed the importance of never setting up a private meeting with anyone they meet online.

We feel fortunate to spend the very unique "computer free time" with your children. At Southwoods, your child gets to improve their social, communication and interpersonal skills through "live" space rather than cyberspace. And as the speed of technological advance increases, we are committed to providing you with helpful conversation starters. We hope this article is the cause of conversation in your home and that all the friendships that are created at camp will continue to flourish and grow in positive ways.

Resources:

- Center for Safe & Responsible Internet Use
- WiredSafety.org
- i-Safe America
- Media Awareness Network