Cyber-parenting

More and more families are facing the challenges that are associated with social media. These days, it's not a case of 'if' but rather 'when' does your child start to build their social-media and cyber life. Children as young as 5 are getting their own smart phones or tablets and parents often feel unsure regarding the appropriate boundaries and limitations they should set on these technologies.

Most parents are somewhat familiar with common communication tools such as Facebook, BBM, Whatsapp, Skype and Twitter. However, there are many others that children are engaging with that are not as familiar – Instagram, SnapChat, WeChat, Google+, Vine, YouTube, FaceTime and Whisper to name a few. Social media and technology is an integral part of today's childrens' developing social life if used correctly and safely.

Access to inappropriate content and cyber-bulling are two of the main dangers related to these cyber communication tools. Cyber bullying is on the rise – technology now makes children 'connected' 24/7 and bullying no longer confined to the playground. Children are unfortunately also being removed from direct social situation- it is far easier to bully someone when we can hide behind a phone or a computer and not see the victim's reaction of pain or humiliation. It's important for parents to know that cyber-bullying can take on many forms such as:

- Messages -public or in private chats
- Impersonations - posing as another person and getting them into trouble etc
- Text wars
- Stealing passwords – accessing private content
- Blogs – character attacks or gossiping
- Interactive games – eg Xbox online
- Sending viruses
- Signing others up to spam or inappropriate mailing lists
- Polling – eg 'Click Like if you think Jane is hot'

Despite these challenges, social technology is not something to be scared of. We need to teach our children how to make use of computers, smart phones, tablets etc appropriately. We need to have clear discussions around keeping ourselves protected and safe online, as well as how to engage with others. We teach our children basic social skills such as sharing and manners – now 'netiquette' needs to be part of those teachings too. Have family discussions around which sites are allowed, who they can chat with, how they should respond, what they can post or upload, checking their privacy setting, for how long they can be online, what they should do if they are feeling unsafe or uncomfortable online and how you will monitor their activities.

By no means does this suggest that all children need access to all social technology! Parents need to make decisions that they feel comfortable with for them as a family-it is okay to say no to your child's request for 'needing' access if you feel it is inappropriate or unnecessary. Clear boundaries and limits are vital to ensuring children engage in technology in a way that enhances their learning's and social interaction rather than consuming it. It is okay to have limitations on their privacy and to restrict access- despite how your child may protest, it is NOT 'everyone else' that is allowed to. And as with many behaviours, your expectations and guidelines need to be age-appropriate - expanding as your child shows increasing signs of maturity, understanding, insight and the ability to self-regulate.

If only there was a social media and technology schedule like we have when we need to vaccinate our children! What age is suitable for a child to have their own phone; are they old enough to use a tablet or computer in the privacy of their room; should they have their own Facebook account at 12 and until what age can a parent read their child's emails/messages? These questions and so many others related to social technology are challenging for parents to navigate. We don't want our children to be left out socially, but we must make decisions as parents that we are comfortable with and that will ensure our childrens' well-being.

Parents can equip themselves to make such decisions with these suggestions:
- Have open, honest and non-judgemental discussions with your children. Encourage them to feel comfortable sharing with you, without you overreacting. Often children do not want to tell their parents for fear of being cut offline.
- Enhance your technology know-how. The internet is full of up-to-date information. A useful site with information and advice is the Common Sense Media site
- Chat to other parents and staff at your child's schools. Usually many parents are debating the same dilemma
- Consider your internet privacy/security software
- Trust your gut – as a parent we sometimes override our instincts because of outside concerns. If you feel your child does not need or is not ready for such technology, listen to that!
- Consider speaking with a professional if you are concerned that you child is using social technology as a replacement for actual social engagement, involved in cyber-bullying, been exposed to inappropriate content or suffering negatively as a result of social technology

Parenting in this age of social media and technology is a new phenomenon– we are all learning as we go. We can equip ourselves and support our children by becoming more aware, engaging in open discussions and using the technology itself to positively influence our childrens' development.