

# Social media: handle with care

by

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Anyone who knows me knows how much I love my social media. I use Twitter and LinkedIn professionally and I keep my relatives and friends up to date with my family life through Facebook. I also explore the wonders of blogging through [WordPress](#). Twitter, in particular, has given me so much. It has opened my eyes, broadened my horizons and provided a reach I never imagined possible. There are times when it's a bit weird – although still on the spectrum of not unpleasant – like when someone approaches me at a conference and says, “Excuse me but are you [@Penny Ten](#)? Amazing to meet you, I've been following you for ages!”

But there have been times when it has got messy. Two examples stay with me and make me feel extremely uncomfortable. The first is what I can now jokingly refer to as my ‘claim to fame’ of having been hounded 24 solid hours by one of our finest and most prolific Twitter edu-trolls. Among other things he called me a liar and anti-Semitic (I'm Jewish, so the irony didn't escape me). I feel proud that I didn't buckle under his attempts to humiliate me until he finally skulked away and blocked me. But it was traumatic and degrading. While it was happening, several of my Twitter allies were direct messaging me, encouraging me to keep to my cordial, outwardly calm stance. But my boss was far from happy the following Monday and I really wondered if the whole very public episode might somehow undermine me professionally. [Teacher Toolkit writes about his own similar experience](#) and captures well that awful sense of being emotionally violated by his attacker.

The second occasion was when a long-time LinkedIn professional contact of mine suddenly went creepy on me and started propositioning me in the most unwholesome and inappropriate of ways. I told him in no uncertain terms that he was completely out of order and disconnected from him on LinkedIn immediately. I admit that I had stereotypical assumptions about him as he was married, a practising Christian and much older than me. It took me by surprise and made me realise that you never really can tell.

So you see while it would be hypocritical of me to ban my children from enjoying the modern privileges of online life, I am keenly aware that it has real dangers for all of us. Some of these dangers are concerned with other people's malicious intent to harm us and others are more connected with the relentless nature of being constantly available and always in communication with the outside world. It is my job to make sure that my children know how to be safe. As parents and as teachers we can't keep children safe all the time and in every situation. What we can do is set boundaries that are age-appropriate, equip them with a sound and constantly evolving understanding, and hope for the best. Grim and extreme as their example is, Breck Bednar's parents explain this all too well in [an article in the Guardian](#) written two years after his death. Breck was a 14 year old boy who loved gaming and who was groomed online and murdered in 2014.

## **When one thing leads to another**

I have two teenage daughters. Like most young people of their age group, they are pretty active online. When my youngest was 10, she was an avid Minecrafter often joining shared servers to play and chat with a combination of school chums – and people she had no idea

who they were. She also uses WhatsApp to communicate with her friends and family. The oldest, [like many 14-17 year old girls](#) has a number of popular Instagram accounts. One has over 2k followers and contains pretty good street photography, the other account seems to be mainly selfies and other such stuff. She invests much time in maintaining them both. She also has Snapchat, WhatsApp and Skype. They both know the rules and understand why we have them – no pictures of you in your school uniform, no sharing your full name, details about where you live, go to school, where you hang out with people with those you don't know personally. We found watching [this short film on Thinkyouknow.com](#) was really useful in helping all of us to get gain a basic understanding of how quickly and simply things can get complicated.

I was quite impressed with my oldest's use of Skype. Especially since our own family experience of it was excruciating weekly meet ups with the grandparents abroad which mainly consists of various combinations of each side saying "I can't see/hear you, can you see/hear us?" and then it usually ends up with one of us on the phone directing granny and grandpa on how to switch on the mic or the webcam. We would watch their pixelated looming faces peering into the screen or hear someone bump their head on the bottom of the desk and swear as they returned from wiggling some cable or other to solve the issue. The kids would invariably slip away unimpressed using the commotion for cover. But no, my oldest daughter uses Skype to do her homework with a friend and for general chit chats.

I did become alarmed recently though when I heard her laughing and chatting away with someone new in her room late one night. When I enquired casually who it was, and she said a name I didn't know, I asked her where she knew them from. I wasn't expecting her to say they 'met' on Instagram and then one thing led to another. I felt my stomach lurch when she said that. And I saw the look of panic and then defensive defiance on her face when she realised that this was not cool. You see it's one thing to like each other's pictures and quite another to start messaging each other when you don't know each other. But to give out your Skype details and to start actually talking intimately is quite another ball game. The one advantage with seeing someone on Skype though is that you can fairly accurately gauge whether they are who they say they are. Unless they are posing and grooming you to meet their older friends. It has been known. My take on it was to explain that we are all feeling our way on this, and it is better to keep the communication channels open rather than force my daughter underground and into deception and concealing her activity. We talked for a long time about why there may be dangers and how to be careful about these. But I am still jittery and know that we all need to stay alert.

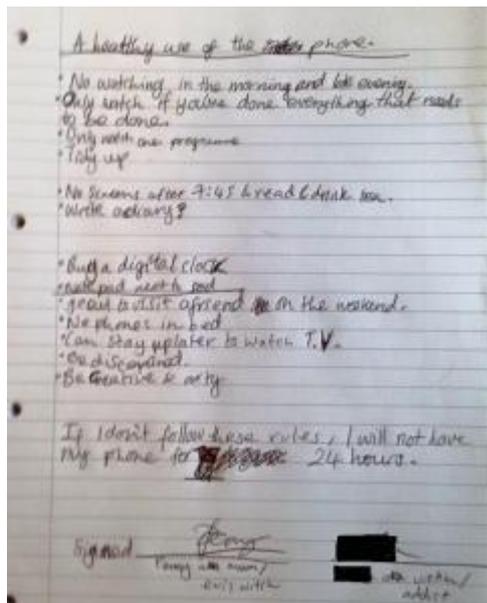
### **Social media or anti-social media?**

Earlier this week the NSPCC chief executive, Peter Wanless, [warned](#) of a nation of deeply unhappy children, due to "the pressure to keep up with friends and have the perfect life online ... adding to the sadness that many young people feel on a daily basis". And this is something that has also had mixed impact on us as a family. My youngest was a little isolated socially until we managed to get her a smart phone on Freecycle and suddenly she was meeting up with her classmates at weekends and chatting with them after school during the week. It was as if the floodgates were opened and her social life took off. My oldest also has a varied social life but actually getting up and going out gradually became less of a priority. Until we had a very dramatic incident which shook her out of it.

I am not sure I will be able to convey the force of the drama clearly here, but it went like this: over a period of weeks, she had been on her phone what seemed like constantly. She was putting herself under pressure to build up her Instagram following, and she was chatting to school friends as well as some of her friends from our previous life abroad. Evenings and weekends would be spent getting homework quickly out of the way and then endless screen time. TV on so she could keep up with Dr Who discussions later, WhatsApp pinging, thumbs scrolling and pumping 'like' on photos so others would 'like' hers. It was relentless. And we regularly intervened, nagged and set boundaries. We gently placed her phone in a drawer overnight and switched off the Wifi at 7.30pm.

One Friday we could see yet again she had no plans to meet anyone real face to face or do anything meaningful over the weekend. The next day we tried to help her find someone to meet with, offered to spend the day out together and eventually in desperation, established a no-screens-until-evening rule – and it was hell. Our mature, reasonable, sensible girl was simply like a raging addict. By the Sunday, she wouldn't even get up, wash, eat, establish eye contact. We did everything we could to get her to move on to something else. By Sunday night she was like an empty shell. On Monday morning she announced she was ill. I was outraged and quite alarmed and felt I had to put my foot down. I insisted she get out of bed, wash and go to school. She was morose, floppy, glazed. But I was determined that she would go and get off the blinking screens. Off she went, still protesting, but she went. Dad and the youngest left for work and school. She must have been waiting and watching nearby and saw her chance. She didn't know that I was planning to work from home that morning before I had to go to a meeting and so when she crept back in, she nearly jumped out of her skin when she saw me there glaring at her. She turned and fled and for a while we had no idea where she was.

The long and the short of it is that it all came to a head, and we ended up that evening having a three hour, very intense and deep discussion about what it is to be a teenager nowadays. She was distraught, bursting forth hearty wails and gasping tears. She had reached an extremely dark and painful place. It was frightening for me to see her like that but it was important to unpack, together, how the intensity of feeling had been fuelled by this relentless online interaction and screen time. I could see how it had become mesmerizing, sucking up her energy and how she just couldn't get herself to disconnect and to meet with some of her offline real-people friends, face to face. She challenged me about my use of social media and whether I needed to rein myself in a little too and then she came up with the idea of writing down and committing to everything we had discussed. So was born the "A Healthy Use of the Phone" contract we have hanging on our pinboard and that we are all bound to as a family.



As parents, as teachers, as people who live in a digital age, we need to help each other to honour healthy use of the Internet and social media. We need to stay alert to the wonders and the potentially addictive nature of this tool. We need to do this regularly and especially when things are going well. In honour of the memory of Breck Bednar, next week I plan to sit down with my children and watch the harrowing documentary about him on BBC3 called [Murder Games](#). I'm not looking forward to it but I feel we must.

Sources:

Think You Know is an excellent resource on safe use of the Internet for young people, parents and teachers <http://thinkyouknow.co.uk/>

Bad Blogging by Teacher Toolkit <http://www.teachertoolkit.me/2015/11/08/bad-blogging/>

Guardian newspaper article on Breck

Bednar <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/jan/23/breck-bednar-murder-online-grooming-gaming-lorin-lafave>

Murder Games: The Life and Death of Breck

Bednar <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03cgtx5>

Daze Digital short piece on girl

Instagrammers <http://www.dazeddigital.com/photography/article/28682/1/hit-follow-on-these-teen-photographers-taking-over-instagram>

Guardian article about the online pressures of social media making children

unhappy <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/jan/07/online-pressures-unhappy-children-cyberbullying>