IS YOUR CHILD ON ANTISOCIAL MEDIA? THE RISE AND RISK OF ANONYMOUS APPS

Heard of Ask.fm, Qooh.me, Whisper or Yik Yak? These are only a few of the anonymous apps that are in the spotlight at the moment. Recently these types of apps have been multiplying and they are definitely on the increase.

Anonymous apps allow users to speak more freely on social media because they remove the fear of social backlash that can happen on more traditional social networking sites like Facebook or Instagram. One site boasts that "it's not about who you are- it's about what you say. It's not about bragging -it's about sharing, free of judgement".

One theory is that anonymous apps are so popular because they fulfil a growing demand among youth who want more fun, less accountability and more privacy online. Under a cloak of near anonymity, youth are no longer under pressure to create the perfect online identity. It allows them to be free and unrestricted away from watchful eyes. In addition the apps are easy to set up and easy to use, what more could you ask for?

What's the harm?

Cruel intentions - For some youth, being able to openly engage with others without worry of being identifiable can facilitate a less than desirable form of personal expression. Many youth are still developing their critical thinking skills, and these are essential to understanding the long term consequences and repercussions of their online actions. Cruel intentions can emerge from online anonymity and in the most tragic of circumstances "lives can be lost by a string of keystrokes".

Self –serving – The ultimate goal of anonymous networks is to create a space to be noticed. If youth are feeding their sense of self based on content and comments from others,

then they are in dangerous territory. Social networking sites like these are a fast trap into a sense of popularity, often with a sense of one-upmanship, with users attempting to post something that is more funny, more clever, more disturbing. Healthy self-esteem and appropriate social responsibility is based on personal relationships, honesty and genuine feedback, not online popularity.

Digital drama's and drive by postings - youth looking to draw attention to themselves can easily create drama around them. What is happening in the schoolyard can now be dragged into an online space and community, and vice versa. Making a hurtful comment and then running away into the darkness of night, while the victim never knew who attacked them is downright cowardly.

No assurances – Are these sites really as safe as they claim they are, are they truly anonymous? Or just anonymous-ish? Certainly with digital identification technology no one is truly untraceable online. It's pretty likely that it is only a matter of time before content on anonymous sites can be identified. What will be the consequences of these posts when they get publicly identified in 2 weeks or 2 years' time? Is your child prepared to be held accountable?

"With great power comes great responsibility" Spiderman

What can I do as a parent?

Set rules and expectations – As parents it is our responsibility to set rules, boundaries and expectations when it comes to our children's online behaviour . Consequences must also be enforced when rules and guidelines are broken, just as you would in the real world.   What are your values in regards to treating others? If you expect respect, consideration and tolerance, then expect no less of your children. Set the expectations of social behaviour and model this by being a good digital citizen yourself.

Do what is right- Encourage kids to do the right thing. Encourage your child to treat others with respect, and to stand up for those who are being targeted. Empathy and tolerance go a long way in reducing the instances of bullying and cyber bullying. Encourage conflict to be solved face to face. When a child can see another's emotions or signs of stress or sadness, they tend to back down. Anonymous apps do not allow the brakes to be put on harmful or negative behaviour.

Technology is a privilege – too many youth believe technology is their right these days, and not the other way around. Privileges are earned based on good behaviour and meeting family standards. Enforce integrity, and have the strength to restrict or take away online access if digital boundaries are violated. This can be a very tricky thing to do, but it will certainly make an impact.

Openly monitor and actively restrict. Let your teen know that random phone/app/text checks will be occurring (and as long as you are making the payments you have the power to enforce this). Restrict sites and apps that are 'over age'. Use settings to your advantage – with a little bit of work you do have a lot more control than you think you do over when it comes to your child's device.   We know that if a child is getting the request to answer the prompt "Are you over 17?", then this is an indication that the parental controls have not been set correctly.

Social Netiquette

This is all about 'social netiquette'. The rules online are the same as they are face to face. Be nice to each other, treat others with respect and help others out. This is not technology gone wrong – it's users gone wrong.

Our online lives have become a bit like living in a store front window. Everyone is sharing more online these days than ever before, and perhaps it has caused us to be more cautious. Maybe anonymous apps really do allow people to be their "true selves" online, giving them the freedom to say what they really want to say, and to express their real opinions and thoughts. These apps allow individuals to post frank stories or make confessions, and often, the responses can be supportive and kind.

If your child is eager to try an anonymous app, why not think about using one that is for the good. App's like Brighten and Happier encourage and promote a positive culture.

Open up conversations about positive online communication and behaviour with your children, and take active steps towards being a digitally responsible family.

Our Workshops

CyberSafe Early Years

CyberSafe

Social Netiquette

At Home Alone

Stranger Smarts

Bully Proofing

A Girls Way

Conflict Resolution

Babysitters Training Program

Kidproof: creating safer communities around the world.