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Expert says teen online friendships can be productive

By Linda McIntosh

Dr. Hilary Buff has long been intrigued by the quality of teen online friendships versus face-to-face friendships and has studied the subject over the past decade. She shared some of her findings at a Conversation Series Community Forum on March 23 at The Winston School in Del Mar, where she is the counseling coordinator.

The forum, called "How Students' Offline Friendships and Social Skills Can Be Improved Online," explored concerns about kids being online, but also shared ways that parents can make technology a positive influence in their children's lives.

Buff found that social networking sites can help teenagers practice their social skills, particularly teens who have social anxiety.

Buff recalled a girl who was afraid to go up to peers in school at lunch and say, "Hi," but had no problem talking to classmates on MySpace. The teen made friends with one of the most popular girls in the school, chatting on MySpace and continued to make other friends. "She went from sitting alone at lunch on a bench with her earphones in, to sitting with peers," said Buff, who holds a doctorate in psychology from California School of Professional Psychology in Scripps Ranch.

While conducting research for her doctoral dissertation comparing online and face-to-face friendships, Buff found that boys have better-quality friendships online than face-to-face.

Buff began her presentation with current research about teen computer use. The studies reported that 93 percent of 12- to 17-year-olds are online and 82 percent of teens are on social networking sites and spend an average of nine hours a week on those sites.

While Buff addressed the usual concerns about teenagers' use of social networking sites, her talk focused on how teens can benefit from online social networking. The advantages, Buff pointed out, include practicing social skills and creating a private social environment within the social networking site. Some of the negative aspects, she pointed out, are that teens might spend less time interacting face-to-face, and might not realize that what they say can be retrieved even after it's deleted, and that social networking sites cannot verify people's identity and can make cyberbullying easier. Buff recommended that parents figure out ways to help their teens productively use social networking sites. For adults, online social networking can be productive. Buff pointed out that 60 million Americans got help from people in their online social network with life issues such as job changes and caring for someone with an illness. Buff suggested that parents model good online social networking skills and in that way show their children how to wisely use social networking sites.

Buff found that studies showed 62 percent of student Internet users used social networking sites to discuss educational topics, such as college and career planning, and 60 percent discussed school assignments. "A recent Macarthur Foundation study also concluded that there are very positive aspects to online social networking for teenagers," Buff said.

Students with learning and attention differences, Buff said, are more willing to ask for help with school and personal issues online than face-to-face and are more willing to express their thoughts and feelings without being afraid of getting rejected. Buff found that online social networking boosted the courage of teens with learning differences. For teens who struggle with social skills, online social networking can make them feel more comfortable and can lead more easily to friendships.

It is important to understand that computers are not the same as televisions, Buff said. One of the biggest differences is that there is interactive communication on the computer.

Addressing concerns about the safety of Internet use, Buff recommended that parents monitor their children's computer use in an open way. Buff suggested writing a contract together with one's child outlining guidelines for safe Internet and online social networking.

She suggested including in the contract promises to tell a parent if something is scary or threatening online, to never give personal information such as full name, address, phone number, schedule or passwords, to never having a face-to-face meeting with someone met online, and to never respond to threatening online messages.

If there's one thought Buff wants to leave parents, it is not to diminish the importance of online social networking for teens.

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