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## A Call for Parents to Log On and Tune In

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I remember the exact moment when I realized I was completely and totally out of touch with my children's logged-on lives. My oldest child (now in college) was twelve years old at the time. Like most boys his age, he enjoyed playing an occasional game on the computer. Some games, like Sim City and Roller Coaster Tycoon, offered him an online outlet to use his creative abilities. What twelve-year-old wouldn't love designing his own city or theme park and building virtual homes and amusement park rides? I can't help but wonder if it was a factor in





his declaring entrepreneurship as a major when he entered college.

At the time I found these games to be a welcome reprieve from the Mario theme song that was still ringing in my ears from his Nintendo phase of life. I thought I would never get that jingle out of my head. When it came to computer games, my knowledge ran dry after checking the approval rating on the front of the box. All that other gibberish about system requirements, blah, blah, blah, was left for my young son to figure out on his own. And figure it out he did. Like most other kids his age, he seemed to be hardwired from the womb to adapt to the constantly changing landscape of technology.

As for me, I was happy to stand by on the shoulder of the road and cheer him on as he lapped past me again and again on the information superhighway. Like most other adults my age, I prided myself on having mastered the task of sending and receiving e-mail, doing an occasional search for a product, and using Word to type my manuscripts. Anything beyond that would cause sweaty palms and increased heart palpitations. I was still part of the old school of thought that an accidental tap of the Escape key would result in the computer blowing up. I was content living my nontechie, ignorance-is-bliss existence—that is, until one





afternoon when I received the wake-up call that would bring me out of my technological slumber.

My son had finished his homework and was playing a game on a computer we had set up on a desk area in the kitchen. I was busy doing other tasks when suddenly my son blurted out, "Yes! I won the checkers game!"

"Great!" I said. "Did you beat the computer?"

The answer that followed still makes a chill run up my spine. "No, I beat some guy in Canada." When he saw the look of sheer terror on my face, he added a quick, "Don't worry, Mom. He's a Christian." I tried not to hyperventilate as I made my way over to the computer. How in the world could my son be playing a game of checkers through this little metal box sitting right here in my kitchen with some guy thousands of miles away in Canada?

Let me also tell you that I was one of those mothers who was militant about giving my kids the "don't talk to strangers" talk. I had it covered from every angle. Don't help anyone find a lost pet; don't accept candy from strangers; don't give directions to anyone; don't go to the bathroom alone at movie theaters, the ball field, or any other public place, and on and on. I'm sure you can relate. On the top of every mother's list of fears regarding her children is the fear that her child will someday cross paths





with a dreaded “stranger.” I really thought I had done a good job in educating my children about strangers, that is, until this particular afternoon.

I began to ask my son rapid-fire questions: “How did you connect online to play checkers?” (“A friend showed me how”—a twelve-year-old at that!) “How do you know this person is from Canada?” (“Mom, the guy told me. You can type messages back and forth while you’re playing.”) “How do you know he’s a Christian?” (“I asked him if he goes to church, and he said he did, and we started talking about that.”) And finally, “What have I told you about talking to strangers?” (“Mom, this guy is not a stranger. He’s just a guy who wants to play checkers!”)



Instantly I was alarmed. After recovering from my shock, I had him show me just how he had managed to get online, find a checkers game, and begin playing checkers with complete strangers. His tutorial did not manage to calm me down, so I banned him from playing online games until I could get a better grasp on the situation.

I hardly had time to catch my breath when weeks later my son asked for permission to set up a screen name so he could IM back and forth with his friends. “A screen what?” I asked and then raced over to my bookshelf of parenting books and plucked the most current Dobson book off the shelf.





I flipped to the table of contents and began searching for the chapter detailing the appropriate age for instant messaging or safety tips for a game of online checkers. Nothing. It was as if overnight the landscape of parenting tweens and teens had shifted and parents were the last ones to get the memo. Then it dawned on me that I was on my own when it came to establishing appropriate rules and boundaries regarding the rapidly changing technology that was invading my children's lives. If not me, then who? In order to be an engaged and caring parent, it was time to face my fear and venture into the great unknown. And thus began my self-paced journey to better understand this new and ever-changing digital world in which our children live.



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Fast-forward seven years and my son would be the first to tell you that his momma has come a long way since the online checkers incident. In fact, I have done hundreds of newspaper, radio, and TV interviews on the subject of Internet safety, as





well as other issues pertaining to the digital world in which our tweens and teens live. I have a screen name, Google alerts set to my kids' names, and monitoring software installed on my home computers. I have added text messaging to my cell phone plan (though it takes me forever to send a message or reply). And yes, I even have a MySpace page, a Facebook page; and if the tide shifts to a newer and trendier social networking hangout for teens by the time you are reading this, I will likely have a page there too. By default of the fact that I write and speak on topics related to teen culture, I had to immerse myself into their digital world in an effort to "know my audience." And know them, I do. I know them more than I ever wanted to know them; and now I am happy to pass that information on to you, parent to parent, friend to friend.



Regardless of whether you have young kids who are tapping away on a Fisher-Price toy laptop, tweens who are begging for a real laptop, or teens who have taken over your laptop, you've picked up the right book. And we'll be covering far more than just the World Wide Web. We will address other forums of communication that bid for our preteens' and teens' attention. Before you let out a heavy sigh over the mere thought of trying to wrap your arms around this monumental task, let me assure you





that the goal of this book is not to make your expert in technology. It is written from the perspective of an average mom who has learned plenty of things the hard way. I am not a parenting expert, nor do I claim to be an expert when it comes to technology. Everything I know, I learned by jumping in and tackling it head-on.

Let's face it—we all desire to be attentive and caring parents, but it becomes difficult when we can't possibly keep up with friend/buddy lists that number in the hundreds, unlimited text messages, instant messages, and the World Wide Web with more than 990 million users. Where are our children going online? To whom are they talking? Who is talking to them? Are they talking to strangers? Are they surfing porn sites? Do they have a MySpace or Facebook page? Are they texting while they are driving? Are they texting during school hours? Do they have trashy hip-hop songs loaded on their iPods? Are they addicted to online gaming sites? I wish we could take their annoying gadgets away! Let's go back to the pre-wired days where there were only three TV channels, cassette tapes that held about twelve songs, and a home phone tethered to the wall in the middle of the living room. At least then Mom and Dad had a good idea of who their kids' friends were and what they were up to because





they were the mighty gatekeepers when the home phone rang. Nowadays, kids don't even know one another's home phone numbers because they have cell phones and can contact one another at all hours of the day or night. And what, may I ask you, is wrong with Pong, Atari, and PacMan? Our kids don't know what they're missing!

Let's face it—we are riding shotgun when it comes to technology. For years I have counted on my kids to change the ring tone on my cell phone or reboot the computer when the screen froze up. Is it really necessary to step in and get involved in their media-saturated worlds? You bet it is. The average teen spends more than seventy-two hours a week using electronic media (Internet, cell phones, television, music, and video games). Before you start doing the math and wondering how they fit in school and a few potty breaks, the study reflects that some of their devices overlap as they multitask their media intake.<sup>1</sup>



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## Training Our Children to Use Technology Responsibly

I am witnessing a sense of desperateness among parents regarding technology and the impact it is having on their children. They want to be engaged and in the loop, but they don't have a clue where to begin. Again, it's not the intent of this book to turn parents into experts but rather to catch them up so they can train their children to use technology responsibly. With the influx of gadgets that enable our children to communicate instantly comes a tremendous obligation for someone to guide them to use technology in a responsible manner. After being in the trenches of teen culture and getting a behind-the-scenes glimpse of teens and their relationship with technology, it is clear to me that there are not enough chaperones at the party. Our kids are in desperate need of adult guidance, though few would willingly admit it. And they are more than aware that few parents can crack the code when it comes to infiltrating their wired worlds. It is literally a virtual free-for-all. Allowing them to learn as they go would be like handing a twelve-year-old car keys and telling him/her to run to the store for milk and bread. At night. In the bad part of town. No curfew in place. No experience necessary, no





driver's ed. course, no permit period where they have to have a parent in the car. Just set them loose and wish them the best. Yet, essentially, that is what many parents have done when it comes to their pre-teens and teens and the technology they love. Just as there are rules for driving safely, the same is true for technology. Unless they are instructed properly, there is a high likelihood that they will be a hazard to themselves and others when they enter the ramp on the information superhighway.



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### The Need to Protect Them from Others

Let's stick with our driving analogy on this one. It doesn't matter how safe we are on the roads if we don't have a clue how to drive defensively. Every time we get behind the wheel, we subject ourselves to others on the road who should not be allowed on the road. The same is true when our kids log on to the computer and connect themselves to a





world of dangers. We are so attentive in the early years to giving them the “don’t talk to strangers” pep talk, but then we allow them to hang out with more than 990 million people who have access to the Internet!

Consider these recent findings from a study involving the online habits of teens, ages thirteen to seventeen:<sup>2</sup>

- 14 percent have actually met face-to-face with a person they had known only through the Internet (9 percent of thirteen- to fifteen-year-olds and 22 percent of sixteen- to seventeen-year-olds).
- 30 percent have considered meeting someone they’ve only communicated with online.
- 71 percent reported receiving messages online from someone they don’t know.
- 45 percent have been asked for personal information by someone they don’t know.
- When teens receive messages online from someone they don’t know, 40 percent usually reply to and chat with that person.
- Only 18 percent said they tell a parent or guardian that they received a message from someone they don’t know.





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- 33 percent of thirteen- to seventeen-year-olds reported that their parents or guardians know “very little” or “nothing” about what they do on the Internet.
- 48 percent of sixteen- to seventeen-year-olds said their parents or guardians know “very little” or “nothing” about their online activities.
- Fully 22 percent of those surveyed reported their parents or guardians have never discussed Internet safety with them.



We need a new “don’t talk to strangers” pep talk, and hopefully this book will help you start the conversation in your home.



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### The Need to Protect Them from Themselves

The preteen and teen years are often thought of as the conformity years. Our children will use these years to search for their identity and purpose in an attempt to find their place in the world. They will most often look to their friends for approval and acceptance. While in the process of finding their voice, many will make poor choices in a desperate attempt to fit in and be accepted. They live for the moment and rarely give a thought to the long-term consequences of an action. We preach to them about the dangers of alcohol, drugs, and sex outside of marriage and remind them of the consequences. It is not likely to sink in and act as a deterrent unless we talk about it over and over again. The same is true with technology.

Our kids have grown up alongside technology and have yet to hear the long-term horror stories that can result from using it irresponsibly and sharing too much information. Only recently are these stories beginning to surface in the news. It is no secret that many school officials, colleges, employers, and others are taking advantage of the bread-crumbs trail our kids are leaving and doing extensive background checks. Our kids naively believe that their actions are private and that the





average adult is incapable of penetrating their perceived private online worlds. In reality, every comment they make, every picture they post, and every step they take is forever saved and cached away even after they have deleted it. Eighty-one percent of parents and 79 percent of teens state that teenagers aren't careful enough when giving out information about themselves online. Sixty-five percent of parents and 64 percent of teens say that teenagers do things online that they wouldn't want their parents to know about.<sup>3</sup> One can only begin to imagine what the political mudslinging ads will look like in the years to come when this generation of youth begins to run for office! In future chapters we will address the issue of sharing too much information.



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### First Things First

Before we dive into the book and begin to discuss the technology that impacts our children,





let's begin with a few prerequisites. The first two are mandatory while the third one is optional (but strongly recommended).

### **1. First and Foremost a Commitment to Be Your Child's Parent**

Perhaps one of the most shocking discoveries I made in the process of researching for this book was the comfort among many children/teens in typing things they would never say to someone's face. In addition, there seem to be no rules when it comes to uploading and posting pictures and videos to the Web. I will address the issue of picture and video uploading in chapter 5. Oftentimes, when I stumble upon such profiles (many of them church kids), I find myself wondering, *Where in the world are their parents?* I cannot tell you how many discussions I have had with parents who have no clue what their kids are posting online. I have met others who simply don't care. They would rather remain in good favor with their child (translation: be their buddy, ol' pal) than properly train them and draw boundaries (translation: be their God-ordained parent).

If you are a parent who makes a habit of uttering the phrase, "Ah, kids will be kids," on a recurring basis, do me a big favor. Close this book and pop





yourself upside the head with it. Now open it back up and continue reading. Your child doesn't need another buddy; your child needs a parent. And let's not be fooled. Someday we will stand before God and be held accountable for the way we raised the children that were entrusted to us. That doesn't mean you can't be your child's friend, but you have to get it in the right order. Parent first, friend second.

## **2. An Open Mind**

You've heard the proverbial saying, "Never say never." Well, it certainly applies to our attitudes when it comes to our children's participation in the ever-shifting landscape of technology. If you picked up this book with the mind-set that, "My child will never be allowed to IM/have a cell phone/get a MySpace or Facebook page/freely surf the Web," then I can almost assure you that this book will frustrate you. I did not write this book to point out the evils of technology and encourage you to ban your children from using it. I wrote this book as a fellow parent who after saying, "I will never . . ." on a few occasions, came to the conclusion that I was responding based on fear rather than trusting God for the answers.





God began gently to remind me that my responsibility as a parent was to prepare my children to live in the world without becoming “of the world.” Romans 12:2 tells us, *“Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will know what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect his will really is”* (NLT).

Some might interpret that verse to mean that we should join our Amish friends by abstaining from all technology since it could open a Pandora’s box of worldly evils. I, however, am not willing to give up my cell phone, laptop, and iPod loaded chock-full of old eighties songs in the pursuit. The key will be finding balance by using technology in ways that are pleasing to God.

While many parents are understandably fearful of exposing their children to too much too soon, it is unreasonable to ban them completely from technology. By the time they leave the nest and enter the real world, they will be forced into an environment that assumes they have a basic knowledge of the latest technology. If we fail to offer them guidance along the way while they are under our roofs, we do them a disservice in the long run. Opinions differ concerning the appropriate age to begin IMing,





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to get a cell phone, to text message, or to participate in social networking sites. Once you have a better understanding of the pros and cons of each forum of communication, you will be better equipped to decide when your child is old enough to participate. Every child is different; and you, of course, know your child best.

### 3. Time

I'm sure you're probably wondering by now what is involved in staying engaged in your children's logged-on lives and, more importantly, how much time it will take out of your busy day. First, let me reassure you that you will not have to quit your day job. It will take some time, especially on the front end, as you learn how to spot-check your kids' activity; but once learned, it will become a standard part of your routine. Also, you only need one parent to take on the challenge. If you know right now your spouse would be better suited for this role, you might consider handing this book off to him or her.

Most parents have learned the art of checking the history on the computer to see where their children have been. I don't even bother to do this because I have monitoring software that does the job for me. Besides, most children know how to





clear the history so you can't track the Web sites they've visited. The monitoring software I have sends an activity report straight to my inbox every hour on the hour. Assuming you choose the path of monitoring software and follow my advice of setting further boundaries by requiring your teen's passwords to any profiles they have set up on the Web, let me give you an idea of what an average spot-checking day looks like for a mother of two teens (my oldest is away at college, and I do not monitor his activity with software). Now, keep in mind that I write full-time; therefore, my laptop is always nearby. That said, I choose to check their activity on a daily basis. If you are not on your computer daily, you can monitor your children's activity on a weekly basis.

Each morning I check my e-mail and scan over one or more of the hourly reports detailing a list of sites visited by my children on the computers they use. Note: I do not go over them all, or it would consume my entire day. After scanning a report or two, I notice the typical sites my eighth-grade son enjoys: ESPN.com, addictinggames.com, aim.com (for AOL instant messenger). I then scroll through subject lines of IM conversations that have been e-mailed directly to my Inbox. I look specifically for new screen names or conversations with certain





friends that have caused a flag in my spirit previously. I quickly scan over those messages, looking particularly for anything that would be dangerous or inappropriate. This would include suggestive statements, links to inappropriate Web sites, evidence of cyberbullying, or contact by a stranger. If I find something, I save the conversation to discuss later. If necessary, I ask my son or daughter to block the individual in the future.

After scanning over IM conversations, I then log onto MySpace and Facebook to check my children's pages. The monitoring software I use does not currently track specific comments and pictures on my children's pages, so my only means of monitoring is to go directly to their pages.

I do a quick scan on their profile pages, looking particularly for new comments posted by others on the page. I also check their pictures to make sure they have used good judgment on the photos uploaded to their pages. I also check to make sure they haven't added any information that could allow someone to track their steps (where they are going this weekend, etc.). As an extra-added bonus, I briefly scan my college-aged son's page. After a quick spot-check, I have a pretty good idea of what he's up to even though he is more than eight hundred miles away. This includes numerous girls who





comment on his “wall.” Who knows—one of these gals could be my future daughter-in-law! I am able to click through to see cute pictures of a sorority formal he attended, tailgate parties, and the like. It’s a treat to get a glimpse of his new life away from home. Many parents of college kids, upon seeing their pages, might use the word *shock* rather than *treat*, so I feel especially blessed. After that, I am finished checking, and I move on to the rest of my busy day. All of the above can be done in about fifteen to thirty minutes, depending on how many IM conversations I choose to read. In the beginning, it took longer as I pored over the conversations to learn who was talking to my children and the overall content of their discussions. Once I got a good idea of their circle of friends, I learned the art of spot-checking.



After recovering from the initial shock that comes with the discovery that our wired teens are accustomed to sharing much more information than the average parent would feel comfortable with, I believe you will come to see some positives in the way they communicate today. Just as with most anything else, technology can be used for good or evil. Being a caring, engaged parent takes time. The truth is, many parents are running ragged with their own busy schedules; and





rather than parent *proactively*, many parent *reactively* by running interference only after a problem arises. When it comes to our children's technology habits, too much is at stake simply to react when things go wrong or, worse, to tune out and fail to react at all. If we are to parent proactively, we must prioritize the time needed to help guide our kids along the way.

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### A Word about Monitoring Software

While using monitoring software like the one I mentioned above is not required, it is highly recommended. Monitoring software actually tracks kids' every keystroke and takes screen shots (pictures) of their Internet activity. I find that most parents have installed some sort of safety filter (an absolute must), but few are familiar with monitoring software. They are not one in the same. I have both installed on my home computers in order to





provide as many levels of protection as possible. The software I use was just under one hundred dollars and has no monthly payments. It has more than paid for itself. Not only is it more thorough than any other option I can find, but it also saves me the time of having to physically check the history on the computer each and every day. The main advantage is the ability to view your child's IM conversations, e-mails, and some (not all) postings made on blog sites. When checking the history on the computer, it will not give you logs of conversations but rather simply show you that they accessed instant messenger or their e-mail account. What they actually did beyond that will be a mystery.



Some monitoring software programming will not only record transcripts of IM conversations and e-mails sent and received but also e-mail the transcripts directly to your Inbox. While it might be tempting to read through their IM conversations in detail to get a better idea of what exactly is going on in their little heads, we must remember that the ultimate goal is not to stalk their every movement but rather to make sure they are using the technology responsibly. In addition to receiving transcripts of IM conversations, my monitoring software also e-mails me reports (daily) of exactly which sites have been accessed, what time they were accessed,





and for how long. If I see sites that I am not familiar with or appear inappropriate, I click through to check them out further.

I should warn you that monitoring software is controversial, and many people are of the mind-set that it is an invasion of privacy. It always amazes me when doing radio and TV interviews and discussing monitoring software that some hosts will pose the question of whether or not I feel I am invading my kids' privacy by monitoring their online activity. My answer is always the same. "One in five kids ages ten to seventeen has been solicited for sex online, and one in thirty-three has been aggressively solicited where the predator attempted to set up a meeting with the child in person."<sup>4</sup> Law enforcement officers estimate that as many as fifty thousand sexual predators are on the Web at any given time."<sup>5</sup> Given that information, I point out that it is irresponsible for parents *not* to monitor where their kids are going online, who they are talking to, and what they are saying. And you can rest assured predators are trolling the Web at any given time and are more than happy to communicate with your child, especially if they sense the parents are absent or disengaged. A sobering thought, but in too many cases, an accurate one.





All three of my teens know that there is monitoring software installed on our home computers. My personal philosophy is that it is appropriate to tell your children that you will be monitoring their online activity. I do, however, have an exception to the rule. If a parent has a reason to believe that a child is involved in dangerous behaviors and further believes the child would try to cover his tracks if he knew he was being monitored, then it is more than fair not to tell him. An example would be a child that a parent suspects is drinking, doing drugs, or could be at risk for suicide. It is a parent's responsibility not only to intervene to protect the child from harming himself but to head the problem off at the pass before he harms others.



If that is not your situation and you plan to install monitoring software, the younger they are and the earlier you tell them, the better. My oldest son was about fourteen when I installed the monitoring software. When I informed him, he gave me the hardest time. He harassed me about it for several years and felt like I was spying on his every move. I continued to reassure him that while I trusted him, I did not necessarily trust others who were making contact with him from the outside. I further reminded him that I was only spot-checking from time to time and not stalking his every move. By





the time he entered his senior year in high school, I no longer felt there was a need even to spot-check his online activity. He had his own laptop at that point and was preparing to leave for college, so it seemed like the right time to cut him loose.

His younger sister, on the other hand, was twelve when I installed the monitoring software. She was much more accepting of my explanation. Because I installed it at the front end of her Internet activity, she and her younger brother have known no other way of life. In fact, when she was about fourteen, I intercepted an IM conversation she was having with her older brother that caused me to laugh out loud. At the time, I was out of town at a book signing and sitting in the lobby of my hotel checking my e-mails. An IM transcript of her conversation with her brother landed in my Inbox. They were discussing a girl that my son had his eye on that just so happened to be a friend of my daughter's. Paige was informing my son Ryan that she had firsthand information about who this girl liked and said, "I will tell you who she likes, but you have to keep it between you and me." Following that statement, she added, "And mom cuz we know she's reading this." She then added, "Hi Mom." I literally laughed out loud.





I believe that our children, though they likely won't admit it, want us to be engaged in their lives and draw boundaries for their protection. I can't promise you that you'll get a shout-out from your child in an IM transcript that lands in your inbox, but I can promise you that you are doing the right thing by getting involved in your kids' wired worlds. (More information about monitoring software, including a link to the monitoring software I use can be found at [www.loggedonandtunedout.com](http://www.loggedonandtunedout.com).)

### It's Time to Log On!

Now that we have set the groundwork and the troops have been rallied, it's time to dive in and tackle the great unknown. The following chapters will focus on their primary means of communication and hopefully will provide you with enough understanding to begin conversations with your children about using technology in a responsible manner. Note that this book is not a comprehensive approach to all media and does not address MP3 players, television, movies, online gaming, portable gaming devices, etc. Another book for another time. This book focuses on the technology that influences the way our children communicate with their peers and the outside world.





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Some of the information you will read in the following chapters will stretch your understanding, but don't give up. Continue to remind yourself that if our kids can grasp the technology, surely we can too. I should also warn you that some of the information presented in the following chapters will shock you. Don't let that scare you away. Knowledge is power when it comes to helping our kids use technology responsibly. Most importantly, remember that God has provided us with everything we need to equip our children to use technology in a manner that would bring glory and honor to his name. It was never his intent to leave us without a game plan.



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