SMART FAMILIES

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BE SMART

When Online Spaces Turn Toxic

Group chats and gaming spaces are a regular part of how children connect and spend time together. Friendships continue there after school, and children work out where they belong. They offer connection, but without adult awareness and guidance, they can normalize cruelty, exclusion, pressure, threats, and harmful language.

Group chats are powerful because many people can react at once. One comment becomes a joke, then a pile-on. Before long, the group's tone has shifted. Children may join in to be funny, gain attention, prove loyalty, or avoid becoming the next target. Others remain silent because they fear social consequences of speaking up.



For the child receiving the messages, the experience is real. Being ignored, removed, or excluded may feel like a public announcement of where they stand within the group.

41%

of U.S. teens who play video games say they have been called an offensive name while playing.

Source: Pew Research Center, 2024

Group Chats **Are Social Media Too**



Parents may delay traditional social media but allow group chats because they appear smaller, more private, and limited to people their child already knows. Yet group chats can operate much like social media, and both share many of the same pressures: an audience, instant feedback, social comparison, and rapidly changing group norms.

Children share photos, videos, jokes, and opinions with an audience. They notice who responds quickly, who is ignored, and which comments gain attention. They also learn how group behavior shapes what feels normal. Group chats can become an early training ground for social media, where children practice habits they later carry onto larger platforms: responding immediately, rewarding shocking content, forwarding private material, and adopting the group's tone.

Delaying Instagram, TikTok, or Snapchat does not mean a child has avoided social media dynamics. Those dynamics may already be developing within text threads, gaming chats, and messaging apps. This is not a reason to fear every group chat, but to approach access intentionally. Talk about what should remain private, how to respond when someone is targeted, and when to mute, leave, or ask for help.

When the Reaction Becomes the Reward

Some comments are designed to provoke. Rage bait involves sharing something outrageous because anger creates attention. Replies, arguments, and screenshots become part of the reward.

Children notice which behavior gets the biggest response. A thoughtful comment may receive little attention, while one shocking phrase brings the chat to life. Upsetting content can also be difficult to leave alone. Children may keep checking to see what happens next or whether they have become the target. Young people need to understand that attention is not the same as respect. Before reacting, they can ask:

"Is this person trying to communicate, or are they trying to make everyone react?"

When Toxic Language **Becomes a Script**

Children learn to communicate from the language around them. Increasingly, their models include strangers behind usernames. When insults or shocking phrases are treated as jokes, harmful language becomes normalized.

Parents may notice this as "copy-and-paste communication." A phrase from a gaming lobby, group chat, or video is pasted into conversation. The child may think they are being funny or imitating others, but the listener may experience their words as cruel, threatening, or discriminatory. Parents should know how to respond.

Instead of asking, "Why did you say that?" try:

"Where did you hear it?"
"What do you think it means?"
"How might another person understand it?"
These questions help children examine the language they absorb instead of repeating it.

Talk It Through

What does loyalty look like when friends target someone in a group chat? Does being a good friend mean joining in, staying silent, or saying, "This has gone too far"? What does integrity look like when someone shares a humiliating screenshot? What does kindness require when everyone else laughs?

Talking through these situations gives children a framework should they occur.

Teach your child when to call someone out and how to handle bullying. **Prepare them with phrases such as:**

- "That's not cool. Let's move on."
- "Come on, guys. That's not funny."
- "I don't think we should talk about them like that."
- "Let's change the subject."

When Toxic Gaming **Becomes Normal**



The concern is not simply that children may hear an occasional insult. It is what repeated exposure teaches children about how people are expected to communicate. In competitive games, mistakes may be met with blame, humiliation, or aggressive trash talk. Targeted players may retaliate, adding to the same culture.

Children can begin to believe cruelty is simply part of gaming and that responding in kind is necessary to defend themselves or belong. When hostility is rewarded or dismissed as "just banter," aggressive communication becomes easier to accept. Competition, anonymity, and few consequences make aggression easier to justify.

The experience can differ by gender. Boys are often both targets and perpetrators of general harassment, while girls are more likely to experience sexualized comments and gender-based insults. Some girls conceal their gender or avoid voice chat.

This does not mean gaming makes children aggressive. Many games support teamwork, friendship, and cooperation. The concern is that a toxic communication culture can give children unhealthy scripts for handling frustration and conflict. Parents can help children notice the culture around a game: how players respond to mistakes, what language has become normal, and whether people communicate differently online. Common behavior is not always healthy behavior, and habits can follow children into school and family life.



COMMUNITY NORMS

Prioritize Your Family and Your Values

Core values like avoiding temptation, humility, self-sacrifice, and acknowledging evil are less mainstream than in generations past and must be fought for.

Delay Smartphones Until High School

Smartphones are addictive, heighten anxiety and depression, and expose children to harmful content. Children thrive when they live free from the disordered influence of smartphones.

Delay Social Media Until 16

The evidence is overwhelming: early social media is not only correlated with poor mental health, but is actually causing it.

No Phones in Schools

Families should strive to keep schools free of distractions. School should be a place where children have authentic human experiences, growing not only intellectually, but socially and emotionally.

The Adolescent Brain in the Chat

Early adolescence is a time when belonging, peer approval, and social status become especially powerful. At this stage, developing brains are increasingly tuned to social information: Who included me? Who ignored me? Who laughed? Where do I stand in the group?

Peer presence and approval can heighten activity in systems involved in reward and motivation. In a fast-moving chat or game, getting a laugh or gaining the group's attention may feel especially rewarding. At the same time, exclusion carries emotional weight. Being removed from a chat, ignored, or watching friends continue without them may feel like a threat.

This does not mean the adolescent brain causes cyberbullying. Emotionally charged peer situations place greater demands on developing systems involved in inhibition, perspective-taking, and slowing down a response. Peer sensitivity can move in either direction. Young people can follow a pile-on or defend someone. They can reward cruelty or shift the group's tone.

Small Signals = Big Meaning

In group chats, silence is not always neutral. A read receipt without a reply, an ignored message, or an emoji added to one comment but not another can contribute to the social hierarchy. Children monitor who responds first, who receives reactions, and who is left on read. These signals can communicate approval, rejection, status, or exclusion without anyone saying so directly.

Screens also remove cues that activate empathy. Children cannot see another person's face change, hear hurt in their voice, or experience the silence following a cruel remark. They may become highly sensitive to signals affecting their own sense of belonging while remaining less aware of their own words' impact.

Digital communication needs to be taught, not handed over. Children need to understand that silence can send a message, reactions can strengthen harmful behavior, and every name represents a real person whose feelings are not visible.



Keep the Conversation Open

Online bullying often goes unreported. Children may stay silent or hope it resolves on its own. They may worry that adults will make the social fallout worse. They may also feel embarrassed if they joined in.

Begin with: "I'm glad you told me." Adults may need to act when there are threats—but listening first keeps the door open.

Creating a Moral Speed Bump

When children know what their family stands for—how they treat people, what they do when someone is targeted, and who they choose to be when no one is watching—those values create a moral speed bump. They give a child a moment to think before liking, forwarding, laughing along, or joining a pile-on.

Children may use moral disengagement to separate their actions from what they know is right. They may tell themselves:
"Everyone else was doing it."
"It was only a joke."
"I didn't write it. I just forwarded it."

Clear family values give them another question:
"Does this reflect who we are and how we treat people?"

This connects directly to the Smart Families norm to prioritize family. Children must know their values before carrying them into group chats, games, and friendships. Families can discuss what kindness, courage, loyalty, honesty, and integrity look like online and offline.

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TAKE THE PLEDGE

To help children grow up well in today's tech-saturated world takes more than personal resolve—it takes community. Behavioral science shows that lasting cultural change occurs in cycles: first comes awareness, then commitment, modeling, and reinforcement. When we shift from a focus on "me" to "we," we can create strong, permanent change. Together, we can reduce the pressure to conform, strengthen our shared motivation, and support one another through the inevitable bumps along the way.

That's the "why" behind our Pledge to Delay Smartphones. It's not just a personal decision—it's a shared commitment to protect childhood, prioritize connection, and build a healthier culture for everyone.

To take the Smart Pledge, visit www.Smart-Families.org/Smart-Pledge

THE SMART PLEDGE

My family pledges to delay giving our child(ren) a smartphone until high school.

Parents First Name

Parents Last Name

Email Address

Sign the Pledge



Take the Smart Pledge