Online Behavior: We’re Just As Bad As We Say Teens Are

Rosalind’s Classroom Conversations, March 2015

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We have a responsibility to our students to acknowledge a glaring double standard that’s happening way more than we want to admit: Adults abuse technology and get away with it.
Think about it. We regularly lecture our students and children about how they should behave online, make them sign technology contracts that give us the right to discipline them including restriction of privileges, school suspension and expulsion—while many parents and educators ridicule, humiliate and bully people online without repercussions. Even worse, parents and teachers aren’t just going after other adults. They sometimes target young people and when these adults are exposed, they typically dismiss what they did or go on the attack again.

Before we lecture young people any more about how “They should think carefully before they push send,” let’s take an honest look at our own online behavior.

Here are just a few of the examples I’ve seen or read about recently:

Driven by spiteful revenge
A parent finds out about an offensive comment or picture another child posted online. Instead of calmly using the situation to talk to their child about it as an example of what not to do, or inform the parents of the offending child by saying some version of, “This was really uncomfortable call to make but I thought you’d want to know…” instead the parent takes a screen shot of the post and then anonymously sends it to the other parents or posts it publicly. Humiliating a child, even one who has bullied another child, is about revenge and just plain wrong.

Our job as adults is to address the problem in a way that has the best chance for the aggressor to learn that the values of the community are to uphold people’s dignity. In any case, when a child is the target, the parent should focus their attention on the physical and emotional well being of their child, not exacting revenge on the aggressor. Teachers and schools should also reinforce this message.

Creating a hostile school environment
This is small thing but it happens a lot. A teacher grabs a phone out of a student's hand and then that same teacher is checking her Facebook page a few minutes later. Just that little moment sends the message that a teacher can enforce a rule that they don't have to follow themselves.

But that's nothing compared to teachers using their phones to directly bully a student. A teacher recently took a picture of a ninth grade boy in her school and posted it on Instagram with the following caption, “STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) kids are trying too hard. I don't know him but I hate him.” When the student responded, “You can't hate me. You don't know me.” The TEACHER responded, “I know I don't know you but I can hate anyone I like.”

It's easy to look at what that teacher wrote and vilify her—and believe she is unusual. I've spent my professional life in schools and I know how dedicated many teachers and administrators are; however, it's disingenuous to not admit the very real fact that there are educators who go out of their way to humiliate children. In this case, social networking is helpful because there's proof about what this teacher did. The student was able to take a screen shot of the post. Otherwise, in my experience, way too often the child won't speak to an administrator, because they would believe that the administrator will automatically take the teacher's word over the child's. The teacher could deny it, say that the child just took it the wrong way, or say the student is overly sensitive—the classic ways in which people who bully abuse their power to silence their targets.

**Spoiling for a Fight**

It's usually on Twitter and it's usually about sports or other school events. Parents are posting rude tweets gloating about their children's victories—baiting the teens on the losing team to respond. And it's just as bad when the parents are on the losing side. Students I work with report Dads and Moms tweeting at them about how they cheated or were poor sports (which is highly ironic). The responses I've seen from the kids? “Umm...you're parents...” And when the kids do respond in an
obnoxious way, the parents become self-righteous, indignant and lash out at the kids again. As one of the high school seniors I work with commented,

"They're parents trying to start beef with high schoolers, it looks ridiculous to us. However if we respond at all it proves their point."

I'm not justifying young people's rude responses, but it's the height of adult hypocrisy to start a fight online with teens and then not take any responsibility for it.

**What we can do**

We need to do the following right away:

1. We need to apologize on behalf of all adults for demanding young people follow rules that a lot of adults won't follow themselves.
2. We need to apologize on behalf of all adults for punishing young people for disobeying rules while adults who break those same rules get away with it.
3. If we're going to demand that students sign technology contracts we need to demand parents and anyone who works in the school to sign it as well. And if you break the rules, it doesn't matter who you are, you will be held accountable.

If you're an educator and a child tells you about an adult who is going after them or their friends—get involved. Thank them for telling you, ask her or him what their ideal outcome is and then handle it like a mature adult. Which means, tell the administrator you trust the most, check your protocols and then someone should respectfully but firmly tell the aggressor to back off and that their actions are against school policy and overall values.

It is our responsibility to send a clear and direct message that those in power will follow the same rules as they enforce on others.
Before we lecture young people any more about how “They should think carefully before they push send,” let’s take an honest look at our own online behavior.