



Brookline PARENT EDUCATION NETWORK  
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## PARENT NETWORK NEWSLETTER

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### Community Forum Update *Cyberspace – the Good, the Bad & the Ugly*

Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, texting, gaming, skyping, internet surfing – kids as well as adults are often spending more time in the virtual world of cyberspace than interacting with the real world. With computers in the vast majority of households and smart phones now functioning as mini-computers, we are more “connected” today than ever before. This constant barrage of electronic stimuli poses new challenges for today’s teens, such as the pressure to be connected 24/7, navigating the rocky road to responsible cyber citizenship, and the very real concern that all the technological distractions combine to actually rewire the developing brain. Read on...

#### DID YOU KNOW....?

- Facebook now has over 800 million active users
- 51% of teens check Facebook and other sites multiple times a day – 22% more than ten times a day
- 24% of teens admit to logging on to someone else’s personal account without their knowledge or consent
- According to a 2010 study, the average teen sends over 3000 text messages a month

For more information, contact B-PEN coordinators June Harris ([jharris@brooklinema.gov](mailto:jharris@brooklinema.gov)) or Karen Campbell ([kcampbell4@brooklinma.gov](mailto:kcampbell4@brooklinma.gov)) or visit

[www.B-PEN.org](http://www.B-PEN.org)

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#### **B-PEN (Brookline Parent Education Network)**

helps parents navigate the social, emotional and developmental challenges affecting today’s teens and pre-teens – common challenges that can lead to risky behavior. An outreach initiative that collaborates with Brookline school administrators and PTO’s, the organization’s goals are to facilitate parent connections:

- \* with other **parents**,
- \* with school and town **resources**, and
- \* with helpful **information** via written/electronic materials on a wide variety of teen concerns.

### CYBERSPACE FORUM B-CASA’S LARGEST EVER

The B-CASA October 2011 breakfast on “Cyberspace – The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly” was the organization’s largest forum to date, with roughly 90 attendees, including parents, students, BHS and MS staff, police, health professionals and community members. Informative mini-presentations by experts, school staff and Peer Leaders were followed by lively table discussions that brainstormed ways to promote healthy digital practices and citizenship to different segments of the population. The

workshop closed with a series of recommendations for action plans to help parents understand and navigate the challenges teens face in the digital world. The B-PEN Advisory Committee continues to formulate including parent lectures, workshops, tutorials and tip sheets. Read on for highlights of the forum's content. ([To read the full report, click here.](#))

## PEER LEADERS NOTE SOME OF THE DOWNSIDES OF SOCIAL MEDIA

In noting some of the pros and cons of social media, such as Facebook, Peer Leaders believe that online communication fosters emotional detachment. You can't see someone's face when interacting to read the social cues of body language that confers joking, hurt feelings, etc. In addition, teens often don't realize that joking around on the internet, such as updating someone else's status of Facebook, can be misconstrued and is, in fact, identity theft. Even if the friend is OK with this kind of "joke," it can be classed as a crime if the parent objects. Students also need to be aware that what they post now can have consequences years down line. Over 80% of colleges now use social media to review prospective students. According to one survey, this benefited 25% of students who had used social media positively, such as lobbying for something, but 38% were penalized for racy pictures/language.

## DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP 101

Cyberstalking expert Kelley Misata has been working with Peer Leaders and the Advisory Group at BHS creating a curriculum called "Digital Citizenship 101" focusing on teaching teens about how to protect their online reputations.

### Some of the key messages for teens as well as adults:

1. Don't focus on the "bad guys" or live in fear of the unknowns in cyberspace,
2. Be the same person online as you are in real life.
3. Google yourselves on a regular basis and be aware of what your online presence is.
4. Do more good, online and off -- the more you are engaged in positive projects, the more a google search will result in a positive profile.
5. If you know of someone being bullied online, encourage them to speak out -- victims of cyberstalking and harassment tend to wait to tell people 3-18 months.
6. If you or someone you know is bullied or harassed - don't attack back, don't delete messages, which can be evidence, and reach out for help.
7. Regularly check your privacy settings.
8. Take responsibility for your own digital citizenship. We have control over what we do online. Digital citizenship is not an app.

## THE DIGITAL TATTOO

Social media expert Lauren Vargas helps companies monitor social media, helping them figure out who we are online – our chats, emails, tweets, buying history, Facebook status, etc. She contends that even though our online persona is only one facet of our character, everything we do online is permanently archived and becomes a kind of "digital tattoo." Something posted today will still be there ten years from now, even if we try to erase it. We must be diligent of what we are posting online and respectful of our future selves.

### She makes three main points:

1. **Be authentic** – live out your values and character in online discussions. Understand your emotional triggers about where, when and why you post and why your friends and family do the same. You are creating circles of influences – be aware of how your interaction in the space is perceived and how it might be misconstrued -- even the most benign details from a Facebook photo can be damaging. (Ex. One student professed wanting to go only to a particular dream college, but the college saw her wearing another institution's sweatshirt and rejected her.)

2. **Be aware of transparency** – understand the “breadcrumb trail” you leave online. Even if you are posting different info in different spaces, people can connect those profiles. Be mindful of how postings might effect you in the future, sharing stories with others might help others in the community, but could someone discriminate against you down the road? How much are you inadvertently revealing – about your children, when and where you work? Ask yourself, “At what cost to my ego and privacy am I sharing information?”

3. **Understand accessibility** – it’s easy to say anything from a keyboard, but it’s important to listen and pause before you react. With “frictionless sharing,” even private instant messages back and forth can be accessed and forwarded or posted online. Everything is public and you have to go into the online space with that frame of mind.

Parents need to educate themselves, their children and their friends, always urging to **RESPECT YOUR FUTURE SELF.**

## THE MYTH OF MULTITASKING

Teens are masters of juggling homework and entertainment -- music, following posts on Facebook, taking phone calls, sending and receiving text messages. But this “multitasking” is not focusing on several things at once, but switching quickly between activities, resulting in “constant partial attention.” It’s exacerbated by an overload of digital stimulation, which starts to rewire the brain, especially the developing brains of teens. The prefrontal cortex (social behavior, reasoning, planning, impulse control) isn’t fully developed until the 20’s, and that development is largely contingent on what activities teens do.

According to experts, the good news is that multitasking sets up young brains for faster response time, improved peripheral vision and a greater ability to sift through information quickly. However, by constantly switching tasks, teens get habituated to distraction, becoming less able to sustain focus for deeper, more complicated thinking. Performance on individual tasks suffers.

A terrific series of articles in the NY Times, [“Your Brain on Computers”](#) by Matt Richtel, illuminates how “constant electronic noise” limits cognitive potential. Even the expectation of an email or text takes up working memory in the brain, leaving less space for integration and storage of ideas. Media overload also sets up the expectation of immediate gratification and need for constant stimulation. The release of dopamine, the pleasure neurotransmitter, leads to wanting more, and can ultimately foster addictive behavior. Young people as early as middle school report feeling pressured to stay connected 24/7 and respond immediately. This false sense of urgency can lead to anxiety and fatigue.

Downtime is critical for the uncluttered thinking needed for synthesizing information, creating memory and coming up with new ideas and developing a sense of self. Parental modeling and guidance can help teens figure out ways to regularly disconnect and find balance. As one of the BHS Peer Leaders said, “Sometimes, the best thing I can do for myself is disconnect for awhile, turn off the phone and computer and take a deep breath.”

## WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

Participants in the Cyberspace forum divided into table discussions brainstorming a series of critical questions.

### **What do we need teens to understand?**

How digital overload affects their learning and brain development, can stifle creativity and can hamper communication skills face to face

The longevity of what they post – the digital tattoo, deletion is never complete

Legal issues, such as identity theft

### **What additionally do parents need to know?**

How cyberspace works – the intricacies of social media, changes in privacy settings, etc., how Facebook works and is used

How your particular child uses the internet – consider becoming a child’s Facebook “friend” and convey the importance of accountability online

Ways to monitor online behavior, but be aware that over monitoring can backfire – prohibition can breed temptation, and kids need some freedom to experiment

### **What can parents do to promote healthy use of technology? What strategies can they use to guide their children?**

Engage in constructive conversations and start early imparting family values and etiquette – basic family rules, restrictions, contracts, discussions, etc.

Ensure online safety and privacy strategies

Keep the computer in a public place

Find effective ways to limit use (especially self-limits) like regular disconnects

Promote good study habits – do non-computer homework first, limit distractions (no Facebook, texting, etc.)

Phones off for all at night – charge overnight in common space

Talk about online persona – should be the same as in real life

Encourage thoughtful interaction – don’t post or respond on impulse and be careful of “jokes” that can be misinterpreted

Be a good role model

Encourage “respect for your future self”

Encourage balance and a periodic disconnect – teach about downtime

Make sure you foster personal, face to face interaction

Create a healthy network of parents for communication and support

## **LOCAL RESOURCES**

### **BROOKLINE SUBSTANCE ABUSE PREVENTION PROGRAM**

Brookline High School and the Brookline Public Health Department provide comprehensive, confidential alcohol, marijuana and other drug evaluation and support services to Brookline youth and their families. Services are free and provided by clinical social workers **Mary Minott**, LICSW, and **Hope Schroy**, LICSW. Both are specialists in the developmental and substance abuse issues of adolescents.

For more information, or to make an appointment, contact Mary Minott at 617-713-5155 or [mminott@brooklinema.gov](mailto:mminott@brooklinema.gov)

## **WEB RESOURCES**

One of the best resources for parents on digital media is [CommonSenseMedia.org](http://CommonSenseMedia.org). For B-PEN's list of valuable “**Internet Resources for Parents**,” including more websites on

“Cyberspace,” visit [www.B-PEN.org](http://www.B-PEN.org)

In addition to resource lists, B-PEN.org also offers:

- downloadable **Tip Sheets** on a wide range of parenting topics
- details on upcoming **events**
- **news**
- a Parent **Blog**
- **Parent Network Newsletters** on themes ranging from “Teens in Cyberspace” to “Prescription Drug Abuse”

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To sign up for B-PEN's quarterly “Parent Network Newsletter,” visit <http://www.bhs-pto.org/email.htm>  
Karen Campbell, editor ([Kcampbell@brooklinema.gov](mailto:Kcampbell@brooklinema.gov))