

The upside of selfies: Social media isn't all bad for kids

By Kelly Wallace, CNN

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I'll admit it right at the start: When I think about teens and social media, I immediately begin to tally up the negatives.

What good could possibly come from teens and tweens spending gobs of time on online networks, posting nonstop "selfies," some in rather suggestive poses, and often communicating with people they don't even know?

A running joke at home: My girls, ages 6 and 7, can't get iPhones until they're 40.

But then I chat with other moms, who always know best, and a picture emerges that social media is not always the scary enemy some of us might think it is for our tweens and teens.

Take the "selfie," for example, which if you haven't already heard has been named Oxford Dictionaries' word of the year for 2013. Really!

Eileen Masio, a mom of two in New York, monitors her daughter Amelia's Instagram account 24/7. Yes, most of the posts are "selfies," but it's the comments that make her think there is also a positive to this nonstop engagement.

"I think just as damaging as social media can be, it can ... help to build self-confidence, too," said Masio, during a recent interview including her husband, 13-year-old Amelia and 8-year-old son William.

"When they post selfies, all the comments I usually see are 'You're beautiful,' 'You're so pretty,' 'Oh my God, gorgeous,'" said Masio.

Report: Teens say social media more positive than negative

In fact, according to a report last year by the nonprofit child advocacy group Common Sense Media, one in five teens said social media makes them feel more confident, compared with 4% who said it makes them feel less so.

In the survey of more than 1,000 13- to 17-year-olds about how they view their digital lives, 28% said social networking made them feel more outgoing versus 5% who said it made them feel less so; and 29% said it made them feel less shy versus the 3% who said it made them feel more introverted.

When it comes to relationships with friends, more than half (52%) of teens said social media has made them better versus just 4% who said it has negatively affected those relationships.

"On the whole, teens said that they feel that social media has a more positive than negative impact on their social and emotional lives," said Shira Lee Katz, Common Sense Media's director of digital media. "They believe that social media helps their friendships, makes them feel more outgoing and gives them confidence."

News outlets focus on the negative

The findings are likely to come as a surprise to most parents, including this writer, especially because most of what we hear about social media, especially in the media, are the negatives, such as how cyberbullying can turn tragic.

"For every heartbreaking case of cyberbullying, there are many stories of teens using social media for good," said Katz.

Rebecca Levey, co-founder of a video sharing platform for tweens ages 7 to 12 called KidzVuz, has seen it firsthand. During a special partnership with the Tony Awards earlier this year, kids were encouraged to either make videos singing parts of their favorite show tunes or talk about why theater was so important to them.

"The response from other kids was so awesome. I mean we had kids who were truly tone deaf and it didn't matter," said Levey with a chuckle. "Everyone's like, 'You're awesome,' 'Go follow your dream,' 'Don't give up.'"

Levey said another benefit is for kids who might feel slightly isolated to connect with other tweens and teens who share their same interests.

"They can just find other kids who are superexcited about the same thing, so if you are living in a small town and you're the only kid who loves musical theater, instead of feeling like a freak about it, you can go online and find all these other kids that love musical theater," she said.

Social media has been a place where teens, who might be feeling isolated, can cry for help. For example, when an 18-year-old recently posted on his Facebook page that he was thinking of jumping off the George Washington Bridge, which connects New York with New Jersey, Port Authority officers managed to connect with him on social media and encouraged him to get help.

Social media for social good

Teens have also shown they can use social media to make their voices heard.

"Teens and this young generation in general want action," said Elena Sonnino, a founder of the site Live.Do.Grow, social media strategist and writer who focuses on engaging tweens and teens in using their voice for social good.

"They want to be able to see, for better or for worse, really quick action and social media allows them to create positive, meaningful change quickly."

Sonnino, who has created a Facebook group called Grow Global Citizens, said social media has not only increased tweens and teens' awareness of the world around them, but also has allowed them to be more innovative about how they can get involved.

"In the past ... they would do canned food drives, they'd do the book drives, they'd do all the things that have been done over and over, which were all wonderful, don't get me wrong, but now ... they're realizing there is so much more they can do," said Sonnino.

At a recent digital family summit, Sonnino said she heard from kids who are doing things like creating Rainbow Loom bracelets to raise money for cystic fibrosis, and taking "selfies" and using the hashtag #unselfie to promote awareness of "Giving Tuesday," the Tuesday after Thanksgiving, which is billed as a day to promote giving to others during the holiday season.

Message to parents: Have the talk

Levey said she and KidzVuz co-founder Nancy Friedman try to urge parents to, in essence, get with the program about social media. The genie is out of the bottle, folks.

"We liken it to the sex talks," said Levey. "You can either have the argument that you never want to tell your kids about sex and you don't want them to learn, and then good luck to them, or you can give them the rules and sort of be there with them every step of the way."

"I think part of the problem is parents, unlike (talking about) sex, really don't know the rules themselves," she said.

But teens like Amelia Masio are learning the digital ropes and are showing us parents that they're just fine in the vast social media landscape.

Recently, Amelia stood up for someone who was being criticized online, and viewed the exchange "kind of like math in a way, with negative and positive positions."

"If one person says this thing, it brings them down, but if this (other) person says the equal amount just as good, it evens out to a zero," she said.

I'm feeling better already!