CINDY PIERCE

SEXPLOITATION
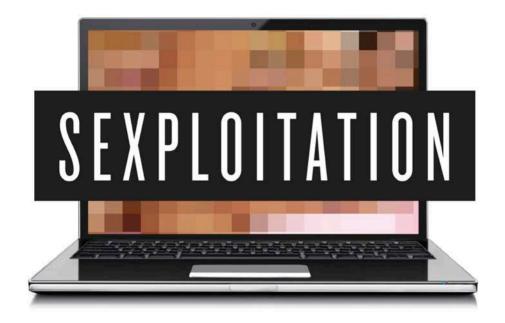
HELPING KIDS DEVELOP HEALTHY SEXUALITY IN A PORN-DRIVEN WORLD

"A comprehensive, wise, and sometimes alarming look at the culture of porn that surrounds our kids." —MICHAEL THOMPSON, coauthor of the *NYT* best seller *Raising Cain*

Praise for

SEXPLOITATION

and

CINDY PIERCE

"Cindy Pierce's new book, *Sexploitation*, is a comprehensive, wise, and sometimes alarming look at the culture of porn that surrounds our kids. Pierce is a straight-talker on the subject of sex; she is also a compelling writer and she makes a strong case that parents have to be brave and talk to their kids before the Internet introduces them to sexuality. Her book will help parents to find that courage."

—Michael Thompson, coauthor of the *New York Times* bestseller *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*

"For every parent who's ever panicked about having 'the talk' with their child, Cindy Pierce has created a frank, honest resource to help—and more importantly, a reminder that this isn't a 'talk' at all but rather a conversation that evolves as our boys and girls become responsible, sexually active young men and women."

—Jodi Picoult, *New York Times* best-selling author of *Nineteen Minutes* and *My Sister's Keeper*

"As parents, we wish our kids will grow up to have happy, healthy sex lives. Just 'wishing' won't help. We need to talk with them, otherwise their sex education will come from popular culture and the Internet. Whether we like it or not, all teens, even preteens have to confront pornography. Cindy's book will help parents find our voices to discuss challenging topics that weren't part of our own growing up."

—Dr. Michael L. Lyons MD, assistant clinical professor of community and family medicine at Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth College

"Here's a guide to having meaningful conversations on 'the other side of awkward' with our teenagers so that these young people we love so much might be safer and happier. Who doesn't need that?"

—Kelly Corrigan, *New York Times* best-selling author of *Glitter and Glue, Lift,* and *The Middle Place*

SEXPLOITATION

HELPING KIDS DEVELOP
HEALTHY SEXUALITY IN A
PORN-DRIVEN WORLD

CINDY PIERCE

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To my husband, Bruce Lingelbach. Thank you for your belief in this message and your unending support.

To our children, Zander, Sadie, and Colter. You make us laugh and light up our lives.

I love you all.

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INTRODUCTION

Living in the digital age means that we inhabit a world where possibility expands continually. And while technological advances—and the cultural and social changes that accompany them—yield many amazing and positive things, they can also create a void inside us, an emptiness created by a lack of true human connection and by the myriad comparisons we're prone to make when we are bombarded daily by envy-inspiring images we see in conventional, new, and social media.

Young people today are confronted with alarming amounts of information, much of it coming from their online activities, and tamping down stress and anxiety as they manage the onslaught can be a daily challenge. Parents, educators, and coaches underestimate the amount of time and energy kids put into sifting through the distractions, and they also misjudge the worry kids feel as they manage their many tasks. While younger people are more practiced in dealing with technology, the nonstop input they receive as they juggle homework, school, music, language, religious commitments, dance, and athletics can be overwhelming. As parents, we may not encourage downtime for our kids because we fear they won't do all they need to do to succeed in today's competitive world, or that they will use their free time for unhealthy activities.

Filling our time—and teaching our kids to fill theirs—is the new norm. We all feel pressure to check our phones for texts, calls, posts, and e-mails between any and all of the day's activities—it's what we feel we need to do to stay apace socially and to keep up with obligations. But being constantly connected has reduced many of us to device addicts who feel the need to keep tabs on others and who must feed our own need to see who is paying attention to our online lives.

Developing deeper connections with our children means that we must find the courage to step into the void and have meaningful and ongoing conversations with them about all aspects of life—their feelings about school, friends, sports, busyness, and yes, about difficult topics like sexuality, drugs, and alcohol too. In order to impact our kids' personal choices as they go through life, we need to have conversations with them, ideally before they are exposed to media, peers, and the Internet. Even if you miss that window before they're influenced by friends and social media—or even if you wait until right before they go off to college or to live on their own—it's worth starting the conversation. Whenever you begin, you'll ensure that your perspective is one that they weigh as they make their decisions.

Parent education experts agree that teenagers wish they had more open communication with their parents. And while parents may wish for the same, many avoid talking with their kids about topics that may be awkward and instead try to connect by doing stuff for them. People convince themselves that good parents use their time making lunches, cooking meals, cleaning, and micromanaging their children's lives, even though their kids are capable of doing most of the tasks on their own.

My hope for this book is that it convinces you that your parenting time is better spent talking to your kids about all aspects of life and the influences that are, or will be, moving into their view as they grow up. By talking frankly with your kids about your opinions and beliefs, and by guiding them toward trusted resources when they have questions you need help answering, you'll give them the confidence to make healthy decisions based on a strong set of values they develop through experience, the influence of trusted adults, and exposure to accurate information. Helping them find their way means we should focus on our relationship with them rather than their messy room or unkempt hair. According to parent educator Vicki Hoefle, "If we want to raise thinking kids with the mental muscle to navigate an ever-changing world, then we have to provide them with daily opportunities to learn to construct a meaningful and satisfying life and teach them the skills necessary to manage that life."[1]

As parents, we say we want kids to play outside, but we feel hassled by the need to check up on them. We want kids off their screens, but the noise of fighting siblings or horseplay annoys us. We want kids to read and relax more, but then we can't help but remind them to get their homework done. We want our kids to have life skills, and we talk about how they

should help in the kitchen and around the house, but we don't invest time in teaching them those skills, and we get impatient when they don't do things *just* the way we like them. We need to mean what we say—which means that we need to slow down and pay attention to our kids. Sorting through parents' mixed messages is exhausting for kids.

When you first start having difficult conversations with your children—especially talks about sexuality, drugs, and alcohol—you'll most likely feel awkward. The key is to keep having the conversations until both you and your kids have enough practice to get to the other side of awkward. Practice helps you develop the courage to keep at it and the resilience to endure even the most uncomfortable moments. Once you have established a connection that can withstand all flavors of awkward, your talks will get easier. Consider that making it through these conversations with you will contribute to your children's comfort when they have to address awkward topics with friends, coworkers, and sexual partners as they move through life. If you avoid tough conversations in your family, your kids will learn to avoid them outside your family. If we genuinely want our kids to be confident speaking up, challenging norms, and addressing difficult situations, we have to show them how that looks and that it is possible to recover even when the conversation doesn't go well. Taking risks, stumbling, and getting back in the game builds character and resilience.

I hope the awareness you gain from reading this book inspires you to dive right into conversations with your kids. Kids need to hear their parents talk about their values and beliefs regarding friendship, sex, homework, alcohol, drugs, relationships, conflict, extracurricular activities, and lots of other topics. My personal stories are included so you can see that being the primary sexuality educator for kids is messy, and that you can and will recover from the inevitable setbacks. I have included advice from the many mentors who have enlightened me along the way, in the hope that you will expand your understanding by reading their books and blogs, watching their TED Talks, and signing up for their newsletters. I believe the variety of insights confirms that we need to muster our courage, bust through doubt, and start those conversations with our kids. Information is power: being informed will help you develop the conviction to inform your kids. Know that your kids will likely resist your attempts to talk about uncomfortable topics, but if you hold to your belief in the long-term benefits and follow through, they will start to listen and respond. Give the gift of your example to other parents. Courage is contagious.

CHAPTER 1

Inner Compass

Children need to develop their capacity to engage in life. That's how they develop resilience and self-motivation.
—Catherine Steiner-Adair, *The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age*

Making healthy decisions requires listening to your heart, feeling what is in your gut, knowing your own mind, and following your instincts—when you do this, you are following your own inner compass, keyed in to a guiding interior force that indicates the right direction for you. Awareness, perspective, forethought, and reflection are more accessible when you are tapped into your inner compass, which helps you make healthy choices and handle consequences.

Unfortunately, the number and type of influences young people are managing in the digital age make it more challenging for them to listen to their inner compass. Many young people have a hard time making the distinction between what they value and what they think they *should* value, based on what they see online and in social media. As a society, we have reached a point where we need to actively teach kids and remind adults of the value of slowing down, being alone, and paying attention to one another and the world around us. Tapping into one's inner compass requires focus.

"Being present" and "staying in the moment" were once considered swirly, hippie concepts but now are standard advice from medical doctors, therapists, counselors, and life coaches. The fact that such a large number

of people suffer from physical and emotional health problems indicates that we are more unmoored than ever. People who feel out of balance in their lives have made meditation and yoga mainstream practices and fueled a booming self-help industry. Being caught up in the treadmill of life has led people to seek peace and harmony, search for a stronger sense of purpose, and take a step back to live in the moment. Teens are facing their own overwhelming versions of the treadmill. The many influences contributing to stress and pressure on kids as they enter their teens and grow to adulthood call for more direct guidance from the adults—parents, teachers, coaches, and others must step in and show them how to set priorities and maintain balance in their lives.

> "It took me a while to discover my own heart, but the pain of being disconnected from it was overwhelming and had obvious consequences. Fortunately, I learned to meditate with excellent guidance."
> —William Okin, Thacher School math teacher
> and practicing Buddhist

Parents struggle to reconcile the disparity between their own childhood social experience and their kids' experience, particularly with regard to screen time. Tuning in to one's inner compass was a much easier task before smartphones and social media. Life, choices, and relationships seemed simpler, because our access to our friends and to the wider network of acquaintances and friends' friends was more restricted, and we were less aware of what was going on in the lives of people who didn't go to our school or live in our neighborhoods. Our parents may have complained about how much TV we watched, even though we had a relatively limited number of channels and options, but Internet access and social media complicate the lives of kids today in ways that are making it difficult for us to know how to respond.

Finding My Own Inner Compass

As the youngest of seven children in a device-free age, I had the opportunity to observe a lot of the choices my siblings made and the consequences of those choices, both positive and negative. Initially, my parents attempted

to shield the youngest of us from discipline situations and the relationship issues of the older kids, but it was impossible to contain the volume and emotional intensity of my siblings' interactions with our parents. Listening from the next room meant we only got part of the story, which was worse than the whole truth in some cases.

Our parents made an executive decision to invite us to the table of negotiation around the personal issues of our older siblings. It was a feast of learning about friendship, relationships, marriage, drug and alcohol use, academic challenges, and the importance of abiding by laws and following family rules. My parents made it clear to all of us that when we did something wrong, we had to pay the consequences in order to learn and grow. They viewed failures and setbacks as hidden gifts. In some cases, they pointed out explicitly all the lessons and positive aspects of difficult situations, but after seven kids, I can understand their need to move the process along. I remember one of my brothers sobbing after a difficult breakup with his longtime, live-in girlfriend. My parents processed with him for a while, but long before my brother was ready, they were exclaiming what a blessing it was that the relationship was over and how it was time to move on. Even at fifteen, I could tell he needed more time to cry.

By being present for these emotional conversations, I learned early on that finding one's way through life was an ongoing experience of setbacks, challenges, and adaptation. Witnessing the outcomes of my older siblings' decisions contributed to my own development of forethought, measure of risk, personal values, and strong inner compass.

The Void

With so many people spending so much time online and engaged in social media—with the relentless reminders, posts, and messages showing what could, should, or would be—we all have a broader view of other people's lives. It is not surprising that young people today experience deeper feelings of emptiness—of an internal void—than previous generations did. Knowledge of the specific details of other people's possessions and lifestyles can set an expectation and standard for anyone who spends a lot of time online or using social media. Intensive awareness of the many things that can be purchased, worn, seen, or done makes keeping up a constant scramble and

can distance us from our own desires and thoughts. With so much stimulation readily available on phones, tablets, and computers, we are spending less time with our own thoughts and more time filling the void with technological input of one kind or another.

Boredom was once something people endured, and spent energy and creativity to move through. Now, people reach for a device at the first sign of restlessness and in the first moment of free time. Many college professors remark on what happens at the end of class now; instead of a murmur of conversation filling the room, silence remains, as students immediately zone in on their phones. When I ask college students what it would feel like to walk to their next class or back to the dorm without looking at their phone, "lonely" is a common response. A number of students readily admit that they have pretended to be reading texts while walking alone because they feel awkward otherwise.

When this tendency to focus on smartphones is brought up with young people, many are surprisingly willing to consider self-regulating their technology use. While young people rarely try to justify online communication as a healthy alternative to interacting face to face, they admit that the efficiency of communicating through devices is hard to resist or avoid. Catherine Steiner-Adair, author of *The Big Disconnect,* says, "With the infusion of computers, cell phones, and online activities at younger ages, elementary school also now has become the training ground for people relating to each other through tech. At a developmental time when children need to be learning how to effectively interact directly, the tech-mediated environment is not an adequate substitute for the human one."[1]

Screen Time, Texting, and Social Media

While social media connect people, spread inspiring stories, raise awareness about issues, and deepen genuine friendships, they can also breed envy and superficial connections. Social media will continue to evolve new forms of connection and sharing, and the social media platforms and apps in use today will ultimately go the way of MySpace, becoming irrelevant. Everything is hot until it is not. Facebook, Twitter, Yik Yak, Snapchat, and Instagram are used in varying degrees by different age groups and fluctuate in their popularity. Trends in use will continue to shift, and some of these

popular sites will be substituted by new platforms, but most young people today, regardless of socioeconomic background, are using one, some, or all of these social media each day.

Thirty years ago, kids felt pretty special if a handful of people considered them to be mildly interesting and called them on the phone occasionally. Imagine the pressure to be wildly interesting on a daily basis in multiple public forums that kids face today. Poring over other people's photos and posts can lead to feelings of inadequacy, jealousy, and resentment. A solid number of young people spend hours cultivating their image through posts and photos. Social media give people the opportunity to put their best face forward—and in some cases it's a completely false image. Many young people report that viewing their friends' feeds, with flattering photos and posts about their exciting lives and the fabulous places they visit, makes them feel boring, uninteresting, and pathetic sitting in their dorm room or family room in their sweatpants. People of all ages feel left out when they see posts about parties, events, or gatherings to which they were not invited. It is easy to get caught up in viewing for hours, reinforcing the warped perception that everyone else is having amazing and interesting lives.

"Two-Facebook" may be a more appropriate name for the ways some people use social media, however, and middle-aged people are just as likely as young people to present highly curated profiles, posting all the wonderful things going on in their lives, the successes of their children, and the kind deeds of their amazing spouses. If the "friends" actually *are* friends or acquaintances in real life, it doesn't take long to get a clear sense of who is authentic in their presentation. Within days of reading glowing posts, we read in the paper about the outstanding kid getting busted by the police or hear people griping about their spouses with a vengeance. Humans are complicated, with multiple dimensions, and have the capacity to be excellent people with flaws. Social media, however, isn't the venue in which our multidimensional selves, including our misgivings and foibles, are portrayed.

Texting

Texting is the way most young people communicate with a large number of friends and contacts. They pass information and interact with great frequency and at high speed. But texts, even when emojis and capital

letters are used, fail to convey nuance, limiting texting as a reliable form of communication. People of all ages claim they avoid calling friends on the phone because the conversation would be "awkward." Reading social cues has become increasingly challenging for people who communicate on screens most of the time. Many people agree on the inappropriateness of texting to arrange a "hookup" with a stranger or to break up with someone, but these behaviors continue. In general, we have come to accept, as a society, that we will use these impersonal means to talk about personal issues and feelings.

Relationships of all kinds require people to read social cues by engaging with, listening to, and observing others, because we all communicate subtly through voice tone, eye contact, body language, and facial expressions. Beginning at a young age and continuing into adulthood, people need to practice reading these cues, and learning to negotiate disagreements and personal boundaries. Development of interpersonal skills begins in earnest when kids are three or four years old, when they attend preschool or have playdates and other social experiences. These environments give kids the opportunity to disagree, cooperate, negotiate, communicate, and resolve conflict. When computers became part of preschool classrooms, kids had less time interacting and working through conflict because they spent more time sitting in front of screens. There is a movement to remove computers from nursery schools because educators and psychologist are noticing changes in children's behavior and in their emotional well-being as a result of less time spent practicing their social skills.

> "After dinner, it was work time for all. When everyone was done with homework, one watched a movie with earbuds, one watched a show, and my husband goofed around on the computer. I suggested we all watch something together, but the kids wanted to do what they were doing—solo. It makes me sad."
>
> —Parent of two teenagers

According to a 2010 Kaiser Family Foundation study of kids ages eight to eighteen, kids spent an average of eight sedentary hours per day consuming media through a screen.[2] As technology has advanced over the past five years, this average is almost certainly increasing. Many experts agree that

so much time devoted to screens is affecting children's physical health and attention span. Psychologist and author Dr. Aric Sigman claims that increased screen time is impacting kids on neurological, social, and physical levels, but that there is relatively little concern about these changes: "Perhaps because screen time is not a dangerous substance or a visibly risky activity, it has eluded the scrutiny that other health issues attract."[3] But some parents and schools are concerned, and are working to address the issue. Jenny Brundin of Colorado Public Radio reported on a Waldorf school in Denver that encouraged families to participate in a media fast for two weeks, and to follow the fast with a media diet. Brundin connects Waldorf founder Rudolf Steiner's idea that children think by creating mental pictures with her own observations of kids living in the digital age: "If those pictures are supplied ready-made—there's less opportunity to build the 'imaginative muscle.' It's based on this simple belief: technology is a tool. Introduced too early, it becomes a crutch, an addictive one at that."[4]

Graffiti in the Digital Age

I have noticed that there has been a drastic reduction in graffiti since texting, social media, and chat rooms have become part of daily life. Before the digital age, you could not drive your car by a bridge, walk around town, or use a public bathroom without being inundated with graffiti. Some graffiti authors signed their first names or initials, but typically their work was unsigned. A good amount of graffiti was boldly crude. Graffiti artists seemed to gain a sense of power from drawing or writing in places where many people would see their words, yet they didn't have to take responsibility. The common thread between writing graffiti, posting comments on social media, and engaging in online chats is anonymity, or at least a distance from the receiver of the message. People find a lot more courage to speak their minds in texts, in chat rooms, and on social media than they do when they are engaged in face-to-face conversations. There is emotional safety in writing from afar, because the reader can't respond immediately. When the writer presses "send," he just moves on.

Social skills are weakened and social courage is diminished when people depend on texts, posts, and e-mails to communicate. The sender does not have to take full responsibility for the reaction of the recipient because she

does not witness it. If the recipient is hurt by a message or takes issue with it, she can respond with a text, also avoiding responsibility for how the message lands. In many cases, the recipient may feel hurt and want to think about her response; she may plan to tell the sender how she felt the next time they run into each other. But, even if the two see each other later that same day, the number of texts to and from other friends in the intervening time may make the upsetting text seem so long ago that it is truly awkward to confront the person. Everyone has moved on, because interactions are fast paced and topics shift quickly. Strong connections with other people and honest conversations about emotions may become casualties of the short attention spans that are the product of fast-moving virtual interactions.

Catherine Steiner-Adair, author of *The Big Disconnect,* makes the point that, in terms of content, texting for kids today is similar to meeting at the park for previous generations. She notes that the lack of depth in kids' texts is similar to the lack of depth in the conversation of a group of kids hanging out at a park. The difference is that kids who frequently spend time on a screen have less practice interacting face to face, and miss opportunities to develop strong social skills. Reading social cues takes practice. Noticing subtle shifts in body language, facial expression, and vocal tone is essential to effective communication. We talk to kids about how important it is to know that "no means no" and to be aware of a nonverbal "no," particularly in sexual situations. But if teens are missing these cues on Tuesday afternoon in broad daylight, how can we possibly expect them to pick up cues in the dark, in a state of optimistic arousal, and possibly under the influence of alcohol?

Sexual Disconnect

The tolerance for disconnected sex with unfamiliar partners is what the hookup scene is all about, and we'll go into this in more detail in chapter 10. Many young people consider communicating via social media and texts an acceptable way to get to know another person, and it is not uncommon for two people to hook up even though they've had very little face-to-face communication. Any kind of sexual encounter puts people in a position of vulnerability, both physically and emotionally. Sex can be awkward in the best of circumstances, and there is no app that can rescue us from the unease of being emotionally and physically naked with another person.

No matter how hard people work to justify hooking up with someone they don't know well, it is a recipe for a disconnected sexual experience.

A healthy sexual encounter involves a strong connection between partners. Dr. Marty Klein, certified sex therapist and author of *Sexual Intelligence*, says, "I see an increasing number of people who don't feel comfortable doing one thing at a time anymore. And that's bad for sex. Because—assuming you're with someone you want to be with, and they're pleased to be with you—there's only (a few) things you actually need to enjoy sex: Focus. Attention. Engagement."[5] It has become a common idea that young people can't be encouraged to focus on and engage their attention on anything or anyone else for too long because they are busy with so many commitments. When I speak to groups of high school and college students about casual sex and the hookup scene, some of them ask questions about how to balance their desire to have sex with the fact that they don't want a committed relationship because they have such busy lives. I have heard junior high girls claim they couldn't possibly have sex in any sort of committed way because it will get the way of their desire for a career. This attitude that a meaningful relationship is incompatible with attaining other life goals contributes to the acceptance of hookups, and casual sex seems to have joined the list of extracurriculars like sports, chess club, and the recycling committee.

Yik Yak Plus

Another way people keep emotional distance while engaging with others is by posting anonymously in chat rooms or through apps like Yik Yak. Posting and commenting when your identity is known requires courage. Today, however, there are many opportunities to post or comment anonymously. Several apps that make it possible to post abusive or hurtful comments without consequences are causing problems in high schools and colleges across the country.

Yik Yak is one example of an app that allows users to post comments anonymously. Often, the light-hearted and funny posts are taken too far and become malicious. Yik Yak is based on GPS location, so when a user logs in, he can read the many "yaks" of the people physically closest to him at the time. This makes the app a nightmare for schools, as students know that everyone who is yakking near them while they are at school is a classmate.

These types of platforms have led to an increase in anonymous harassment, accusations of rape and abuse, bomb threats, bullying, and racist and homophobic comments about specific people on campuses. Allegations of rape and abuse, as well as bomb threats, seem to be easier for schools to address than the cruelty and prejudices that undermine the sense of community. Anonymity seems to inspire users, particularly high school students, to unleash outrageously harsh posts and follow-up comments. One dean of an independent school said:

> The underlying issue that Yik Yak causes is paranoia. When you don't know who has written something terrible about you, it leaves you feeling alone and hated by everyone. You no longer want to go to class, and especially not the cafeteria for lunch. You feel like everyone is in on one big secret—except you. What I found most interesting about the situation was that students reading the app thought it was hilarious and say, "Come on, don't shut it down. It's all innocent fun." Minutes later when someone had yakked about them, they were the first to want to shut down the network, collect all student phones, and sign a petition to end Yik Yak altogether! It was wild to watch.

An alarming number of students jump right into the cruel exchanges, leading some school administrators to block the Yik Yak app on their campuses. Fortunately, Tyler Droll and Brooks Buffington, creators of the Yik Yak app, have responded in a responsible way in most cases. Because the app is GPS based and operates within a five-mile radius of the user, Yik Yak can set up a "geo-fence" that disables the app at schools that provide their coordinates. This tactic doesn't change what students do when they leave campus, but this blocking effort has reduced the issues on campuses where the administration has been proactive. Yik Yak is designed for people eighteen years of age or older, but colleges are facing many of the same issues that high schools are.

Boston College Addresses Anonymous Posting

The frequency of racist yaks around Boston College inspired the FACES Council—a committee dedicated to promoting appreciation of diversity at BC—to create a video to demonstrate the harmful effects of Yik Yak on

campus. The video shows a series of students reading anonymous racist, sexist, homophobic, or disrespectful posts on their phones. After each person finishes, he or she looks directly at the camera for a silent moment to let the harshness of the yak sink in. The narrator ends by explaining, "Comments like these are the reason there are students at BC who are struggling to balance two cultures, struggling to maintain positive body image, and struggling to be comfortable with who they are … Yik Yak should be a red flag to the administration that there is a serious problem in the way students are being engaged in conversations about difference of race, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, gender, and ability."[6]

The comments that follow the video online and the letter to the editor of *The Heights*, an independent student newspaper of Boston College that accompanied the video reveal a surprising mix of support for the message as well as dismissal and mockery of the message. Some students suggested that people who find comments offensive should stay off Yik Yak. Others made the point that Yik Yak is just one of many platforms used to express racist attitudes, and the racist yaks reveal that the campus is in need of more conversations about intolerance and bigotry. This kind of debate is going on in varying degrees on campuses everywhere, resulting in important conversations about respect and tolerance, as well as about freedom of speech and the responsibilities of different types of speech.

Advice on Using Anonymous Social Media

By Rachel Simmons, author of
Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls

- When people post anonymously, there are no consequences or costs to what they do. People write things they would never say. They also lie, just because they can. They say things to get a rise out of other people visiting your page. You can't trust anonymous posters because you don't know their motive, or even who they are. Anonymity doesn't give people courage to say what they really think; it lets people say anything, true or false, which is why you can't trust it.

- By inviting people to say harmful things to you, and then reading and responding, you give them credit. No matter how clever a comeback you come up with, you make it seem like their words are worth responding to when you reply.

- You will never be someone who is 100 percent liked by everyone, so stop thinking you're going to be. This is why so many girls sign up for sites where people can comment on them; they believe they might be that person everyone loves. This is a useless waste of time. Focus on the relationships that bring you happiness and security, not people who tear you down. If you are worried about what other people think of you, ask the people you trust and who know you, not cowards who hide behind a cloak of anonymity to hurt you.[7]

Multitasking

Multitasking is the term people use to justify flying from task to task and device to device. People of all ages claim to be multitaskers. In an interview on NPR's *Talk of the Nation*, Clifford Nass, psychology professor at Stanford, said, "High multitaskers think of themselves as great at multitasking."[8] Research shows, however, that multitasking trains the brain to be more susceptible to distraction and causes the multitasker to lose the ability to focus. According to Nass's research, people who consider themselves "good at multitasking" are actually worse at it than those who are low multitaskers. The research offers a note of caution about what we see in the world: kids today are negotiating multiple devices from an early age.

According to a study conducted by Stephanie Englander of Bridgewater University for the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center, 83 percent of middle school students, 39 percent of fifth graders, and 20 percent of third graders have a mobile device.[9] Students of all ages sit down to write a paper on a computer or tablet with their phone on and multiple tabs open to social media sites, YouTube, e-mail, and homework. As they attempt to write a paper, they are also chatting online, reading and replying to texts, checking e-mails that pop up, seeing notifications from Facebook and

Twitter, and dealing with distracting ads in banners, sidebars, and pop-ups on their screens. For many, the temptation to engage continuously is difficult to resist. Yet most researchers agree that multitasking is not effective. Travis Bradberry, a psychologist and *Forbes* magazine contributor, summarized current research on the topic by saying, "Multitasking reduces your efficiency and performance because your brain can only focus on one thing at a time. When you try to do two things at once, your brain lacks the capacity to perform both tasks successfully."[10]

Not only is multitasking an unproductive way to work, it reinforces the tendency to be scattered in general. The implications for connection with others on social and sexual levels are unsettling. When young people interact, few of them listen to someone else complete a thought without looking at their phone, talking over the person, or losing interest in the conversation by drifting off or starting a new topic. The general lack of social patience among younger people is one result of the prevalence of one-sided communication—texting, tweeting, and posting.

Fear of missing out (FOMO) is also common in this fast-moving digital age. Multitasking to avoid missing out is leading to shorter attention spans. Kids are often gathered together but are actually connected to and engaged with a number of people who aren't present; they are in the habit of being at a distance together. We have all seen kids make a huge effort to get together with friends and then sit next to each other looking at their phones, interacting with other people. With my own kids, I just keep encouraging them to engage with the people who are with them. We discourage phones in the car. This means we have to endure arguments over which station will play on the radio and some recreational sibling bickering. For long road trips, we allow headphones, but an interesting audiobook or podcast will often catch their attention.

Surrendering to our kids' obsession with screen time is a mistake, even though it is the easiest thing to do. When kids don't have an opportunity to reflect and consider the impact of so much screen time, they will roll right into the habit of managing multiple devices, often at the same time. According to Steiner-Adair, kids "typically multitask on a computer, simultaneously instant messaging (IM), uploading YouTube videos, posting updates on Facebook, and continually searching the Web for fresh diversions. The so-called downtime they spend on computers is neurologically, psychologically, and often emotionally action packed. Stimulation,

hyper-connectivity, and interactivity are, as the psychiatrist and creativity expert Gene Cohen put it, 'like chocolate to the brain.' We crave it."[11] If we are genuinely interested in our kids spending less time on their devices, we need to curb our own habit of multitasking and resist the temptation to stay in constant contact and check responses. We also need to keep having conversations with our kids about the benefits of taking a break from screen time.

Stuck with Yourself

When I was fifteen, I confessed to my mother that for the ten years she required me to attend church, I never listened to what the priest was talking about. Without hesitation, she responded, "That may be true, but you were also not watching TV, talking, playing, or running around. You were sitting still and in your own mind for an hour a week." Touché. There are fewer and fewer opportunities for any of us to be in our own minds for a stretch of time before our devices beckon us to engage. Author and psychotherapist Gunilla Norris teaches meditation and leads contemplative workshops, and summarizes the need to be in our own minds in this way: "Within each of us, there is a silence, a silence as vast as the universe. And when we experience that silence, we remember who we are."[12] We have a choice to stay unplugged when we are alone. We need to remind each other and ourselves to make that choice.

Unplugging from devices, action, outside influences, media, marketing, and obligations is important for people of all ages. Being able to hear your inner compass requires that you slow down and step away from the frenzy of pressures. Life serves up a lot of stress on its own. With the added intensity of input that comes with living in the digital age, parents need to actively seek opportunities to bring their pulses down and to remind children of specific ways to keep their lives balanced too.