

## **HOT TOPIC: Is Jewish education enhanced or hindered by the use of social media?**

### **JEWISH EDUCATORS AND THE OPPORTUNITY TO DEVELOP A SOCIAL MEDIA CULTURE**

by Daniel A. Epstein

My clinical experience in mental health has ignited a deep interest in studying the impact of social media use on the behavior and development of teens. A lifetime in the Jewish community and in education has shaped my approach to developing solutions. This is a particularly interesting time in the study of the interrelationship of social media and behavior because it still so new. Most of the data shows a general understanding that while there is, of course, a new world of possibilities in education, democracy, networking, and much more, there is also a host of problems associated with overuse, exposure to age-inappropriate content or activities, and harassment. A major consideration in the prevention of negative consequences is to acknowledge a "new normal" may be forming among emerging generations. Yet, as anyone working with the youth would likely agree, something must be done to promote an experience that mitigates potential harm. This is where we, as Jewish educators, have an edge – but first we need to connect, collaborate, and get creative.

The social media experience has a role in the lives of nearly everyone we interact with on a daily basis. A recent study in the *Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics* indicated that 22% of teenagers check social media sites more than 10 times per day, 54% log on at least once a day, and 75% have mobile phones.<sup>1</sup> As schools increasingly integrate technology into the classroom, it is safe to say these numbers will continue to rise. In my experience, the concerns educators and parents have around this topic are centered around the impact online activities can have on offline behaviors and wellness. As Jewish educators, we have a unique opportunity to explore and implement possible interventions and preventative measures.

Jewish education is often based on the texts and lessons rooted deep within our culture. A great number of teachings are focused on personal conduct and our interactions with others. Personally, I see a strong connection between *lashon hara* (lit., evil tongue; derogatory speech about another person) as it pertains to bullying. As with seemingly everything else in our lives, even bullying has been digitized. Now, it is no longer limited to school hallways, buses or playgrounds. Cyberbullying can take many forms and while it may not seem as directly intimidating as in-person bullying, it still can have profound psychological effects. As Jews, we believe we are all created in the image of God, that a life is sacred, and that we should "love thy neighbor." It is essential to communicate these lessons to provide perspective on the impact bullying has on not only the individual being attacked, but also our spiritual existence and relationship with God. One basic tool in reducing the prevalence of bullying is empathy training.

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Jewish educators have an extensive set of tools that can be applied toward increasing empathic behaviors in students.

Beyond cyberbullying, there are many other areas of concern regarding potential negative consequences due to social media use in pre-adolescents and teenagers, including self-esteem, isolation, and addiction. After studying and providing programming about this topic, I have found an inspiring, well-received approach. The key is developing a culture where social media is seen as a utility with evolving uses and pitfalls when used without moderation. Mindfulness is a practice that is well-suited to this issue. While mindfulness is difficult to satisfactorily define, its application to the social media experience involves self-assessment, awareness of the emotions a user is experiencing, how the user may appear to others, and consideration of potential consequences.

It is important for educators and parents to instill the notion in these pre-adolescents and teenagers that a user's online persona is an extension of himself or herself and not a separate entity. As Jews, we place a strong value upon respect for God, self, and community. The social media experience should reflect these values.

**Endnotes:**

1. "Clinical Report — The Impact of Social Media on Children, Adolescents, and Families" in *Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics*, published online March 28, 2011. <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2011/03/28/peds.2011-0054.full.pdf+html>

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