

RUTH MARCUS

Keeping Kids From One Byte Too Many

My subjects today are sexting teens, Facebooking parents and child-rearing tips from Bill Gates. Trust me: This is all going to connect up.

Sexting is the growing practice among teens of sending messages containing photos of themselves nude or partially clothed. If you don't think teenagers are dumb enough to do this — think about all the dumb things you did as a teenager, then add the mischievous possibilities created by digital broadband.

A recent study by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy found that 22 percent of teen girls and 18 percent of boys had sent or posted online nude or semi-nude photos. Among younger teens, 13 to 16, 11 percent reported engaging in such behavior. If you've ever been, or known, a teenage boy, you can guess what happens next: One-third said they had seen nude or revealing photos meant for someone else.

And this being America, you can guess what else happens: The law gets involved. Nude photos of minors — even if the minor is you — are child pornography. Receiving a nude photo of a minor — even if the minor is your girlfriend, and even if you are a minor — constitutes possession of child pornography.

This week, a federal judge blocked a Pennsylvania prosecutor from filing child pornography charges against three high school girls who had posed topless or in their bras. A 14-year-old New Jersey girl was arrested last month for possessing and distributing child pornography after posting nearly 30 nude photographs of herself on MySpace.

In 2007, a Florida appeals court upheld child pornography charges against a 16-year-old girl and her 17-year-old boyfriend for taking pictures of themselves "naked and engaged in sexual behavior," then emailing the photos — to each other. The court said the prosecution served the "compelling state interest in protecting children from sexual exploitation."

This is, of course, a ridiculous use of law enforcement resources. Teenagers need to be protected from their own stupidity, not prosecuted for it — which brings me to the parents-on-Facebook part. My older daughter gets to sign up for Facebook next year, when she starts high school, and we've been pre-skirmishing over whether she will have to "friend" me.

As I learned when I tried to friend the children of some close friends, this is considered a terrible faux pas, somewhere between intrusive and creepy. Parents friending their own children is seen as a particularly unnatural act. As my daughter explained, perfectly pleasantly, "There are things that I talk about with my friends that I don't need you to know."

Fair enough — I was 14 once, and perhaps not as irredeemably nerdy as she thinks. So fine: Use the phone. Text or IM. Video chat. But Facebook is essentially a public venue, captured in bytes for eternity. My daughter is, knock on a plasma screen, too sensible to sext. But if the notion of a lurking parent makes her or her friends think twice before posting something — well, that's all to the good.

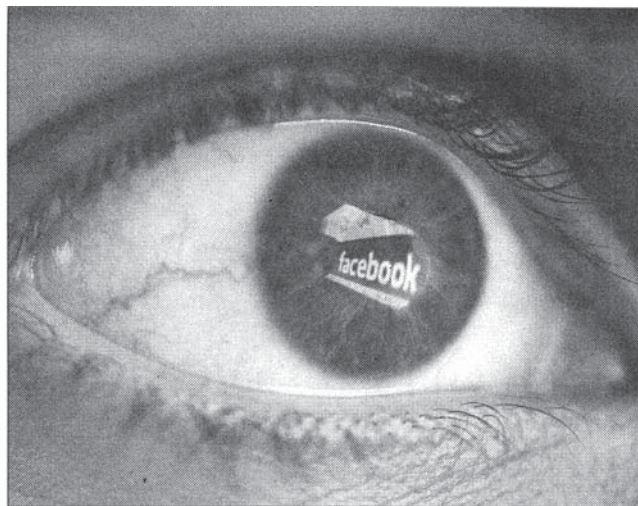
One parent I know tried to friend his son's elementary school teacher a few years ago and received a polite rejection — but enough access, under Facebook rules, to let him see the pictures of her bending over backward while a friend poured beer into her mouth. Like I said, captured in bytes for eternity.

As it happened, Bill Gates visited The Post last week, and I asked how the Gates household navigates the terrain of children and technology. It turns out that the Gateses, like the rest of us, muddle through with sensible, if ad hoc, rules posed against the inevitable clamor of children to bend them.

Their children were addicted to the Xbox 360 game "Viva Piñata"; the Gateses imposed an hour-a-day screen time limit. They don't restrict what sites the children can visit, but, as Gates noted with evident satisfaction, "I know how to review a history log of a browser quite effectively."

When their tween daughter wanted a cellphone, "We said, 'No, we're happy for you to be the only one who doesn't have a phone.'" They held out for a year. On movies, he said, "We go to those Web sites that say why is it PG-13 — and usually give in."

We didn't get to sexting, or Facebook; then again, his oldest is 12. But it was oddly gratifying to think that the man who helped start it all was struggling with the same parental issues as the rest of us who may be less adept with browser history logs.



BY DAN KITWOOD — GETTY IMAGES