

Common Sense Tips

Digital Cheating

Some facts

- > **More than 8 in 10 kids (83%) have cell phones; 53% have had them since they were 12 or younger***
- > **More than 35% admitted to using their cell phones to cheat**
- > **52% admitted to some form of cheating involving the Internet**
- > **38% said they copied text from Web sites and turned it in as their own work**
- > **65% of students with cell phones say they use them during school, but only 23% of parents think their kids are using them during school**
- > **69% of schools have cell policies that don't permit cell use, but more than half of all kids ignore them**

* all facts from the Common Sense Media June 2009 study

Cheating goes hi-tech

Personal technologies have been real game-changers for schoolwork. Information has never been easier to access and computers provide powerful tools for presentation, collaboration, and creativity. Many believe that the mobile phone also has potential as a learning tool. But an unintended consequence of these versatile technologies is that they've made cheating easier. Although cheating has been going on for years, cell phones and the Internet offer new opportunities for unethical behavior.

What is digital cheating?

Some kids use mobile phones to store notes. Some text friends about answers during quizzes or tests, while others take pictures of test questions -- which can be forwarded to students who haven't yet taken the test. Kids with smartphones can even search the Internet for answers. Some kids don't even realize they're taking shortcuts when they copy and paste material they find online and present it as their own work ... although those who use the Internet to download entire papers or reports surely know it's not ethical.

Why it matters

Our kids are the pioneers in a brave new world that has few rules. The decisions kids make today will shape the digital culture of tomorrow. We want our kids to grow up knowing right from wrong -- no matter where they are. We need to be sure that they know personal responsibility is as real in cyberspace as it is in the classroom. Digital life -- particularly the Internet and mobile phones -- operates in new ways. Much of what kids do is anonymous, which can sever consequences from actions. Anything they post or create can be seen by a vast invisible audience. Their work can be copied, pasted, altered, and sent to untold numbers of people. And they can copy and paste others' work in a split second. Because kids have unfiltered access to information, the temptation to use other people's work and call it their own can be profound. And since so much of this world happens distantly, plagiarizing or cheating can seem like a victimless crime. Kids think they can get away with it because they believe their teachers, parents, and the people whose work they've cribbed won't discover what they've done.

Common Sense says:

- > **Be aware that when you hand your kids a phone, you're giving them communications superpowers.** Gone are the days when kids used them to talk. They text, take pictures and videos, and some access the Internet.
- > **Do your homework.** It's up to you to know what your kids are doing with the technology they have. So make sure you understand what that technology is capable of doing. Make restrictions where you feel they're important. Just because their friends have phones that can search the Internet doesn't mean your kids have to have the same capabilities.
- > **Don't assume that your children automatically know what's right and wrong.** The digital world operates with different rules (that is, wherever rules even exist). Establish rules about use right from the start. Make sure kids have sourced their material, clearly indicating where they found that statistic, that insight, that map. Be explicit about what is and isn't acceptable in your home. Don't assume they know. And make sure you have real consequences for breaking the rules. (Hint: Taking the phone away works every time.)
- > **If you suspect your child is cheating, check the phone.** Look at the pictures and the text messages. This is big-league snooping, though, and your kids will be angry with you, because they'll consider it a major privacy violation and breach of trust -- so use this option only when you're very sure something's amiss.
- > **Review school policies.** Most schools have clearly established consequences for anyone caught plagiarizing or cheating (many schools have software that tell if someone's "lifted" material and presented it as their own). Tell your children you expect them to live by the established rules. Review the school consequences as they range from having to redo a paper to expulsion -- and set up some home consequences as well for any violations.
- > **Even if they would never cheat, have the talk.** You can ask your kids if they know of anyone who's cheated (they'll be more likely to talk about others than themselves). Ask them why they think anyone would cheat and what they get out of it in the long term. It never hurts to reinforce that digital cheating is still cheating.

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