MARK OESTREICHER
& ADAM MCLANE

A PARENT'S GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL MEDIA

HELPING YOUR TEENAGER NAVIGATE LIFE ONLINE

simply for parents

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Helping Your Teenager Navigate Life Online

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Credits
Authors: Mark Oestreicher and Adam McLane
Executive Developer: Nadim Najm
Chief Creative Officer: Joani Schultz
Copy Editor: Rob Cunningham
Cover Art and Production: Veronica Preston

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CHAPTER 1: SOCIAL MEDIA IN YOUR HOME

"I don't ever want to see you on Jerry Springer."

That's one of those exasperated phrases I (Adam) find myself saying as a parent. My kids—11, 9, and 1—don't get the reference, but they have grown to understand what it means: *You're making a choice that you might end up regretting*.

If, like me, you're on the front end of parenting teenagers, you, also like me, probably have no idea how adolescence got here so fast. Just when the elementary years started to make sense and I felt confident in those concrete realities, puberty hit like a meteor through the roof.

With adolescence upon us and the realities of college looming, I need to have an end goal in mind for my children that impacts every aspect of my parenting.

When my wife and I sit down to better articulate the relational goal of parenting our children, we settle on a statement that sounds like this: “We want to raise our children to have healthy, happy, and simple adult relationships.”

Healthy: We want to foster in them a hunger for healthy relationships. Friendships based on love, respect, and mutuality. Friendships that go deep spiritually and challenge them to continue growing in their faith in Christ.

Happy: We know too many people who are made miserable by their relationships. We believe that Jesus sets us free to live full of joy. God has surrounded us with incredible friendships that bring us happiness, and we want to see that for our children, too.

Simple: Several years ago we realized that our best adult relationships were relatively simple. When we spent time with our best friends, there wasn’t the heaviness that we felt around others. We want our kids to grow up in the knowledge that their best relationships don’t have to be complicated by backstabbing, sarcasm, cutting remarks, drama, and gossip.

The View From (Almost) the Other End

Marko here. I'm in a different life stage than Adam. My two kids are 18 and 14 (actually, they're almost 19 and 15). In a very real sense, my children include one adult and one teenager. By the time this book releases, my daughter, Liesl, will be living in Europe or India (she's going to both) for a nine-month experience of volunteering and embracing adulthood prior to college.

So my perspective is close to some of yours, those who *already have* teenagers.

My views of parenting teenagers are very similar to Adam's, but with a nuance of difference born out of the combination of our unique values, opinions, and experiences.

With that in mind, I have no intention of disagreeing with Adam's relational goal of parenting above. But I'll add a dimension, as I have been asking this question quite a bit myself in the last couple of years. My thinking is that the goal of parenting a teenager is independence. In other words, I'm more interested in raising adults. Sure, we're not ultimately made for independence; God made us in his own image, wired for interdependence. But the dependence children have on their parents *needs* to shift

during and after the teen years, with young adults both moving into interdependence with other people *and* their parents. So I'm sticking with *independence* as a goal for parenting teenagers: My kids have to experience healthy independence from me (and my wife) before they can choose another alternative.

And that goal has massive implications for the subject of this book: social media and parenting teenagers.

Before we go on, we should also tell you that the two of us—Adam and Marko—are lifelong church youth workers, with more than 45 years of experience between us. We've interacted with literally thousands of teenagers and parents about the subjects in this book. Adam's really the social media subject expert of the two of us (he even bought the URLs of each of his three kids' names when they were born, figuring they'd want it one day and it would no longer be available). Oh, and the two of us happen to be business partners these days, running a little organization called The Youth Cartel that trains youth pastors and provides a variety of resources.

A Technological Age

Our children are growing up in a time when all of their moments are documented. When we as parents aren't

sharing, tagging, or commenting about their lives, their teachers, classmates, relatives, and other people are.

Their births, first steps, potty training, kindergarten nerves, and elementary school days have all been captured and shared in ways our parents never could have imagined. In some ways, we have no idea what it means to be a child today. When I (Adam) fell and skinned my knee, I only had to worry about my mom telling her girlfriends in the break room at work. Now, nearly instantly, we share every success and failure via social media—and friends, family, and even people we don't know are allowed to comment on whatever happens.

When I (Marko) post and tag a graduation photo of my daughter on Facebook®, not only does she see comments from people she's never met (my friends), I also see comments from people I've never met (her friends). It's a weird world.

Relational ideals, the very idea of privacy, and the sense of individuality have been dramatically redefined by technology.

Your kids are likely in a similar position as ours.

Our kids can't remember a time they didn't have broadband, wireless Internet in every room of the house. YouTube® has always been as entertaining as broadcast television. Mom and Dad have always had laptops. Our children have never known a person who shared a telephone with someone else or used a phone that didn't send text messages. They've never had to memorize a phone number—if it isn't already programmed into their phone, they just "look it up." In their lifetime, the news has always scrolled mentions of Facebook, Twitter®, and blog posts.

And so here we are. Navigating the waters of raising teenagers when the moral and philosophical implications of this new technological reality are not yet fully realized.

And unless you live "off the grid" (Ha! It's sort of funny to imagine someone like that picking up this book!), your kids don't really have a choice about whether to engage with a social media-enriched world. Like air, it's everywhere they need to be.

More daunting for us is the reality that our children need our help navigating this emerging world. As Christian parents, we recognize that this isn't just about understanding and using technology correctly. So much of who we are and

what we know of others as members of the community and of our church, and what people know about our relationship with Jesus comes from social media. Matthew 28:19 charges us to *"Go and make disciples of all nations,"* but that "going" means something entirely different today than it has for all of human history! Social media has changed the implications of that one phrase in the past 10 years; it's an unprecedented movement that we need to grapple with as parents.

What Exactly Is Social Media?

Let's start with a definition so we're on the same page. (Get it? This is a book, and we're all on the *same page*!) Here's what Wikipedia® says:

"Social media includes web- and mobile-based technologies which are used to turn communication into interactive dialogue among organizations, communities, and individuals."[1]

Did you see what we did there? We used a social media site to define social media itself. Unlike traditional media, social media is democratic in nature, as anyone with access to the Internet can create media.

What we don't want

Less than a decade ago, we'd talk to parents of teenagers and hear things such as, "I don't allow my kids on Myspace®."

As youth pastors, that always put us in an awkward position. It wasn't just that we *suspected* that their kids were already on Myspace; more often than not, we were already connecting with them there.

This isn't 2005, and we rarely hear that sort of boundary comment from parents anymore. Instead, we hear from parents who understand that social media isn't going away; they simply need to know how it fits into their overall parenting goals and objectives.

Instead of building walls of isolation, these parents want to know how their kids can lead lives that honor God, keep them safe, and move them toward wisdom and independence.

The focus of this book, then, isn't a "circle the wagons" mentality. If you want a book to tell you the Internet is evil, you can find that elsewhere. Our goal, instead, is to move from building walls of protection to shaping a focus on

understanding social media and earning trust that moves your teenager toward adulthood.

From an adolescent development perspective, building and reinforcing walls of protection for our teenage children—no matter how well intentioned—can become counterproductive. A primary objective of adolescence is to find one's place in the world. This process, called individuation, is unavoidable from a developmental perspective, if a child is to grow into an adult.

One task of individuation is simply this: becoming one's own self. And a major component of that process is the trying on of different selves.

Each of us can look back on our teenage years and remember this process. Perhaps you were like me (Adam) and you spent a season of adolescence wearing Metallica T-shirts and skateboarding. I (Marko) went through a preppy phase, a wannabe punk phase, and even (this is embarrassing) a break dancing phase. (I thank God this phase wasn't posted and tagged on Facebook!) These were a critical part of our adolescent journeys, as we were trying to find our unique identity and place in the world. We didn't become skateboarding metalhead adults, or preppy/

punk/break dancing adults—but trying on those various selves was part of becoming who we are today.

"Individuation does not happen in a vacuum. One needs only look to any seventh grader with whom you have an inside relationship to see the beginnings of what is, at times, seemingly a split personality. He will be a class clown at school, protective older brother in the neighborhood and chief torturer of his little brother at home. He will give a head nod to family in public and fall asleep in a family member's lap on the couch at home, securely hidden from the world."[2]

The same is also true with your teenager when it comes to social media usage. For instance, she may try out creating a personality online that's different from what she displays in your home. Or perhaps he is hyper-Christian on Facebook to inspire his aunts and uncles but a real hellion at home. That's all part of trying on new selves to find who they are. (And the reason this stage is often when parents get gray hair!)

Further, research in the field of adolescent development shows that the more parents try to restrict this process of individuation, the more they often drive their teenagers toward deviance, secrecy, and a lack of communication.

In school, this often exhibits itself when teenagers create new ways to get around rules. Let's say the school has a rule that prohibits non-natural hair colors. Teenagers try to find a new way to express themselves by sticking their toes across the line, by coloring only one shock of hair, or shaving it into a naturally colored but even more distracting style.

This same phenomenon is why it isn't unusual for teenagers to have a Facebook or Twitter account that you're aware of—and then a secret, no-parents-allowed account. (More on this in Chapter 6.)

What we do want

Looking again at the big-picture goal: As Christian parents, we want our kids to grow up to experience more than healthy, happy, and simple adult relationships, don't we?

We know from our own walk with Jesus that *living* as a Christian is about much more than *behaving* like a good Christian. We aim to experience the fullness of life God offers and to live a life that brings others closer to Jesus.

As we journey together, we need a hearty, grace-filled emphasis. We don't want to merely teach our kids what

to do and what not to do. Instead, we want them to live all aspects of their lives in a way that has been transformed by the working of the Holy Spirit in their lives—as messy and scary as that is!

Along the way there are things that you'll want to help your child avoid altogether. We want this book to empower you with both understanding and practical skills you can implement right away.

But we'll also be in constant consideration of their adult faith development. We want teenagers to avoid pitfalls, but we *really* want them to grow in wisdom—and their social media usage is now an enormous part of that.

Imagine your child as a college freshman—sitting in a dorm, far from home, and intertwined in an impossible array of newfound relationships. By the time they're sitting in that place, making decisions that will impact the way they view themselves for years to come, it's really too late for rules. They need to have acquired social media wisdom by then.

With that in mind, let's begin preparing them.