

## HAVING THE TALK WHEN A CHILD WANTS TO START A BLOG

When my youngest sister messaged me to talk about how I'd finally allowed my daughter to start her blog, I was hit by that sense of cosmic parental reckoning.

In fact, I had not granted such permission, I informed the sister, who seemed to regret breaking the news. Of course, it would be the parenting and technology writer's grade-school-aged child who is publishing a blog unbeknownst to her parents.

My sister had been notified via an email sent by the fourth-grader to her "contacts" announcing her online endeavor and inviting comments. When I confronted my daughter about running an unauthorized virtual press from our laptops, she ever-so-casually responded: "Oh, weren't you on that email?"

Granted, the 10-year-old had been asking for months if she could start a blog about the environment. I had been putting off the request because I wasn't comfortable with her foray into such a public space. She got tired of waiting and took the initiative to create and launch her idea using the BlogHer network.

"No, I was NOT on that email," I said. "Don't worry," she said. Her immediate response was to reassure me that no personal information was revealed on her blog, which was focused on tips about how individuals could help the environment.

"I wanted to inform people about the environment, and this seemed like a better idea than sending an email to every single person you know," she said.

It sounded like a legitimate reason, and as a journalist I could hardly squelch her desire

### PARENTS TALK BACK



with Aisha Sultan

to inform the public.

Both my children have heard me talk repeatedly about safeguarding one's information and the difficulty of protecting one's privacy online, so I was glad to see that some of those warnings may have trickled down. We had cleared the first hurdle: She had diligently avoided revealing any information about herself in the setup and execution of her blog.

Our children are allowed access to screens only during the weekend, so she did not have much opportunity to update her blog, which consisted of a couple of posts summarizing advice from an environmental awareness book she was reading.

But we needed to discuss other potential pitfalls. I asked her if she understood what copyright meant, and how she needed to properly credit another writer's work, whether it was words, ideas, photos or art. She said she was aware and had cited the authors whose work she was discussing in her previous posts.

We talked about how to decide if a source is credible to link to or cite in your own writing. These are basic skills

she'll need to build upon as she navigates her way through the information age, and I suppose this was a hands-on learning opportunity.

I wanted to impress upon her what it means to delete after you've already published something. Did she understand that nothing truly ever "deletes" from the Internet? Surprisingly, this was a much easier concept for her to grasp than I expected.

I asked her if she understood her responsibility to post truthful information and that even if it was just her friends who read her posts, they would be trusting her judgment and ability to share accurate information.

Just as importantly, I wanted to get a sense of how she would handle the different set of rules governing social discourse that dominates the Web: If someone leaves a mean or rude comment, how do you respond?

Our conversations about her blog touched on many of the familiar themes that underlie all those talks about growing up: personal responsibility, respect for others and protecting one's self.

As children beginning to explore their own identities tend to be, she seemed fundamentally more comfortable with the risks of venturing into a new territory on her own than I was. I know she will learn from missteps and situations we haven't yet discussed.

It's a platform I could not have imagined having access to at her age. But she's already figured out a key to any fruitful publishing venture — getting readers. She showed me how to subscribe to get updates on her latest posts.