



**Question & Answer Session with Phyllis Fagell, LCPC,  
Following Online Screening of  
*Like: A Documentary About the Impact Of Social Media On Our Lives***

The Parents Council of Washington (PCW) hosted an online movie screening of *Like: A Documentary About the Impact Of Social Media On Our Lives* over a five-day period from March 30-April 3, 2020, available to parents, faculty, administrators, and staff of PCW member schools. To find more about the movie, go to [www.thelikemovie.com](http://www.thelikemovie.com).

On April 2, 2020, PCW hosted an online Q&A session with Phyllis Fagell, LCPC, counselor at PCW member Sheridan School, journalist, and author of *Middle School Matters: The 10 Key Skills Kids Need to Thrive in Middle School and Beyond - and How Parents Can Help*. The Q&A session, moderated by PCW's Ellen Patrick, took place on Zoom. Below are notes from the discussion, with questions in italics.

*Q: During this unprecedented time, kids are learning from home with the use of technology greater than ever, and social media is often the only socialization available to them. What should parents focus on and how can they best manage the current situation?*

- The pandemic has changed everything; given us a new, but not permanent reality.
- Right now it is important to make sure kids feel connected to teachers and friends.
- At worst, kids may spend too much time online.
- Take away their phone while doing school work if necessary.
- No phones at the dinner table; no phones in the bedroom. Good sleep is important.
- Different kids respond in different ways. Extroverts may feel this most because of their vast social needs; but if they have built in coping strategies, they will reach out. Introverts will likely manage because their social needs are less intense and may be met. Kids with weak social skills (e.g., those not being invited to connect over social media) will likely have the most difficult time. Find out how kids are socializing and help where needed. Make sure they are connecting with friends outside the home.
- Pay attention to what kids are doing online. Boys and girls may respond differently; some may need more parent engagement to connect with people outside the home.
- Remember that none of us are at our best when stressed, so spot check what the kids are doing and what they are putting out online.

*Q: How do you suggest parents talk with kids about social media usage without arguing, fighting, or creating conflict?*

- Establish rules in advance rather than when the kids are in the middle of a game with a friend; do not react, but wait and discuss at a different time.
- Give warnings for when usage needs to stop, recognizing screen time has increased.
- Be sure to set some technology-free time, including going outside.
- Think about your own use of technology; share observations and develop a strategy.

*Q: The movie talks about kids using social media as a means for external validation and the dopamine effect. How can we help kids get validation and fulfillment through other means?*

- Kids are insecure and do not have the ability to self-validate, so they look for validation online. Explain their brain chemistry and the dopamine effect.
- Talk about taking a break and focusing on something else.
- If they scroll through other people's lives they might feel or worry they are left out, but they are not sure if they are or not.
- Get kids on the telephone (call) not the screen (facetime).
- They are good enough as they are. Validate them. Let them know mistakes are okay.

*Q: Social media is often used as a way to numb feelings or escape difficult emotions. Why is this problematic and how can we help kids develop appropriate coping mechanisms?*

- Adults often use social media to avoid things or for a numbing effect.
- Being online can be like a rabbit hole, for kids and adults alike.
- Make sure kids understand that bad/sad feelings will pass and not stay forever.
- Kids are not accustomed to being bored; they need to understand there is value to sitting and doing nothing.
- Help them find things to do offline.

*Q: Kids are constantly using social media, which involves both good and bad. One of the negatives is the impact on self-image and the reliance on filters, photoshopping, and other alterations to produce the "perfect" image. How can we help our kids use social media differently - in positive ways - to bolster confidence?*

- Peggy Orenstein (*New York Times Magazine* writer and book author) references taking her daughter to Target and pointing out how unnatural Barbies are.
- Point out that images online are unrealistic – photoshopped and filtered – and only represent the image others want you to see.
- Focus on posts that are good, positive, or show community engagement – piecing together music, messaging with grandparents, singing happy birthday to friends.
- Some cities are doing teddy bear scavenger hunts for kids on their walks and posting reactions; others are using social media to arrange food for food banks, etc.
- Post other people's successes on social media; encourage kids to do the same. Or, for example, if a friend does something positive, encourage them to share those things, rather than pictures of parties or selfies.

*Q: We heard a lot from tweens and teens in the movie about how they use social media. What do you think adults get wrong or misunderstand about kids' online use? Can you address some of the myths and misconceptions about social media?*

- Kids do not really want to be on their phone all the time, but they do not want to be left out when others are engaged. They want to be invited and be part of something.
- Another myth is that most kids are looking to stir up drama. They really just lack the skills to handle it properly, and may not know how to regulate their interactions. If something starts, maybe with a misunderstanding, they do not know how to de-escalate. Teach kids how to make a proper apology; and let them pick their battles.

*Q: With kids and parents at home all day now, what should parents be doing to help kids stay healthy and navigate these new arrangements?*

- Help kids understand they are a part of a family; everyone needs to contribute - chores such as cooking/cleaning or helping in other ways. Let them help choose.
- Have a family discussion around values. You can find values cards online, and have each family member pick 10 cards that resonate and then rank the values. Compare. When they do not know how to deal with a situation, ask them to go back to their values and make choices based on those most important to them. [go to [www.motivationalinterviewing.org/sites/default/files/valuescardsort\\_0.pdf](http://www.motivationalinterviewing.org/sites/default/files/valuescardsort_0.pdf)]

*Q: Given how much time kids are online these days, do you have suggestions on how to deal with online bullying?*

- Teach kids they should never put online what they would not say in person.
- Remind kids that if someone is harassing them, they should ignore and block them. And, when necessary, seek help from an adult.
- Take into account how the child wants to handle the situation, and empower them to handle it on their own first, if appropriate. Contact the school and let them know if a problem cannot be resolved personally. Do not hesitate to contact the school.

*Q: Why are some kids more addicted to phones than others? How do you help them when they are feeling down on themselves?*

- It is much like how drugs affect people differently. The first thing to do, if you think there is a problem, is try to understand what needs are being met by the social media use. Are your kids healthy offline? Are they interacting with positive people online? Are they feeling down because of what they see others do and feel left out?
- The movie mentioned “JOMO” or the Joy of Missing Out – that is what we should be striving for. There is often stress and anxiety from seeing what others post online. Is it making them feel bad? If so, help them to see why. Remind them that people put forward an image that they have chosen to let others see and it is not real or worth the time and effort.
- Help them interact with people who make them feel better about themselves, and make it a priority to spend time with people in person.
- Talk about what makes a good friend. Help them recognize what actions are not serving them.

*Q: How do we help our kids have a balanced life or set priorities and goals for a balanced life?*

- We often do not have balance in our lives, and it is very complicated right now when we are stuck at home. Kids are looking at parents as role models. Are you demonstrating balance in your life -- self-care, maintaining friendships, etc.?
- Now it is key to help them with self-awareness. Who are they? Are they introverts or extroverts? What are their social needs? Help them find what they need.

*Q: How do you keep perspective during this time?*

- This is a very stressful time for kids and adults. Dr. Sonia Lupien, PhD, summarizes the causes of stress as NUTS: novelty, unpredictability, threat to the ego, and sense of control. She advocates trying to determine the cause of the stress and then coming up with steps to deal with it appropriately.
- Kids are feeling very real losses right now. Validate their feelings and remind them of the train metaphor -- emotions are like a train going through a tunnel, and the only way out is to keep going.
- There are exercises to help kids take their mind off of something bad/stressful (e.g., scripted exercises or listening to music, cleaning a room, taking a bike ride, etc.).
- In addition to teaching ways to distract, help them understand their feelings are normal. Anxiety is normal. Stress is normal. Find ways to compartmentalize the anxiety. Validate moments of joy. Let them take control of parts of their day.