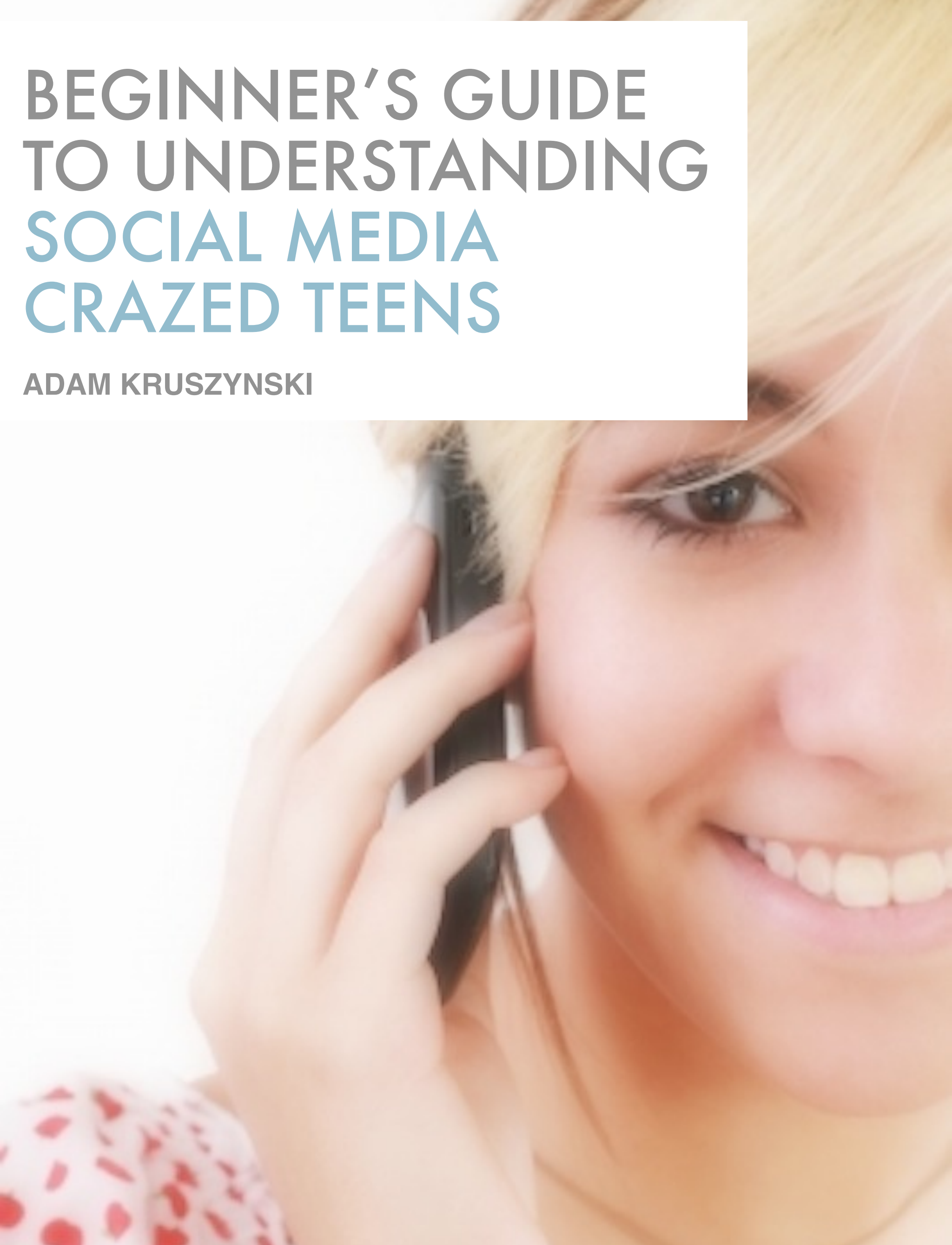# BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL MEDIA CRAZED TEENS

ADAM KRUSZYNSKI

1

INTRODUCTION FROM ROOM 507

In August 2013 I was privileged to be one of the speakers at Speak-Up, the anti-bullying / leadership conference @ MSVU in Halifax, Nova Scotia. It followed a pioneering Cyber-Safety Act issued by the Nova Scotia government back in April. I was approached to speak as a digital marketer to explain how teens use social media to a mixed crowd of educators, parents, involved community members and young people passionate about this issue.

Nobody really knew how close this topic was to my heart. I've been bullied as a geeky kid. I've been bullied as a teenager freshly immigrating to Canada. My kids get picked on and bullied too because they are mixed heritage (I'm from Poland and my wife is from Trinidad). I've always struggled with helping my kids to deal with the problem while understanding bullying is an action, not a person. Each person (including them or even myself) must choose not to bully others.

I wish I could say I'm a great parent. I'm afraid I struggle with all the same problems every parent does. I do however have an unique perspective on the topic. I am a parent of two great teenagers totally addicted to social media. I have a teaching background having taught over 1200 lecture hours for various colleges in Ontario and Nova Scotia. I also have a sociology and psychology background from University of Toronto. Lastly, my greatest advantage is my experience as a successful marketer reaching the young generation through digital and social media. Perhaps this more holistic perspective is what people really connected with. It definitely wasn't my swagger and good looks.

My session at Speak-Up got me a lot of compliments, some media interviews and invites for more speaking engagements. But the most important thing the conference did is exactly what it was supposed to. It helped me connect with other parents, educators, community members and youth totally passionate about the issue. I learned so much from many experts present there. It helped me realize how critical the issue is. More importantly, it made me realize I didn't want to stop there. I wanted to continue the conversation. I wanted to help. That's where this short book comes in. It allows us to continue the discussion I started with others in room 507 that August morning: How do we all survive our social media crazed teens?

References

Cyber-Safety Act registration April 25 2013
http://antibullying.novascotia.ca/cyber-safety-act

Nobody really knew how close this topic was to my heart. I've been bullied as a geeky kid. I've been bullied as a teenager freshly migrating to Canada. My kids get picked on and bullied too because they are mixed.

That's where this short book comes in. It allows us to continue the discussion I started with others in room 507 that August morning...

TEEN LIFE CHANGED FOREVER

Let's start with the well-observed fact that a teen's life is changed in a very profound way when they receive their first cell phone or another smart mobile device (e.g. iPod). Not only can they access the vast amount of information on the Internet, they can easily and instantaneously communicate with all their friends, they can watch videos (YouTube, Netflix, digital TV, etc.), they can play games, they can listen to their favorite music, they can express themselves (writing, photos, digital art, etc.) and they can access a multitude of social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, etc.). That single device becomes the dominant way they experience the world around them. Comparing this to our experience as parents or teachers, we accessed the world around us using books, radio, TV, phone and directly. The two experiences are quite different.

Next let's understand what this device means to a teen. Like I said, they can experience 30% to 50% of the world around them entirely through this single device (simply based on number of awake hours they spend on this device). This technical wonder in many ways becomes an extension of their life, not simply a tool they use. It contains their memories (e.g. pictures). It expresses who they are (they choose and personalize the device, graphics, cases, accessorize it, etc.). It is their private journal storing most personal thoughts and messages. It is their escape when things get hard (they turn on their music and disconnect). It is a way to bring their friends with them everywhere they go. It is even their life organizer with lists and notes and calendars. It is their fitness trainer, their scrapbook, their alarm clock, their radio, and much, much, much more. Lastly and most importantly, it is the primary tool they use to understand and form their identity during teen years. Why do they prefer to text instead of talking to you or calling you? Because texting allows them to communicate with 10 or more people at the same time. That's also why they can't just stop right on the spot. They have to tell their 10+ friends bye. This asynchronous communication is far more efficient at communicating on a mass scale. Conversations can include links, pictures and so much more.

This is why taking away this device has such a strong reaction to teens. This is why it is so critical we help them to understand and use this unique and almost magical item. Its funny how we argue the positive and negative effects of teens using these devices. It's pointless to compare efficiency, directness, quality vs quantity, or impact on our mental health vs older ways of communicating. Mobile devices have no morality. Facebook is a tool and cannot somehow discern right from wrong.

Mobile devices have no morality. Facebook is a tool and cannot somehow discern right from wrong. By themselves the mobile and social media is neither good nor bad, just our actions are.

By themselves the mobile and social media is neither good nor bad, just our actions are. Regardless of its positive and negative effects, mobile and social media is here to stay and there is extremely little we can do about it. In fact, social media is a powerful tool used to battle and help with the very issue we are tackling here. Let's focus on how to use it in the best way instead.

3

THE HEART OF THE ISSUE

I believe that understanding the heart of the issue is actually easier than expected. We're just as overwhelmed and confused (and afraid) about this topic as our kids are about life. To clarify, we must first strip all the technology, all the statistics, all the fear and all the marketing brainwashing us. Devices are not the issue. They are the means through which these problems are experienced and spread. Statistics are too narrow, too biased and changing too quickly to give us any proper insight. Our fear of the situation and technology is clouding our judgement. Most experts (I realize I'll sound like a hypocrite here) are not really offering insights, they are marketing specific solutions. You must strip away all this junk to see what is truly happening.

The heart of the issues can be found in the fact that being a teen today is very overwhelming and confusing.

The heart of the issues can be found in the fact that being a teen today is very overwhelming and confusing. First, there is too much information about anything and everything. The Internet is both a blessing and a curse. It's a blessing because we can access almost every piece of information with few touches of our finger. It's a curse because the information is so vast and people have no way to know which information is correct. It's all just there. Second, all this information and technology has no moral guideposts. It was not designed for children. Facebook is not designed to allow parental controls. Cell phones don't have filtering technology for vulgarities. All these things were designed for discerning adults making choices. Third, these same technologies make it so easy for us to share our ideas, thoughts, experiences and stories. For both good and bad, our thoughts are there for all to see. Kids harness all these tools to express themselves and form their identity.

We as a human species are evolving how we communicate.

To oversimplify what is happening, we are evolving. That's right. We as a human species are evolving how we communicate. There are scientifically proven changes to our brain physiology (ref #1). There are scientifically proven changes to our behaviour patterns like stress (ref #2). There are scientifically proven changes to how we understand, form and maintain relationships (ref #3). For right or wrong, bad or good, moral or amoral, these new technologies are shaping and changing how we are communicating with the world around us. Our connections are shorter, more frequent, more efficient (especially when reaching mass) and yes lacking physical contact. But that does NOT mean they are less real or profound. Teens feel just as heart broken in a break-up over social media as they feel over the phone or in person. The perception that digital experiences are less profound is tied to the fact that any one experience is quickly followed by waves of numerous future experiences. In marketing we call this "message decay". It's the idea that any

advertising message decays so quickly because customers are constantly bombarded with other messages.

I am also left with an unfortunate conclusion here. These mobile devices and social platforms are simply tools. As such they simply make our topics (like bullying, privacy, self-esteem) far more visible. And since they are not somehow directly responsible, the truth is that we as parents (and educators) are in fact responsible. We are equally responsible for our kids' and teen's behaviour on Facebook as we are when they are in a mall. No matter how clueless we are about mobile or social media, it does not excuse our role in our kid's lives. Let's face it. We have been very negligent. We've been pointing fingers at everything and everyone else but ourselves. Our lack of understanding about mobile and social media does not excuse us from any responsibility. Let's focus on how to collaborate and help our kids instead of fighting, blaming, or being afraid. Only we can help them.

> Let's face it. We have been very negligent. Our lack of understanding about mobile and social media does not excuse us from any responsibility.

References

Ref #1: Huffington Post article summarizing this topic: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/30/shocking-ways-internet-rewires-brain_n_4136942.html

Ref #2: Great SlideShare presentation from Radware: http://www.slideshare.net/slideshow/embed_code/28256928

Ref #3: Canadian research summarized in this National Post article: http://news.nationalpost.com/2012/03/25/is-social-media-harming-our-mental-health-researchers-wonder/

4

EMPOWERMENT VS CONTROL

I must share another unfortunate truth with you. Controlling social media behaviour in our kids is simply not attainable. Facebook does not possess any parental control features. Mobile phone do not have inappropriate language filters. All of these tools are designed for self-regulating adults, not teenagers. Yes you can force your kid to give you the phone, their passwords and review what they have been doing. Unfortunately, this method of control doesn't work for at least three reasons. First, this type of moderation is not real-time in a medium where most of behaviour is very much real-time. Moderating after-fact turns the positive process of learning into the negative process of punishment. Second, it is simply not effective. Most kids know how to cover up their tracks. They can move inappropriate pictures. They can delete bad text messages. They can clean the phone web browser history so you don't see what they were looking at. Outsmarting them using the technology they use and understand much better than us is extremely unrealistic. Third, it's counter productive. It creates conflict instead of trust and closer parent-child relationship. It will likely produce rebellion before it produces any results. It discourages the very thing a teen needs to learn, personal responsibility and self-regulation.

The key to this is trust. By trying to regulate your teen's social and mobile habits, you are trying to regulate something very personal and private to them. You either have this type of relationship with them or you don't. If you don't, they simply will not be willing to let you into this world. If you're fighting with your kids to get passwords to their cell phone or Facebook account, that's an indicator you don't have this trust. You will not be able to address any inappropriate behaviour without this. You must fix the trust issue first. If alternatively you feel your kids are simply not mature enough, I suggest you wait before giving them their mobile device or Facebook. There are plenty of potential dangers in the digital world waiting for them (predators, pornography, hate, etc.). Mobile devices and social media channels were designed primarily for responsible adults.

For those of us fortunate to have good relationships with our kids, we are left in a fortunate paradox. We as parents and educators want to help our kids with something we often barely understand ourselves. This paradox however is actually our saving grace, not our undoing. Start by accepting this process is not that of traditional parenting or teaching. This learning process can be that of an equal partnership. Your kid can teach you about mobile and social media as you teach them about being more responsible. This paradox can become the en-

We as parents and educators want to help our kids with something we often barely understand ourselves. This paradox can become the engine for growing your trust. You can mutually educate and empower each other.

gine for growing your trust. You can mutually educate and empower each other. Suddenly the conversation can change from "I don't want you to say these things on Facebook!" to "Can you teach me about Facebook and what's acceptable to say there?" and together you discover what is the appropriate behaviour.

Our effort here is that of education and empowerment, frankly for both us. We can learn all these technologies, platforms and how to use them to communicate effectively. Our kids can learn how to be more aware, discerning and responsible. What's more important here is that this journey will bring us together and develop trust. It's this trust that will change your teen more than any wisdom you can share.

5

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A PARENTING TOOL

I will have to apologize up front. Most parents will not like my next observation. It amazes me how many parents express their frustration at how little their kids communicate with them. That's preposterous. Our teens are communicating with us! In fact, they are over-communicating. Have you seen their Facebook? Have you seen their text message log? We're simply not communicating with them in a way they do it with the rest of the world around them. Text them. Do a post on their Facebook wall or tag them in a picture. Send them a Twitter message. Then watch them respond. They absolutely are communicating with you. You're the one not listening. More importantly recognize that if they text you, they are reaching out. Try reading between the lines. If they post a message on Facebook, they are in fact communicating with you (among other people). When they post a picture on Instagram with you in it, recognize they are expressing excitement at that memory.

Now go a step further. Reciprocate by communicating back in the way they prefer. Text them to remind them of their chores rather than nagging them in person and requesting immediate attention. Share your memories of them on Facebook so they can respond and share them with others. Read their posts and LIKE them, comment on them and be excited about them. Ironically, one of the simplest ways teens will begin watching what they say on Facebook is when they know their parents care to read everything posted there. Do you want to know which boy likes your daughter? Simply watch which one comments the most on her posts. The more you engage with them in these little ways (within reason of course), the more they will communicate back with you. You have to learn these new technologies and platforms precisely to communicate with your kids and future grandkids. Yes, you will still have family dinners and Christmas but all these moments in-between are just as important.

The most important thing you can do on mobile and social media is to exemplify the behaviour you want your kids to copy. We fear how mean people can be on Facebook. Well, be the most positive influence to your teens there. Be the person they can always count on for a supportive comment, on your attentiveness, on your responsiveness, on your honesty and kindness. They will not only appreciate, but also begin to model your behaviour.

6

SOCIAL MEDIA AS AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL

Teens are a very difficult age group to teach. Hormones. Rebellion. Stress. Relationships. Drugs and substance abuse. Puberty. So many distractions. Forming personal identity. Pressure with grades, choosing an university and personal appearance. It's a miracle these kids retain anything we share with them. These kids are totally overwhelmed with so much change in their life.

We educators now have another way to reach our students after they leave school. It's called Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.

This is precisely why social media can help with the educational process. It's a simple age-old principle used in marketing: the more times your message is seen, the more it will be remembered / recalled, the more it will change their behaviour. That's precisely why we marketers bombard you with ads everywhere you go. Not because we know you love them! It's because you are so busy and distracted that we have to bury you in our messages before you actually pay attention to them and do anything about it. Well guess what? We educators now have another way to reach our students after they leave school. It's called Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. This is not to add to our already heavy load. This is to replace other less-effective ways of communicating with our students like handouts, whiteboard reminders and even email.

There are already a number of research studies and educational experiments pertaining to this matter. In particular, a pilot program from Portland, Oregon saw very positive impact from using mobile and social media to aid their education process: 50% increase in grades, 33% reduction in chronic absenteeism and 20% more students were completing extra assignment for no credit.
http://www.centerdigitaled.com/classtech/Portland-Project.html

Let us harness social and mobile media to help our teens learn. Now let's go pass one-way communication to engagement.

Let us harness social and mobile media to help our teens learn. There is so much we can do with it. We can start with sharing our curriculum / course information via blog, promote it on Facebook / Twitter, use social media as actual course content and use mobile text for reminders. Now let's go pass one-way communication to engagement. We can ask thought provoking course-related questions via social media to keep students stimulated and thinking about the content after school. We can ask them to participate in a blog instead of writing an essay. We can create and run debates on Facebook also providing a clear way for spectators to show their support (via LIKEs & comments). We can use Pinterest boards or Instragram as research scrapbooks. I would need an entire book just to write down all the things we can do here. You can encourage student questions via Facebook or Twitter instead of waiting for them to ask you the next day in school (they will forget).

It's called gamification. Anyone teaching pre-school knows to use stickers and small rewards to keep your kids focused and reinforce positive behaviours. This is no different.

There is another trend in social and mobile media we can use in education. It's called gamification, the use of game mechanics in a non-game contest specifically to engage the user. More specifically the micro-motivators aspect of gamification. Now, this is nothing new. Anyone teaching pre-school knows to use stickers and small rewards to keep your kids focused and reinforce positive behaviours. This is no different. Teens are just as distracted by everything they are learning and experiencing. They are just as confused about appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. What's different is what those micro-motivators are and how they are executed through social and mobile media. Our stickers translate into LIKEs on Facebook posts or favoring specific Twitter posts. Our recognition / reinforcement of proper behaviour translates into encouraging comments on teen's posts.

A few words of caution here. Consider anything you say to be public, even if it has been sent as a private message. Anything you send can be captured, shared and even used against you. For that reason, focus on encouragements and providing information. Avoid any negative comments. Those should still be handled in person. Lastly, you can still keep your private life separate by having two profiles (Facebook / Twitter / etc.) or creating dedicated school focused presences that don't creep into your personal activity (e.g. using Facebook Groups). Understand however that your students will most likely not separate the two.

WORKING TOGETHER

Our dream must be bigger than the dreams hollywood and music is selling to our teens right now. Same as we have done with smoking, we must show that physical and emotional abuse is not cool.

We have to work together to help our children. I understand that parents and educators often feel unequipped handling mobile and social media topic with teenagers, especially when they themselves are not comfortable with technology. The evolution of how we communicate (including all the technology) simply outpaced our ability to develop appropriate curriculum or even parenting guidelines. Even our communities, politicians and authorities are often confused about how to deal with these matters. We are so frustrated we are already pointing fingers at each other in blame. We pressure policy makers to address the issue we ourselves are not always willing to address at home. Aside for making ourselves feel less guilty, I see no benefit to any of these actions.

Let's start from scratch then. Educators, parents, community leaders and youth... we must all work together. Same as the last chapter, we must remain open minded. We must dream a better dream. Then we must have the courage to follow it. Our dream will continue evolving as humanity evolves. Our dream must be bigger than the dreams hollywood and music is selling to our teens right now. Same as we have done with smoking, we must show that physical and emotional abuse is not cool. We must show that violence is not the best way to resolve conflict. We must show it is simply stupid. In fact our dream must be so big as to inspire a new generation of music and entertainment. Our dream must show a better way.

What does our dream look like? That's a hard question. We all dream slightly different dreams. Our definition of morality and appropriate behaviour is different. I will however share with you my dream. It is the dream I dream for my children.

I dream of a world where we are tolerant and encouraging of each person's journey to become something much greater than we or they can ever imagine.

I dream of a world where duality applies to actions, but not to people. Where choices and acts are right or wrong, peaceful or violent, kind or mean. Yet there is no separation of people by us vs them, white vs black, gay vs straight, even friend vs enemy. This duality is what breaks and keeps us apart instead of bringing us together. I dream of a world where we are tolerant and encouraging of each person's journey to become something much greater than we or they can ever imagine. Where we do reinforce the positive and discourage the negative but without forcing the direction of the journey or limiting the boundaries of its creative outcome. I dream of a world without anger, conflict, or prejudice... yet I know that this world including myself is not capable of it. I guess I hope our kids can dream dreams much better than ours. That is why I dream that our kids can overcome the limitations and faults of my generation.

8

WHERE IS THIS ALL GOING?

The question "Where is this all going?" haunts us, doesn't it? We don't know the answer to this question and it terrifies us. We fear this technology already makes us more disconnected from our kids. We fear how this will impact their personal and professional future. We fear we cannot effectively help them in their journey. We even fear for ourselves becoming more irrelevant and obsolete as the entire world is going digital.

Do not let this fear cloud your evaluation of what is happening or decisions on how to succeed in this situation. Go back to the heart of the issue (third chapter). Technology will keep changing. Stats will keep growing. Marketing evangelists will keep preaching. Despite all these, the heart is easy to understand and will remain the same. We are overwhelmed by information and things will only get worse. Platforms may change but this trend will not. We, the human race, are evolving how we communicate. Devices may change but this trend will not. As with any significant change, we need to come together. The world will change but this will not.

What do you need when going through a tremendous period of change? I believe you need an open mind, a positive vision for the future and the courage to pursue it. Let's break this down. You must start with an open mind. This will allow you to adapt and succeed in a rapidly changing environment. In practical terms, you have to find ways to embrace technology, mobile devices and social media (rather than rejecting them). In this aspect learn FROM your teenagers. Next you need a positive vision of the future. That vision can only be realized once you embrace the change. In this case, you must focus on all the opportunities the mobile / social media is bringing and how it can improve human life. Here are some examples: ability to remain connected over great distances (e.g. via Skype, Facetime, Google Hangouts), ability to achieve freedom of speech for those oppressed in third world countries (e.g. Twitter used to inform the world about crisis in Syria or China or other countries), the richness and ease of self-expression resulting in wonderful art (e.g. ideas, books, drawing, designs so freely shared online), ease of global education for all regardless of their situation (e.g. anyone with Internet access can learn things online and many educational institutions provide free online courses, including some high-profile universities like Oxford and MIT) and so much more. Each one of us dreams a different dream. Again, the mobile and social media is amoral. We cannot force our morality onto this media. We can simply choose how we use it. What dream can you dream for yourself and your children? Lastly, once you have a dream, you must have the cour-

age to follow it. You must act for your own benefit and for your child's benefit. If you don't, you are (as I said before) being totally negligent.

This book is one of the many ways I choose to follow a dream for my children. I invest time learning how they use social and mobile media, what content they consume (e.g. music they listen to online), what tools they use (e.g. Facebook, Instagram), who they talk to on regular basis and much more. As they teach me, we dream of a better world that in turn shapes their behaviour (without me nagging them constantly). The most wonderful way you can help your teenager is to give them a vision of the future so inspiring, it eclipses this noisy world.

The most wonderful way you can help your teenager is to give them a vision of the future so inspiring, it eclipses this noisy world.

RESOURCES
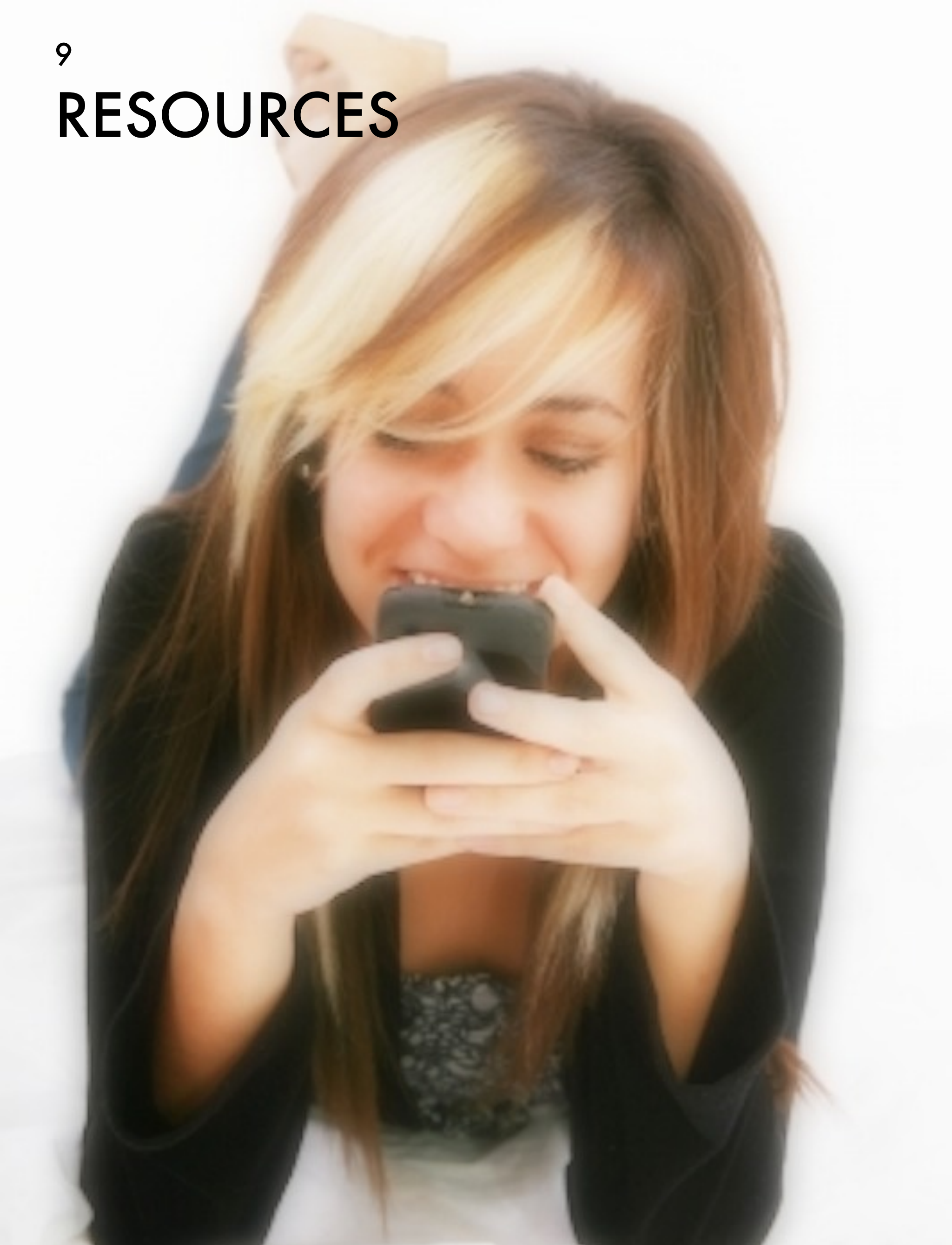
For Parents

Australian national educational program designed for parents, teens, teachers and more.
http://www.cybersmart.gov.au/

Government of Alberta Canada bullying prevention website.
http://www.bullyfreealberta.ca/

Internet Savvy Training course for parents teaching their children how to responsibly use social media and technology (provided by Government of Alberta).
http://humanservices.alberta.ca/InternetSafety/internetsavvy.html

UK charity helping families deal with changes part of raising children. They provide non-judgemental support by email, chat, phone, and more.
http://familylives.org.uk/advice/teenagers/

Dannielle Miller is an expert on teenage girls. As an educator, a businesswoman and a mother she's helping parents raise amazing girls.
http://www.danniellemiller.com/

For Educators

European non-profit organization bringing innovation in teaching and learning to ministries, schools, teachers, researchers, and more.
http://www.eun.org/teaching/smile

Eric Qualman is an international speaker about the power of Social Media in education.
http://www.socialnomics.net/2013/03/11/how-can-social-media-be-used-in-education/

Facebook resources for education by Facebook
https://www.facebook.com/education

Schoology is a social media educational platform providing unparalleled educational experience that improves student outcomes.
https://www.schoology.com/

Adam Renfro's digital magazine (Flipboard) about how teachers can use technology and social media in their classroom.
https://flipboard.com/section/edu-nation-beQp3C

CREDITS

Dedication

Love to my social media crazy teens, Faithe and Matthew Kruszynski, for teaching me so much about social media.

Kudos & Thank You's

Thank you to my wife Natasha for supporting me through the journey of writing this book.

Thank you Speak-Up Conference @ MSVU in Halifax Nova Scotia for starting the conversation.

Big thank you to Tracy Albiston for editing and proofing this book. She owns and operates an awesome source for interesting articles, author biographies and reviews of Christian, inspirational, romantic, & historical fiction: http://www.tracysbooknook.com

Kudos to government of Nova Scotia Canada for their Cyber-safety Act.
http://antibullying.novascotia.ca/cyber-safety-act

Kudos to Kids Help Phone for being there our children.
http://www.kidshelpphone.ca/

Images courtesy of FreeDigitalPhotos.net

Ambro http://www.freedigitalphotos.net/images/view_photog.php?photogid=1499

David Castillo Dominici http://www.freedigitalphotos.net/images/view_photog.php?photogid=3062

imagerymajestic http://www.freedigitalphotos.net/images/view_photog.php?photogid=3849

stockimages http://www.freedigitalphotos.net/images/view_photog.php?photogid=4096