Summer lends itself to being active and enjoying the outdoors. However, when the heat cranks up high or the much-needed rain falls, we tend to find indoor activities to keep up entertain. Our teens and young children follow the same pattern, but perhaps choose different activities to engage in. One of the more common activities for young children and especially teens is using Internet and communication technologies.

According to the Pew Research Center's findings from their Internet & American Life project, 95% of all teens in America are online. This percentage has held constant since 2006. Of those 95%, three quarters of them access the internet on cell phones, tablets, and other mobile devices. Additionally, 71 % of teens (age 12 – 17) in America use computers shared with family members and 23% of them have a tablet computer.

Internet use for this age population is increasing in mobility. Seventy-eight percent of teens have a cell phone and 74% are "mobile internet users" who report that they access the internet on tablets, cell phones and other mobile devices. The use of social media, in general, has increased over the past few years. Facebook use from 2011 to 2012 increased from 93% to 94% and Twitter more than doubled in the same time span from 12% to 26%.

This data impacts the need for internet supervision and safety in a significant way. Teenagers have become even more vulnerable to a variety of risks due to their increased use of the Internet. Some of those risks include:

Bullying and harassment: When a teen's social media accounts are left unmonitored by parents, teens are left exposed to potential messages that are demeaning, indecent, violent, or even racist. A teen's perception of the meaning behind messages is often skewed. They may not realize the implied meaning of some of the messages they receive.

Mixed-up relationships: Just as there are "predators" in our public environments, there are likewise "predators" looking for their next target on the Internet. Just because a girl is told she is instant messaging a 15-year old boy, doesn't assure her that it is true. In fact, it is common practice for Internet predators to modify their profile based the person they are communicating with. Parents can help guide their teens as they explore the social media culture.

Becoming a victim: The Pew Internet Research group states that teens are more likely than children to become victims of child molesters or other exploiters. Teens are often lured into move the relationship past technology and in to the real world as they give out personal information that allows predators to stalk them online or meet them in person.

Inappropriate websites: The Kaiser Family Foundation cites their research reveals that 70% of 15-17 year olds have accidently accessed pornography on the Internet.

Financial risks: Because teens are vulnerable to giving out parents' credit card, banking, or other financial information, they can fall victim to financial fraud. They need to be aware of this risk and approach "free offers" and other marketing ploys with great caution.

Parents can take action to help reduce the risks posed to their teens when they are online. First, every parent should strive to know as much as they can about Internet and the communication technologies their children are using. By "meeting them where they are at", teens and parents can have an open conversation about Internet risks and benefits.

Parents need to help teens understand that, regardless of the device being used, the risks they are exposed to remain constant. Using their smart phone to access the internet rather than a laptop will not protect them from predators or scams.

Basic Internet rules should be clearly defined and consistently upheld. When parents develop an Internet Safety and Use plan with their teen's input, the level of the teen's buy-in is significantly improved. By reminding teens of the reasons behind the need for the rules, parents are keeping the safety of the teen at the forefront of their minds.

Don't allow teens to sleep close to their cell phone. I know that they will NOT like this rule, but it is important that they understand the boundaries of communication and the importance of sleep in being functional and alert at work, school, or home. I have a friend that requires everyone (parents, too!) to "check in" their phones every night. The chargers are lined up on the kitchen counter top and are required to remain there until the next morning. Even if this rule gets a rocky start, it is an important part of parents monitoring teen use of technology and the Internet.

Keeping the home computer in a fully visible and public location in the house proves helpful in monitoring Internet use. Checking the history of what Internet sites have been accessed is another helpful tool. Full disclosure of how you, as a parent, are monitoring sites and Internet use, will help support your teen's efforts to be careful while online. Using protective software that blocks, monitors, and/or filters websites provides an additional layer of safety.

Communicating with teens about the dangers in using the Internet and concerns you have as their parent (or other important adults in their lives) is a good way to help teens make good decisions. Approach the topic from an "advisor" perspective instead of from an authoritarian parent viewpoint. Establish ground rules that are fair, relevant, and intentional. Explain the risks that your are trying to protect them from and teach them how to protect themselves online, as well.

If you have questions about parenting children of all ages, feel free to contact me at the Geary County Extension Office 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!