

# Common Sense on Celebrity Role Models

## Kids look to celebrities for role models

Kids have always looked to celebrities as role models. Now that kids are immersed in the 24/7 media world at younger and younger ages, these role models play an even bigger role. Everywhere kids turn, they see images and hear reports about their idols. And now that social sites like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube allow celebrities a no-holds-barred way to communicate directly with their fans. Kids are often left alone to make sense of it all — or they turn to their peers to figure out what's happening. The results aren't pretty.

### Some facts

By the time our kids are in middle school, they start to look to their peers for a sense of what's socially acceptable or desirable.

Kids choose public personas as role models, but there are no guarantees that a star will stick to a lifestyle that kids can look up to — or that parents will approve of.

Studies show a direct link between role models, advertising, and the effects that both have on our kids' behavior.

Celebrities use the Internet to communicate directly with their fans.

## Media is one gigantic super-peer

By the time our kids are in middle school, they start to look to their peers for a sense of what's socially acceptable or desirable. Parents may remain the primary influence in their kids' lives, but the competition starts to get fierce at this age. This separation is entirely age appropriate, but when the media comes into play, all sorts of things can go awry. Studies repeatedly show a direct link between role models and advertising, and the effects they have on kids' behavior. Take smoking, for example. Studies show that exposure to pro-tobacco marketing and smoking in the media more than doubles the odds that kids will start smoking. And half of kids who start smoking say they do so because they saw someone they looked up to smoking in the movies.

## Underestimating celebrity influence

We already know how advertising impacts teens, so why should we underestimate the influence of today's young celebrities? Thanks to celebrity blogs and gossip sites, scandalous pictures are leaked online, commented on, updated, and archived — and available to kids of all ages. The media's constant coverage of celebrity scandals further normalizes this type of activity and can influence the way young people make decisions about their own behavior. For example, 22% of teen girls now say that they've sent sexually revealing pictures of themselves through their mobile phones or over the Internet.

## Parent tips for all kids

- » **Grab the headlines, and make them teachable moments.** If you see teen drinking on a TV show — or you see pictures on the Internet of celebs smoking pot or getting arrested for drunk driving — check in with your kids. For young kids, see how much they understand. Grade schoolers get a lot of confusing information from their peers, so set the facts straight. For preteens, turn celebrity misbehavior into a teachable moment by letting them know what you think about the behavior. And for teens, ask questions. For example, if a celebrity they like is in trouble with alcohol, ask whether their peers are using alcohol or whether they have any anxieties or questions about drinking. Take time to share your opinions — and expectations — about the issues.
- » **Use the power of consequences.** Point out when a celebrity is suspended or loses endorsements as the result of questionable behavior. Establish consequences in for what would happen in your own home if your child behaved just like their favorite star. Tell your teens the facts: not all consequences involve being grounded. Explain that poor decisions now can lead to a reputation that can hurt them later.
- » **Watch your messages.** Be a good role model for your kids. Make sure that you don't glamorize alcohol or drugs by sharing stories about "wild days" in your past. If teens ask about your personal experiences, answer their questions honestly, but don't say more than you need to. They may act as if they don't listen to you (after all, their rooms are still a mess), but they do.
- » **Have a media literacy moment.** Point out that the media uses stars' misbehavior to make money. The more people turn to Web sites and TV networks for pictures and gossip, the more money the companies behind the sites and channels make. Ask your kids why they think these stars get so much attention and whether they believe the stories they hear about their favorite stars.
- » **Impart your values.** Yes, it may sound old fashioned. But our kids need us to tell them what matters to us and why. That's the essence of parenting. Face it: They spend more time with media than with you or in school. Equal the playing field. Speak up — often.
- » **Look out for endorsements.** Lots of celebrities cash in on their fame to endorse products in their Twitter feed or Facebook profile. Help kids detect the difference between ads and legitimate content.