

Common Sense on High-Tech Cheating

Some facts

83% of 13- to 17-year-olds have cell phones;
53% have had them since they were 12 or younger.

More than 35% admitted to using their cell phones to cheat.

52% admitted to some form of cheating involving the Internet

38% said they copied text from Web sites and turned it in as their own work.

65% of students with cell phones say they use them at school, but only 23% of parents think their children use cell phones during school hours.

69% of schools have policies that don't permit cell phone use, but more than half of all kids ignore them.

(All of the above refer to teens 13-17 and are from *Common Sense Media, 2009.*)

What is digital cheating?

Personal technologies have been real game-changers for schoolwork. Information has never been easier to access, and computers provide powerful tools for presentation, collaboration, and creativity. Many people believe that the mobile phone also has potential as a learning tool.

But an unintended consequence of these versatile technologies is that they've made cheating easier. Although cheating has been going on for years, cell phones and the Internet offer new opportunities for unethical behavior. Some kids use mobile phones to store notes. Some text friends about answers during quizzes or tests. Others take pictures of test questions, which can be forwarded to students who haven't yet taken the test. Kids with smart phones can even search the Internet for answers. Some kids say they don't even realize they're taking shortcuts when they copy and paste material they find online and present it as their own work.

Why it matters

Our kids are the pioneers in a new world that has few rules. We want our children to grow up knowing right from wrong, no matter where they are. We need to be sure that they know personal responsibility is as real in cyberspace as it is in the classroom. Digital life — particularly the Internet and mobile phones — operates in new ways. Much of what kids do is anonymous, which can sever consequences from actions. Anything they post or create can be seen by a vast invisible audience. Their work can be copied, pasted, altered, and sent to countless people. They can also copy and paste others' work in a split second.

Because kids have unfiltered access to information, the temptation to use other people's work and call it their own can be profound. And since so much of the cyber world happens distantly, plagiarizing or cheating can seem like a victimless crime. Kids think they can "get away with it" because they believe their teachers, parents, and the people whose work they've cribbed won't discover what they've done.

What parents can do

- » **Be aware that when you hand your children phones, you're giving them communications superpowers.** Gone are the days when kids used cell phones just to talk. They text, take pictures and videos, and sometimes access the Internet.
- » **Do your homework.** It's up to you to know what your kids are doing with the technology they have. So make sure you understand what that technology is capable of doing. Make restrictions when you feel they're important. For example, just because their friends have phones that can search the Internet doesn't mean your kids have to have the same capabilities.
- » **Don't assume that your children automatically know what's right and wrong.** The digital world operates with different rules — that is, wherever rules even exist. Establish rules about use right from the start. Make sure kids have cited their material, clearly indicating where they found that statistic, that insight, that map. Be explicit about what is and isn't acceptable behavior. Don't assume they know. And make sure you have real consequences for breaking the rules. (Hint: Taking the phone away works every time.)
- » **If you suspect your child is cheating, consider checking the phone.** A look at the pictures and the text messages will let you know if something's going on. But be aware that this is big-league snooping. Establish some expectations with your children ahead of time by letting them know that if you think something's amiss, you're going to check it out.
- » **Review school policies.** Most schools have clearly established consequences for anyone caught plagiarizing or cheating. In fact, many schools have software that can tell if someone's "lifted" material and presented it as their own. Tell your children you expect them to live by the established rules. Review the school consequences — from having to redo a paper to expulsion — and set up some additional home consequences for any violations.
- » **Even if you think they would never cheat, have the talk.** You can ask your kids if they know of anyone who's cheated (they'll be more likely to talk about others than themselves). Ask them why they think anyone would cheat and what they get out of it in the long term. It never hurts to reinforce that digital cheating is still cheating.