



**How will this
post make my
friends feel?**

parenting in a digital age IV

CHRIS PARKER

Does our family dialogue clearly highlight the Christ-honouring practice of reaching out self-sacrificially to others?

You have no doubt already considered what I am about to 'say'. However, it's still worth highlighting and considering its implications for parenting. Here it is; everyone's life on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and (insert social media of choice) seems so good, if not perfect, by comparison to mine! If one of our roles as parents is to nurture and cultivate resilience and godly contentment in our children, we need to consider how we are training and equipping them to navigate their social media use: including their processing of this happy-bias.

The truth is, we all do it. Your life online probably looks a little rosier to your 'friends' than theirs does. We all have a tendency to post and share the good things that are going on for us. This happens for a number of reasons. One is that social networking technologies are designed in a way that promotes this practice—they are, by design, about positive self-promotion. Another is that sharing the fluffy, fun things of life is what we do when we share with the people we don't know deeply—we're not going to share in a way that makes us vulnerable to a large group of people we don't really know. So on social media, we stick to posting the things that portray us as having a fun life and that make us seem 'cool'.

It probably shouldn't come as too much surprise then, that not only are psychologists increasingly speaking about the effects on young people of having less close, rubber-hits-the-road relationships than previous generations (even if they have hundreds of 'friends'), but they are also reporting seeing increased general levels of anxiety: particularly in teenagers. How much does the constant immersion in a social networking mosaic of other peoples' fun, happy, sexy, successful, beautiful, fit, 'blessed' lives provide a niggling source of comparison that leads to disillusionment and possibly low-grade depression.

Are we talking to our teenagers about this? Are we doing what we can to equip them with the road map they need to navigate through this rugged terrain? This is difficult territory even for adults, let alone for teens who are walking through the valley of anxious self-identification and wondering where they fit in God's world. Are we creating family 'conversations' that remind everyone that God doesn't promise that life will always be perfect and that struggle, mess, and ordinariness this side of the fall are guaranteed. Does our family dialogue clearly highlight the truth that our identity is not found in shallow reflections from others—as defined by the number of likes and comments—but

from the deep and beautiful truth that we are designed, made, and loved by God, and that our true identity is to be found in unity with His son, Jesus?

A neglected question

The above questions are important to ask. However, there is another important question that flows from our pursuit of Christ-likeness. It is this, "When we are about to post or share something online, do we ask the question, 'How will this make my friends feel?'" I don't mean feel about you I mean feel about themselves! When you share some aspect of your life and how cool or wonderful it is, how is it received by a 'friend' whose life is not wonderful in that way—and will never be? This is not suggesting a hiding of good things. It's a recognition that when we share in a real-life, face-to-face way, there is the capacity for greater depth, listening, empathy, and reading of body language, that shallow social media sharing doesn't allow. There can be a removed, one-way sharing of the good thing online that ends up feeling a little like bragging.

Our teens can be immersed in social media. Are we talking to them about this? Are we modelling to them through our social media use an opportunity to serve and build others up (which might even mean at times not posting)? Does our family dialogue clearly highlight the Christ-honouring practice of reaching out self-sacrificially to others?

A final thought

I finish with what is perhaps a contentious—and some might say naive—question, "Do our children really need social media accounts at all?". For many of you the horse has bolted, but if you are not there yet as a parent, it might be worth doing a cost-benefit analysis. There is a truckload of potential 'costs' that are tending to draw us away from the flourishing life God has designed for us. Do the benefits weigh up?

To download a free chapter, "Technology", from Chris Parker's book *The Frog and The Fish*, visit thefrogandthefish.com/resources. *

Chris is the author of *The Frog and The Fish: Reflections on work, technology, sex, stuff, truth, and happiness*. He is also the editor of *The Christian Teachers Journal* and CEN Professional Learning Coordinator. Chris and his wife Coco live in the Blue Mountains. They have two children (16 and 14) and a growing collection of ukuleles.

