The Golden Rule in Cyberspace

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Monica had worked hard in high school and earned good grades. She was involved in school activities and even held some leadership positions. After school and during the summers, Monica volunteered at a nursing home. Applying to her favorite college, she thought for sure she would be accepted. Instead, Monica received a letter denying her admission, shattering her dreams of attending that college.

Like hundreds of other colleges and employers, the college Monica applied to checks social networking sites. The admissions board was able to read many of Monica's posts and found that several were harsh toward other students. What Monica did not know or did not care about ended up costing her.

Most of our teens know how to work with technology but few realize how technology works. As parents and educators who love our teens, it is part of our job to educate them that what they post online can change the course of their lives. Here are some tips to share with our beloved teens:

1. Many colleges, employers and even ministries are checking social networking sites before admission or hiring. Because teens do not have an extensive work history, information from these sites are given much weight.
2. Everything that is posted on the internet, social networking sites, e-mail, and even texts are there forever.
3. Posts are accessible to everyone with a little knowledge and a computer. Recently, I met someone whose account on a prominent social networking site had been hacked into by a "friend."
4. Be careful of what you post. It used to be that unkind words were spread from person to person directly. This talk usually died off in a few days and was relatively confined to a few people. Now with technology, harsh words can literally reach hundreds of people in a matter of minutes. It becomes harder to repair friendships once this happens.
5. When we post something on a site or text message, communication is only one dimensional. We do not know exactly what the sender means because we cannot hear their tone of voice or see body language. Even emoticons do not communicate everything. It can be easy to bite back if we feel we have been wronged. Technology does not force us to look someone in the eye and deal with the issue squarely. Therefore, it can be more difficult to give our friends the benefit of the doubt.

6. Instead of firing off a hurtful text or post, wait until you are calm and address issues in person. Give the other person room to explain and ask, "What did you mean when you wrote…?"

For those who have already crossed the line and have some harsh posts, take them off your wall immediately. These negative posts can only lead to further destruction. In the future, remember that any electronic communication will have a life of its own and can be sent to people that you did not choose. The golden rule of treating others the way we want to be treated also applies to cyberspace. If that is hard, imagine your grandmother or your pastor sitting next to you when you are texting or on line. ☺