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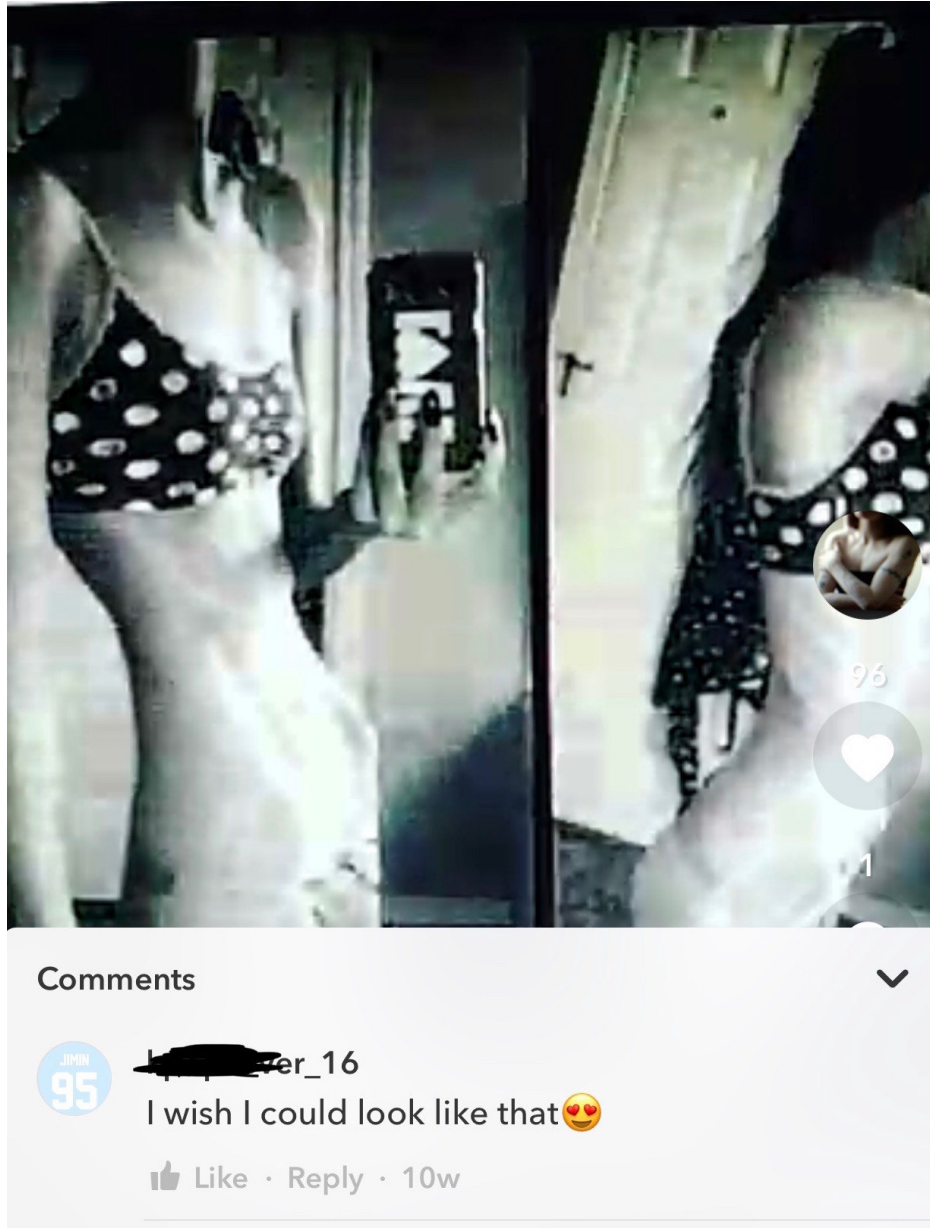
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Is the Town Prude. She's written a guide to keeping your kids off social media. Get it here:.

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Porn Is Not the Worst Thing on Musical.ly



A screenshot I captured on Musical.ly.

My daughter is ten. She wants me to download the Musical.ly app on my phone so she can make funny lip-sync videos. *Everyone has it, she whines, even the kid whose mom is an FBI agent/social worker/pediatrician/nun.*

Wow. Well. In that case...

I download the app while she's at school but it won't let me explore without an account. I create a profile under Chardonaynay47, only to

delete that and opt for something less momish—gummibear9.

One word sums up my experience: *Nowayismykidgettingthisapp*.

Musical.ly looks innocent—just kids making music videos, and it is that, but more so it's this: user uploaded content by millions of people who can also live stream, which is how I first encountered porn on Musical.ly. A very helpful naked man live-streamed his live stream (if you know what I mean).

Kids are going to see it eventually, right? Might as well let them see it now. Might as well get them drunk while we're at it. And high. Can't keep them bubble-wrapped forever. Eight-year-olds have been diaper-free for five years; if you can pee in a potty, you can hold your own online. *Amiright?*

Friends who worry I'm over-reacting suggest I make the account private to keep pedophiles at bay, but pedophiles are not my main concern. Here's why: Pretend you can turn your kid invisible. Pretend you drop your invisible kid off at a warehouse in downtown LA. You have no idea who's inside—fingers crossed it's packed with Nobel Peace Prize winners, board certified pediatricians, and J.K. Rowling. Pray it is *not* packed with the worst of humanity. No one can see your kid, but your kid can see everyone and hear everything.

Would you do it?

Of course you wouldn't. Most parents are careful about who and what their child is exposed to. Setting your child's account to private may make him invisible, but he's still there, fully present, taking it all in.

"Excuse me, where can I find a vampire copulating with a cartoon bear?"

"Aisle 19, section B, left side of infinite content."

"Thank you."

"No problem. My name is Social Media. Feel free to browse the personal photos, videos, and mouth diarrhea—I mean comments—of my two billion

users.”

Social media is the Costco of human imagination. Remember that song from *Willy Wonka & The Chocolate Factory*? “Come with me / and you’ll be / in a world of pure imagination...” Sounds lovely. Until you consider whose imagination your kid is stepping into.

Ahh. But my child can’t Google naked people or watch violent videos on YouTube because I’ve enabled parental controls.

Good for you. Unfortunately, parental controls couldn’t keep 12-year-old Gabbie Green from killing herself after being cyberbullied by kids on several social media platforms and messaging apps. There are no “parental controls” for Snapchat, Instagram, Musical.ly, Facebook, Kik, nor do they exist on messaging apps like Marco Polo, or Yellow, or SayAt.me, or Monkey. The list goes on and on. And no, you can’t always review what your kid says (or what’s said to your kid) because most of it can be deleted or deletes itself directly after transmission.

Question: do you want my kid to have access to your kid 24/7?

Good. Because I don’t want your kid having that kind of access to my kid either. Tweens and teens have an underdeveloped frontal cortex. They’re impulsive and self-centered. They make terrible decisions and they can be meaner than a bull shark. Also, their conflict-management skills are lousy. Sixth graders have yet to master the skill of fully rinsing conditioner from their hair, and we’re giving them the power of unfettered public expression? Even our President can’t control himself online, and he’s a stable genius.

Clearly, we need to be careful who we give power to.

But back to Musical.ly...

Porn is not the worst thing on Musical.ly

The worst thing is watching little kids (as young as eight) sexually objectify themselves. The kids who get it right (the tweeny Kardashians) gain followers. The kids who get it wrong—those not “sexy” enough, funny enough, savvy enough—are openly ridiculed in the comment section. Worse, their “cringe-worthy” lip sync may be immortalized in “Musical.ly Cringe Compilation” videos on YouTube. Some of these cringe compilations have upwards of five million views. My heart hurts not only for the exploited children, but for all kids who scroll Musical.ly (or YouTube) and see this kind of ugly play out.

It gets worse...

There’s code language that gets past Musical.ly’s filters. Some kids hashtag their videos with words like *thot*—shorthand for *That Ho Over There*—or *fgirl*, *hottie*, *sxy*, *whooty*, or *sin*. But good luck keeping up, the code changes week-to-week. And then there are lyrics—stop reading now if you’re easily put off—there are kids mouthing words about rough sex. I saw a boy around the age of nine, maybe ten, create a user name that was so sexually graphic I had a hard time processing what I was seeing. A little boy. Not a teenager. A boy.

...And much worse

There are #killingstalking musical.lys, which are dark-themed (artistic? emo?) videos showing boys putting knives to girls’ throats. There are #selfharm videos that show suicide options—bathtubs filling, images of blades, a child’s voice saying she doesn’t want to live any more. I saw a boy with a bleeding chest (yes, real blood). I saw a young girl whose thighs were so cut up I had to take a break from writing this article. A long break. The images are deeply upsetting. There are #cutter and #triggerwarning and #anorexic videos. Musers with eating disorders hashtag videos using *proana* (code for pro anorexia.) I found over eleven thousand #selfhate videos. It goes on and on. Each hashtag is its own magical wardrobe, a portal into a world *where it’s always winter but never Christmas*. It’s Narnia minus Aslan. Who then will save the children? Apparently, other children.

Little kids try to save slightly older little kids on Musical.ly (Yes, I meant to write that sentence)

Their effort might seem beautiful, hopeful even, but it isn't. A child stepping into the darkness of another child is not beautiful, it's *wrong*. I saw this comment beneath a #suicide video: “u r beautiful plz dont kill urself im only 10 but i will b ur friend.” Kids should be watching witty cartoons, riding bikes, making slime, doing art, playing Minecraft, learning chess, and boring us with bad magic tricks. They shouldn't be stopping other kids from killing themselves.

Am I being dramatic?

I'll leave that up to you, on one condition. Give weeks of your life to these hashtags. Crawl inside the world of #fgirl and #cutting. Stay a while. Remember, content changes so you can't pop on, have a look, then ditch it for a Netflix binge. To *really* understand, you need to use Musical.ly—any social media—as a kid does.

The question I'm asked most

“Do parents know their child is posting/watching such videos?” Of course not. Remember Dylan Klebold? He was one of the Columbine shooters, the depressed one (not the psychopath—that was Eric Harris, his toxic friend.) Dylan was kind, funny, and well-liked by his teachers. He came from a good family—close to both parents, especially his dad. His parents had no idea their son was suicidal, let alone homicidal. When we hear about kids who self harm or commit acts of violence we imagine horrible parents: Well, *that* explains it! Dylan's mom was loving, hands-on, and watchful. She was you. She was me. The kind of mom who put little notes in her kid's lunch. The lesson here is not that social media or violent video games lead to suicide and school shootings, the lesson is that we parents don't know our kids nearly as well as we think we do. The only thing we *do know* is the adolescent brain is vulnerable and susceptible. What your kid's brain sees and what it clocks time doing, *matters*.

Dylan's mom wrote a book. It's heartbreaking and eye-opening. I finished it weeks ago but one passage haunts me: “There is nothing I

wouldn't give to have read the pages of Dylan's journal while he was still alive, while we still had the chance to pull him back from the abyss that swallowed him and so many innocent others."

Look at the Musical.ly screenshot above, and read the comment beneath it. Somewhere out there is this girl's mom, who probably thinks her daughter is watching funny lip-syncs, not leaning into an abyss. In this case, anorexia beckons. Suicide beckoned Dylan. For others, it's a living hell of self-hate. Zero notifications. Zero new followers. The *absence* of love—the kind so readily given to other kids via thousands of followers, likes, and hearts—is hard evidence: *The world thinks I'm a loser*. These are the kids who hashtag their own face with the word *ugly*. The world, of course, is oblivious. But to kids with an online identity, the rejection feels global.

Not all kids slip into darkness, but many come close. Why? Because their brain is vulnerable to impulse. Brain doctors describe it like this: "Significant changes occur in the limbic system, which may impact self-control, decision making, emotions, and risk-taking behaviors. The brain also experiences a surge of myelin synthesis in the frontal lobe, which is implicated in cognitive processes during adolescence." In other words, your kid's brain is half-cooked. Think carefully of that vulnerability before you hand over the online keys.

Question. How much time is your kid on her phone?

On any screen? Eight- to 12-year-olds average four hours a day, teenagers clock significantly more. What happens when these kids enter society as adults? Who will they become if they were never given a bit of blank slate and unbroken time to explore their *own* imagination? Or never given the opportunity to draw from the rich, complex world around them—from art, from story, from a field of empty space, from the narrative of real live people rather than a homogenized, hyper-sexualized, virtual reality of strangers?

Space to breathe

If your child does not maintain an online self, chances are her social circle is small—friends from school, neighbors, family. If she has a rough

day at school, a bell sets her free each afternoon. The jerks who taunted her at lunch aren't coming home with her for the night. She has space to think, to be with you, to read, to hug her dog, to recover, to get brave. Online, there is no school bell, there is no escape; she exists globally, and so do her mistakes. The ridicule is permanent. Puberty is harrowing enough in physical form, asking a child to *also* manage an online ego is like asking them to thread a needle while the plane is going down.

An online self is a commodified self

How many “Likes” is that self worth? How many followers? A kid learns quickly and harshly that their value is determined by a number. A negative thought pattern is inevitable: *Everyone else has more followers. Everyone else has more likes. I posted yesterday and only two people have liked it.* Studies show that girls as young as 10 struggle with body image and suffer from anxiety while using Instagram. In an article for Time, Frances Jensen, chair of neurology at the University of Pennsylvania's Perelman School of Medicine, says that social media and smartphones may not be the root cause of an anxiety and depression but, “They may turn out to be an accelerant—the gasoline that turns a flicker of adolescent angst into a blaze.”

Are you there, Bill Gates? It's me, Childhood

Maybe if Bill and Melinda are listening they'll do something to change the landscape of American childhood. (Melinda has written about this topic as a worried mother.) Maybe she and Bill can offer an incentive. How about this: If a kid stays off ALL social media—no Snap, no Instagram, no Musical.ly, no KiK and so on—until they are 16-years-old, the Gates Foundation will cut that kid a \$1600 check on their 16th birthday. The kid can use the money any way the kid wants—no *forced* college savings. Shopping spree! Car down payment! Concert tickets!

We award kids cash for lesser feats—for winning bowling tournaments, spelling bees, and art contests. What could be more deserving than winning at peer pressure? *#16for16*. (Or if that feels impossible, *#15for15*.) There are teens out there who shun social media. They text, they call, but they won't scroll and post. They spurn the addiction. Read here and here for proof that it can be done.

Here's a DIY-version: If you begin to sock away \$23 each month when your kid is 10, you'll have \$1600 to hand over for a tough job well done—plus \$56 bucks to spend on wine and salted snacks for your middle-aged self. Pretty good deal. Plus, when one of your kid's friends is all: *OMG! You're not on Instagram!* Your kid can save face and be like: *Yeah, dude, and I'm getting paid for it, too.* Talk about investing in our country's future.

Two things you can do right now for your tween:

- If your kid has an iPad, disable Safari. Now the iPad has no portal to the global warehouse of mouth diarrhea. Kids can only use the apps you provide. Bing Bang Boom. That was easy.
- Just say no. Once you say yes to social media like Musical.ly or Instagram, it's *really* hard to take it back.

Have your pediatrician back you up. At your kid's next visit, slip the doctor a pre-written note that says something like: *Johnny has been begging for ____*. (In this case let's pretend Johnny wants the first person shooter game that "ALL" his friends are playing.) *After you ask if Johnny's been eating his vegetables, can you please reiterate that he shouldn't be playing video games rated M for mature content. Thank you! (Winky face.)*

Bing Bang Boom. Now you've got science on your side. When your kid gives you grief you can reply, aghast, "What kind of a mother would I be if I didn't listen to your pediatrician?"

People say I'm a dreamer...

Recently I toured the middle school my daughter will attend in the fall. Our tour guides were two 7th grade honor students who somehow managed to be super chill and highly sociable at the same time. I sidled up to the one with *Teen Vogue* hair and asked if most kids at school have iPhones. "Some do, yeah. But I don't." My eyes widened. "I don't need one," she said, "they're so distracting. I have too much going on." (I'm guessing her parents have something to do with it too.) I ask how she talks with friends when she's not at school. "I Facetime from my laptop or iPad, whichever I'm on. Or just text from those." I ask the other guide

if she does the same. “I have a flip phone. It’s dorky.” She laughs. Her friend laughs. I tell them about the Mickey Mouse phone I had in my room when I was their age and how I would talk for hours until the receiver grew hot against my ear.

My daughter’s fate is sealed: Next fall she will be one of the dorky kids with a flip phone. Unless there’s a Mickey Mouse flip phone available by then. Good luck, team dork! We can do this. *#16for16 #billgates #childhood*

Sincerely yours,

The Town Prude

P.S. If you go the flip phone route, your kid can still take loads of pictures of their friends with this [cool camera](#).

P.P.S. Some of my favorite books for parents and great reads for kids nine and up can be found [here](#).