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“My experience in the online world”

Today I am here to provide you with a very simple message. The topic says my experience with the online world and children but I am going to keep it a lot simpler than that. In the last couple of years I have been teaching many many parents, teachers, professionals and children. And while performing that job one thing became more and more clear to me. I got more and more to the root of what media literacy, online education is all about. This is mainly because it was not only me teaching my audience. Maybe even more important is to realize that the audience was teaching me too. I have learned so much from all the discussions I have had with parents. I have learned so much from everything teachers told me. And because of that I know exactly what works and what does not work. However my biggest source of inspiration, are, have been and always will be the children themselves. It is amazing how much I have learned from talking to children about their online world.

Possibly an example about minecraft.

(Isn't that amazing.) And the more I started teaching parents and teachers, the more I realized this ONE important key factor that makes all the difference. In the beginning I mainly shared WHAT I learned from the children. WHAT they told me, what they like, where they are online, how we should protect them, etc. And parents were satisfied and the information was there. However you may all have heard of the saying: When you want to help someone don't give them a fish, but teach them how to fish. And after years of providing education now I am talking more about HOW I talk to the children. HOW I learn from them and HOW we can lower our thresholds to be the parent, teacher, professional, or whatever they feel taken seriously by. And it is not hard. It is not hard at all. It only takes a change in perspective.

It requires us to become genuinely interested in their world. It requires us to ask them about their world. It requires us to broaden our horizon. Let's use an example. Let's say you are as a parent at the school yard and another parent asks you: “hey what kind of sports does your child play?” And you would answer something like: “ah well, yeah... I don't know... he plays something with a ball.. I am not really sure... but it's his thing you know. I don't care”. I think you would be amazed. I think you would ask “huh? Wouldn't you dive more into the sports of your child? Wouldn't you take a look at their game?” But now let's do this conversation again. Let's say that you would ask: “what does your child do online?” And a parent would answer: “Ah yeah well, I don't know... it's something with blocks... and she really likes it, but why would I care?” I think this conversation would be much more normal. You might even have had such a conversation in the past. Don't be ashamed, because we are all learning in this field but see that for children there is not a big difference between playing a soccer game or playing minecraft. In both they have friends, in both they are creative, in both they have things they are proud of. It is really possible to ask your child at the dinner table: “How was your day online?” And you might get a serious answer. And YES your child might tell a LOT... I have a lot of parents who say (so you are not the only one)... But I really don't care... it is soo much and I don't care and he uses all these difficult words. Well it is about interest. When I have a child later that plays soccer, I will go watch for him or her. Not because I like soccer so much, but because I would do it for my child. It's the same with the online world. Even if you don't like it, do it for your child.

And to make it a bit easier even. Who likes to go camping? Well me too and you might recognize this.. When you arrive at the campsite, and start to prepare the tent. What will the kids do? [play, swim, find the wifi hotspots, make friends] yes... and at the end of the day when you have prepared the tent and start reading the campsite booklet, the children come back and already know the whole campsite. And I have never heard a parent say... Oh my, now I have to know the whole campsite before I can make rules and boundaries for my child. No of course not. You ask your child: “where is the pool?, where is the camping shop?” And you make the rules and you educate, because you are the parent. Online is no different. Realize that children are experts in the online technology. They already know the campsite, but for the rest they are kids. When they receive scary messages, they can be technological experts, but on the behavior side they are kids again. When children are asked if they want to be a model they might be flattered and say yes. Even though they know how to hack the school computer and how to program apps. Please please. Realize children are no experts. Children are just as us exploring the online world. They are just not afraid to fall. So let’s start talking to children, let’s start listening to their world. It is the basis for them opening up to us. It is the basis for lowering thresholds, it is the basis for sharing, it is even the basis for setting boundaries. A parent that rejects all of the online world is not taken seriously. But a parent that is interested, that embraces, but then from time to time also says: “but this goes to far” and “here is a boundary”. That is what children need. So they key to online safety? Listen to children. Also on policy level. Do not talk ABOUT children, but talk WITH children. They are key in understanding and solving their struggles as well as their dreams, desires and lifestyle. It is vital.