From Pranks to Property Damage: Social Media's Influence on Youth Behavior

Kids love to have fun and sometimes while having fun, they make mistakes. That's because growing up is a challenge, and nowadays, it's not just about getting over broccoli, getting taller or outgrowing your favorite shoes; it's about navigating a maze of rules, expectations, and social norms that can be incredibly confusing. For a child eager to fit into certain social circles, distinguishing right from wrong can feel like trying to solve a thousand-piece puzzle with a blindfold on.

We've all been there—doing things to impress people we shouldn't just to feel accepted. Maybe it was taking something, breaking something, sneaking out somewhere, or simply pretending to like something because it was popular. These experiences, while sometimes regrettable, are a part of our own independent journeys. They build our character and teach us valuable lessons about integrity, values and authenticity. These moments of trial-and-error help to shape us into who we are.

Around age ten, kids' brains become more sensitive to "happy hormones" like oxytocin and dopamine. In a part of the brain called the ventral striatum, receptors for these hormones start multiplying like rabbits. This makes the adolescent brain particularly vulnerable to the influence of things like social media and peer pressure. We adults know that social media is like a crowded party where everyone is showing off and trying to get noticed, but with targeted ads. On one hand, it's a fantastic place for creativity, self-expression, and finding out which Hogwarts house you belong to. On the other hand, it can lead to anxiety, depression, and the realization that

your life isn't as glamorous as that influencer who seems to live on perpetual vacation (Spoiler alert - their life isn't really like that either). Like it or not, platforms like Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and Snapchat are the new playgrounds where kids hang out, show off, and sometimes get into a bit of mischief. Kids want to get those likes, comments, and followers, which can lead them to do things just for attention even if it's wrong. This vulnerability is compounded by the limited experience of teenagers who may not fully understand the long-term consequences of these actions. Some groups and individuals use these platforms to share and celebrate acts of vandalism and violence.

Viral "challenges" and trends that encourage harmful acts can spread rapidly (which is dangerously creating a culture that normalizes and encourages these misdemeanors), and can lead to a cycle of imitation where youths replicate what they see online for social capital. This unfortunately highlights the darker side of social media: a side that can lead to real-world consequences.

I spoke with one of the younger kids I know through my friend circle, and we had this conversation:
Me: "What would you do if you were with some friends late at night and you saw a car with money inside, say, 20 bucks, and one of you noticed the

door is unlocked. Would you take the money?"
Him "Bet!"
Me: "Seriously? Why? It's not yours to take!"
Him: "No one knows it was me and I could post it to my snap for glaze. . . It's like, a price he pays for leaving it there. If I didn't take it someone else would."
This way of thinking is troubling. It shows how some kids justify bad behavior by thinking that everyone else does it too.

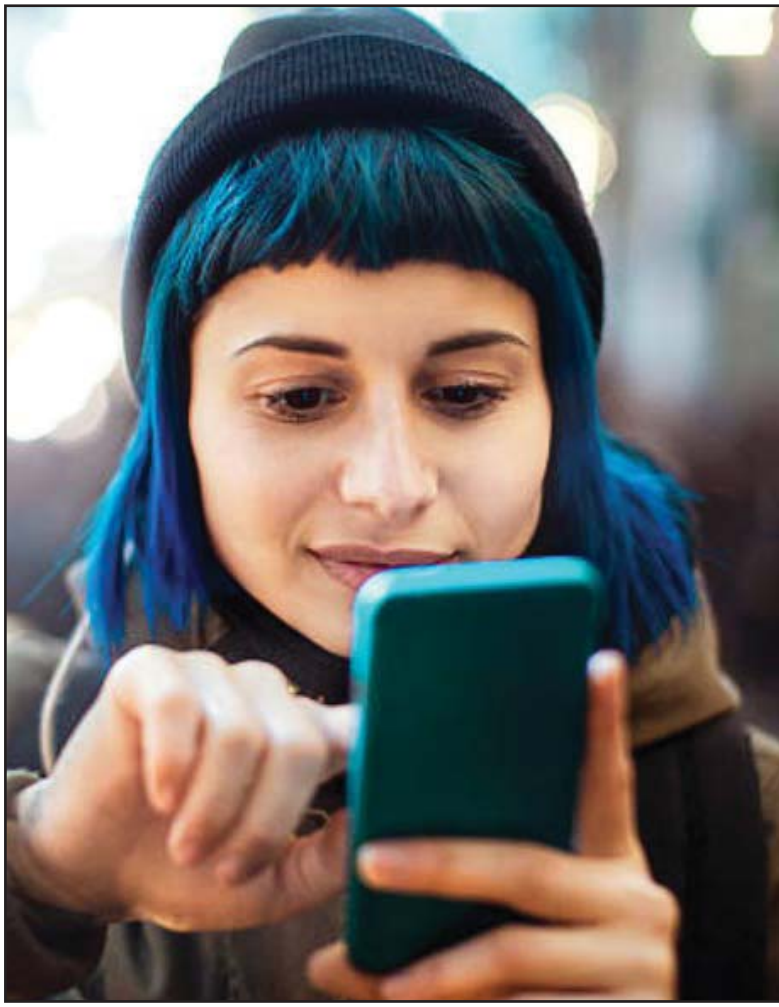
The TikTok Tango: What are kids doing now in the name of cool:

One particularly troubling trend is the rise in vandalism and pranks targeting vulnerable senior citizens.

Some social media users have filmed themselves targeting elderly individuals in public places:

- Pretending to be a mugger.
- Setting off loud noises near unsuspecting seniors.
- Pretending to be hurt or injured.
- Pretending to be lost.
- Dressing up in frightening costumes, or wearing masks, and attempting to jump-scare seniors.

There are at least a pair of incidents worldwide that have 'inspired' our teens to crueler pranks. A phenomenon called 'Granny spinning' where a group of youths go up to an elderly person they do not know, lift them and spin them around until they are disoriented and terrified. One incident that was filmed for likes was in Romania in 2016 and another happened in 2022 in England- filmed for TikTok. Anecdotal evidence suggests more incidents. A couple of other TikTok challenges show how these 'pranks' can erupt with problems. The 'TikTok Door Knock' challenge involves running up to people's front door doors and delivering one or two hefty kicks before running away- often enough to damage the door significantly. A middle aged Surrey, BC couple decided to plant a tripwire in front of their door after being 'pranked' a few times. This resulted in injuries and charges to both the prankster and the pranked. 'The Orbeez Challenge' requires kids to load airsoft guns with orbeez- water beads and fire them at unsuspecting passersby. Some victims have reportedly panicked and shot real gunfire back as they thought there was an active shooter situation unfolding.



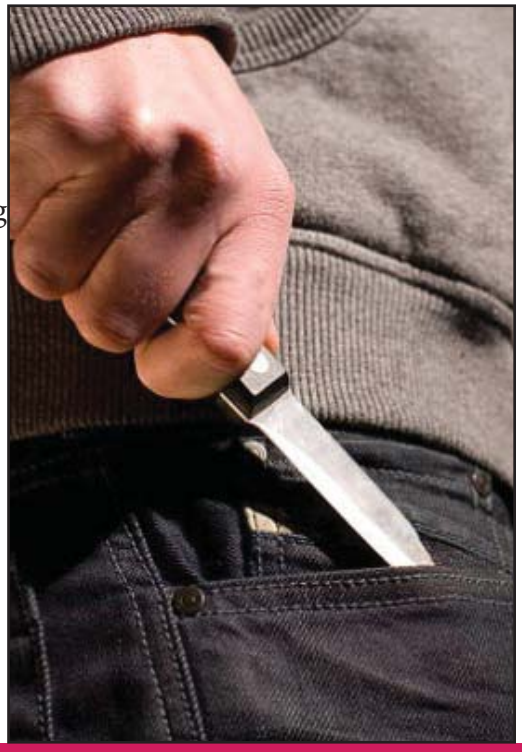
As we can see, such behavior is not only disrespectful but also emotionally distressing for the victims, who may already feel vulnerable due to their age. We also have seen what happens when complications arise. It's not hard to figure out what happens when one of these seniors lashes out in defense? Old Bob won't be so chill if his Vietnam shell-shock gets triggered and he knocks someone out cold on the pavement. Defending your home from invasion isn't a crime either so what if these kids kick down the wrong door?

There have also been other cases where individuals damage public property for the sake of gaining views and likes on platforms like TikTok and Instagram. The 'Devious Licks Challenge' comes to mind where kids film themselves destroying and looting public bathrooms. Actions like this not only cause physical damage but also create a sense of fear and insecurity within our communities. They have enough going on. Also, those who decide they're Picasso and spray paint all over public property or who criminally harass will feel the cold steely grip of the law as they can potentially face charges.

In 2021 youth were responsible for 5,678 cases of mischief, which includes vandalism and property damage and there were 53,688 police-reported youth crimes in Canada, with a crime rate of 2,175 per 100,000 youth. Youth crime rates vary across different regions in Canada. For example, British Columbia and Quebec have some of the lowest youth crime rates, while the territories have the highest rates. Social media amplifies the "everyone's doing it" mentality. If one kid jumps off a bridge, you can bet there's a TikTok challenge encouraging others to do the same. The desire for likes and followers can drive young folks to do some pretty questionable things, like eating tide pods, abusing animals, or vandalizing property and then proudly posting the evidence online. Geniuses, right? Absolute valedictorians!

A survey by the National Institute on Drug Abuse found that 30% of teens have been influenced by their peers to take part in vandalism and theft, and according to a study by Common Sense Media, 37% feel pressure to post criminal content that will get a lot of likes and

comments. So, what's the role of adults? What can we do? Parents and educators play a monumental role in guiding kids to understand the consequences of their actions. Adults tend to have a more fixed sense of self that relies less on feedback from peers because they have a more mature prefrontal cortex, (an area that helps regulate emotional responses to social rewards). By sharing our own experiences and being transparent (to a degree), our children will also act the same and trust us to guide them in times of need.



Understanding current trends and what factors could be contributing to delinquency in kids is crucial in order to work together or even to have a hope of guiding them towards healthier and more constructive ways of seeking social validation.

Here are some ways we can help:

- Encourage positive behavior by praising kids when they do something good;
- positive reinforcement motivates to continue behaving well.
- Teach empathy by role-playing different scenarios that help kids understand how
- and why their actions affect others.
- Set a good example by showing respect and kindness, treating others the way you'd
- want your kids to treat them. Children naturally mimic their parents. Monkey see,
- Monkey crawl and throw a tantrum right?
- Monitor Social Media Use. Keep an eye on what kids are doing online. Encourage
- them to use social media responsibly, or lock the computer if you must.
- Review the content they post to their public pages on a regular basis to see if
- there's anything suspicious.
- Practice open communication. Children must have an environment where they feel
- comfortable talking about their problems and experiences or they simply won't
- bring it up. Ask questions, but don't interrogate.

The following example would be useful in teaching older children:

The 3 Rules of Management (Hojnacki, 2004).
1. The Rule of Private Gain: If you are the only one personally gaining from a situation,
and it is at the expense of another, then the ethics of the decision leading to the
situation should be in question.
2. What If Everyone Does It? There are broader implications here. Who would be
hurt? What would the world be like if everyone did it?
3. Benefits vs. Burden. Do the benefits outweigh the burden? Does what one will gain
outweigh the trouble or difficulty to get it?

We can't bear the burden of teaching kids totally ourselves either; social media platforms need to step up their game and take action to protect the developing minds of the youth. Setting up tailored regulations and monitoring mechanisms can help curb the spread of harmful content; the impact this has on our children cannot be understated. It's time for the media aggregates involved in our children's lives to be more accountable.

Like I said before, social media is an incredible place to connect and create. The challenges it presents to youth today are significant, but change comes with small victories. Every victory is a step towards the goal. By working together and understanding the factors that contribute to vandalism, pranks, and an explosively growing need for attention. Parents and educators can work together with our young ones to build stronger communities where respect won't go the way of the dodo and dial-up internet.

Stay Vigilant