

Middle School Guidance Officer



The skills teens need to avoid getting fooled by fake news

One day your kids are learning to walk and the next they're on their own sharing Russian propaganda on YouTube and Facebook. You might think your great-uncle using an old desktop to "surf the internets" is the person at risk of accidentally spreading "fake news" on social networks, but kids these days aren't always faring so much better.

A large-scale study by the Stanford Graduate School of Education found that young people at every stage from middle school to college were consistently unable to differentiate news from advertising, or false information from the truth, a state of affairs the researchers described as "bleak."

Compounding the problem is the way young people use the internet. Much of the news they do consume comes through intermediaries, chief among them YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, according to research from Common Sense Media. These networks often muddy the source of information, or make all outlets look similar, robbing the audience of visual cues to help them differentiate reliable and less-reliable sources. It's worth remembering that adults have trouble identifying fake news in this environment as well.

The good news is, parents and caregivers are ideally placed to help. The same Common Sense Media study found that while children aged 10 to 18 were typically skeptical of mainstream media, 66% felt they could trust information from their families.

So how can you teach kids to spot fake news, rather than be fooled by it?

The ABCs of media literacy

Common Sense Media's vice president and editor-in-chief Jill Murphy says it starts with basic media literacy, which can be taught from as young as five—for example, telling your child why a show isn't appropriate for them instead of just shutting it off. Toward the end of elementary school, they can grasp the fact that journalism is a job, which you might illustrate by showing them news stories on the same topic published by different outlets. "It may go against your values to look at the other side of an issue," says Murphy. "But it's a way for them to absorb the concept that people write to convey a specific message. Learning to question those messages is an important skill."

However, you don't want to make them too critical, says Peter Adams, senior vice president of education at non-profit The News Literacy Project. "One mistake a lot of people make is to give the impression that all information is created with an ulterior motive. We don't want kids to be naïve, but we don't want them to be cynical, either."

- Diane Shipley

Anna Willis, Middle School Guidance Officer