

## Charlene C. Giannetti on Our Children's Cyber World

BY PAMELA AWAD

For some of us, life on Mars brings to mind red skies, spaceships and aliens creatures. For another demographic, life on Mars is otherworldly in its absence of cell phones, computers, iPods and the Internet. Parenting expert and author Charlene C. Giannetti outlined eight strategies for dealing with today's technology when she addressed a luncheon audience on January 13, 2009. Describing technology as the "beast that needs to be tamed," she counseled patience, fortitude and continuous conversation when dealing with the mystery and madness of our children's cyber world.

STRATEGY #1:

### With Every Piece of Technology You Buy, Consider the Age of Your Child.

As there are no age-appropriate labels for electronic items, consider what a child really needs. Are cell phones for children of kindergarten age really necessary? Does your young child ever travel alone, unaccompanied by an adult? If the answer is "no," safety concerns are not an issue. Technology plugs children in socially and advertisers seek to hook kids from a young age. Consider what your child needs, not what he or she wants and resist the pressure to give in. Saying "no" is appropriate.

STRATEGY #2:

### You are the "Appropriate Use" Manual for Every Piece of Equipment You Buy.

Technology manuals do not explain how to properly use the computer, cell phone iPod, etc. It is a parent's responsibility to explain how to use technology in a safe and responsible manner. Parents should offer guidance, make suggestions, and explain the consequences of improper use. Remind children that nothing dies in cyberspace, postings take on a life of their own and the negative consequences can be long lasting. Ms. Giannetti cited the findings of a University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine

and Public Health study that analyzed 500 MySpace profiles to determine what kinds of information kids are posting. The study found that, of the profiles, 37% mentioned alcohol use, 24% mentioned sex, 14% mentioned or implied involvement in acts of violence and 13% mentioned tobacco use. 200 million Internet users worldwide have MySpace accounts and one quarter of them are under 18. While MySpace and Facebook are a way for youngsters to share common interests with peers, parents need to provide guidance for safe Internet use and be aware of what information is being posted.

STRATEGY #3:

### Don't Discount the Influence of TV, Movies and Music.

Although as parents we tend to focus on the Internet, young people are overwhelmingly influenced by the entertainment culture portrayed in the media. Kids emulate behavior they see exhibited by movie stars, TV heroes and musicians and much of that behavior is what they post on Internet sites. TV and the movies sometime showcase undesirable behaviors like smoking, and some of today's music contains violent or misogynistic lyrics. Celebrities, unlike the rest of us, often escape consequences. Giannetti advised familiarizing yourself with your children's media while talking with them often and loudly, the better to hear you above the din.

STRATEGY #4:

### Unplug the Equipment.

Is this a fate worse than death? According to Ms. Giannetti, it is not. Kids crave time spent with parents and time spent away from technology can mean more time spent together playing board games, having lunch, taking a walk in the park, doing just about anything. In a busy world where time is precious, it's sometimes easier to let technology substitute for parenting. Ms. Giannetti reminded us that the virtual world pales in comparison to our real one. And in

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an interesting twist, she cited the current economy as a great opportunity to say “no” to additional technology.

## STRATEGY #5:

**Speak Out Against Bullying Behavior.**

Sadly, bullying in cyberspace is a fact of life and both parents and children need to understand the consequences. Kids can become easily upset, depressed, distracted in school, difficult to teach; they may also experience appetite loss and a diminished desire to go to school. Almost every child has been bullied and many have engaged in bullying behavior. Giannetti reminded us that only the technology has changed; children still need to be taught to treat others with respect, parents need to stand up for a child that is being teased and to enlist the support of another adult if the situation becomes overwhelming for the child. Teachers may be especially helpful as they are aware of the social aspects of the classroom; they know which children are loners and who are members of cliques. Most importantly, let your child know she can come to you and you will not penalize her by shutting down the Internet. Unplugging their technology pulls the social rug out from under children. Reassure your child that bullying behavior is not his or her fault and then report it to the appropriate authorities.

## STRATEGY #6:

**Report Bullying Behavior on the Internet.**

Cyberspace is so vast, it is difficult to track down perpetrators and identifying the offender may be difficult. YouTube, MySpace and Facebook have safety centers and continuously work to fine tune their reporting procedures, but the sheer volume of uploads can be overwhelming. As a parent, begin locally with your school and refrain from making the problem a personal crusade. Voice your concern with cyber bullying in general. Alert the appropriate authorities online and print out and save anything offensive. Ms. Giannetti counseled patience as this may take more time than you would think.

## STRATEGY #7:

**Understand How Technology Has Changed Dating and Dating Behavior.**

This is especially important for girls as dating abuse is on the rise. Texting enables boys with control issues to “stalk” girls; some girls have reported receiving over 200 text messages a day. Nonstop texting may initially be viewed as flattering, but can escalate into abuse and violence. Ms. Giannetti emphasized the need for our daughters to understand what comprises a good relationship and for our sons to model their behavior on strong father figures.

## STRATEGY #8:

**Focus on the Positive.**

Nothing endures but change, and technology is changing the world in which we live. The generational truth is that parents are the best source of data for their children and it is the parental voice they hear in their heads. It is from us they learn their most important values, as well as what they need to become productive, kind, generous members of society. As parents, we should think of technology as a way to bond with our children. Ms. Giannetti suggested texting greetings, using e-mail to discuss issues that may be too sensitive to talk about face-to-face and forwarding newspaper articles and other interesting, timely information. In closing, she reminded us that the most important thing we can do here on earth is to keep talking to our children, wherever they are. ●

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Charlene C. Giannetti is an adolescent parenting expert and on site development consultant to the National Middle School Association (NMSA). She is a bestselling author and mother of two. With Margaret Sagarese, she has co-authored six books, including *The Roller Coaster Years* and *Cliques*. Their newest release is *Boy Crazy! Keeping Your Daughter's Feet on the Ground When Her Head is in the Clouds* (Broadway Books). She has recently launched a new Web site, [www.womanaroundtown.com](http://www.womanaroundtown.com).