

Yik Yak, Yuk

It is time to have a conversation with kids about online behavior and etiquette. Again.

The social media platform Yik Yak has reemerged recently and is providing youth with an easy way to engage in hate speech and cyberbullying throughout our region and the nation. Unlike the Yik Yak of years ago, the newly funded software company no longer provides schools with the ability to “geo fence” their facilities to prevent use of the platform. Further complicating matters for schools, Yik Yak is a free app that can be used on personal iOS devices over cellular networks, so it is not possible to prevent its use in schools. Much like its earlier version, Yik Yak still offers “complete anonymity” to its users, meaning that no one who sees a post on the platform will know who posted it.

Yik Yak states that their platform has been built on the principle that they “believe the global community deserves a place to be authentic, a place to be equal, and a place to connect with people nearby.” The community does have set “Guardrails” that members are to stay within. These guardrails serve as the parameters and rules that users are to follow on the platform. These guardrails, however, are almost entirely self-governed by those participating in the 5-mile radius conversation zone. As a tool to enable this self-governance, the guardrails also offer participants the ability to “downvote” statements posted in their 5-mile radius zone. Five downvotes will eliminate a post. What we have discovered is this downvote capability is being used to eliminate the positive statements that school administrators and student champions have used to flood their 5-mile radius zones with positivity. This practice of flooding a zone with positivity was very effective in overpowering the negative conversations that took place on the platform when we last dealt with it following its initial release in 2013.

The bigger picture

Yik Yak is just one example of the thousands of platforms and methods by which communication can take place. Regardless of the technical safeguards and “geofences” that can be built to restrict the use of specific technologies within our schools, ultimately, the only method by which we can truly correct the misuse and hate being spread is to address the human element that is posting the messages. It will take the whole community to make sure these conversations are both meaningful and impactful to turn this challenge into an

educational opportunity that makes a difference in how children and young adults conduct themselves online and in-person and that impacts the future of our society itself.

As adults, school administrators, teachers, and parents, we must model the appropriate use and etiquette that we expect from the youth around us. Our actions and words are seen, both in-person and online, and these are the examples from which youth will model their own behavior. It is vitally important to make sure youth understand that cyberbullying is bullying, and bullying is unacceptable no matter where it takes place. The promise of a cloak on the Internet to hide your identity is not a true cloak. Our youth must understand all their activities are ultimately logged and visible somewhere for years to come. Don't say things about people, or about yourself, online that you wouldn't say to your parents or grandparents in-person. Follow the golden rule online just as you would when talking with people in-person but understand that just like bullying or spreading hate in-person, the same consequences will occur when it is done online. And more importantly, when these activities are conducted online, there are better, more accurate records for those being targeted for law enforcement to pursue.

Having constructive conversations early and often regarding the appropriate use of the web is critically important. It is critical for youth to have trusted adults to ask questions about things they have seen online, and at the same time they should understand that parents and educators have a right to supervise their use of online resources. Ultimately, we want to guide our kids in appropriate use and how to have constructive conversations both online and in-person.

Unfortunately, there will be occurrences where it will be appropriate to take swift disciplinary action. In these cases, it is important to immediately involve the appropriate administrators or authorities. It must be understood, that bullying, hate-speech, threats or terrorism being conducted online are the equivalent to those same behaviors occurring in-person. Similar to the trust that we want youth to have with adult role-models in their lives, we, as adults, also need to trust and feel comfortable in having conversations with our peers, administrators and authorities when necessary.

Yik Yak will undoubtedly rise and fall as a platform plagued with bullying and hate once again, but remember, it is just one of many platforms, online or in-person, that will gain popularity and foster this behavior. Let us all focus on working towards making impactful changes at the source of these activities: our youth and each of us, so that we can build a better society for the future we will all share.

Resources

It is critical to engage youth in conversations about appropriate use online, while we, ourselves, model good digital citizenship, in an ongoing basis. These conversations and mentoring examples, are key in trying to eliminate the hate, bullying and other inappropriate content that

is being posted online, but also spoken in the flesh. Here are a couple free resources that will hopefully provide you with some conversation starters:

- [FTC.gov/KidsOnline](https://www.ftc.gov/kids-online)
- [Council for Digital Good \(YouTube video playlist\)](#)
- [CommonSenseMedia.org](https://www.commonsensemedia.org)

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