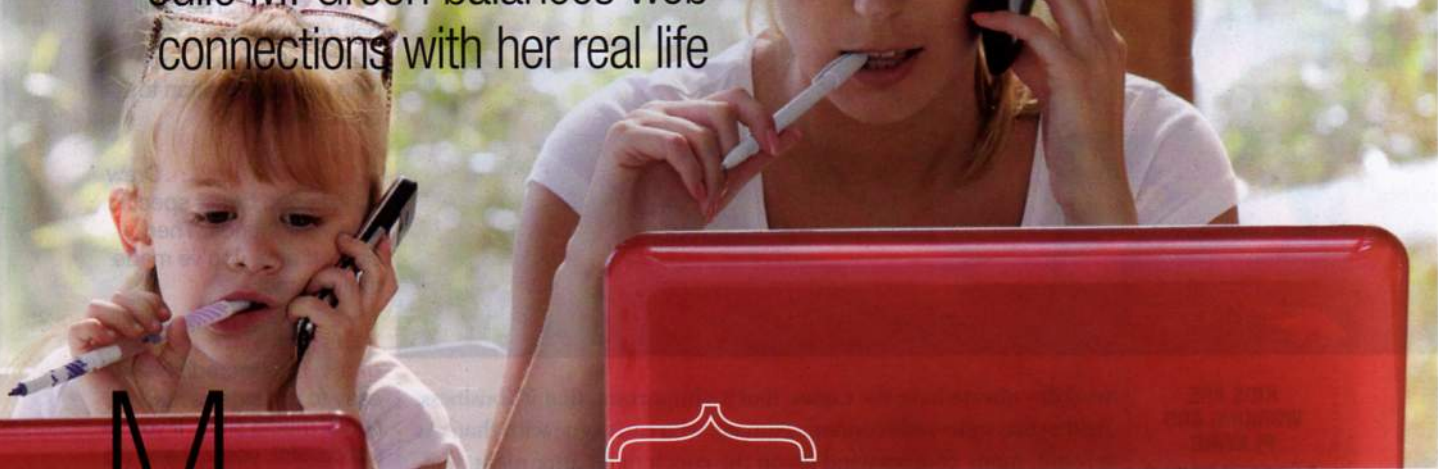


# (Anti)social Media

Julie M. Green balances web connections with her real life



**M**y kid is bathed and snug in bed. Stories have been read, teeth brushed, cuddles doled out. My husband comes downstairs and places his hands on my shoulders. I don't turn away from the laptop. "Just give me five minutes," I mutter. He pours himself a drink and retreats to the living room.

A while later, he asks if I'm coming. "In a sec," I say, still typing away. "There, done." I slam the laptop shut — over an hour later. He huffs past me upstairs.

Social media may bring people together, but it can divide many more. Websites like Facebook and Twitter connect you to total strangers, while taking your attention away from the people closest to you: your partner, your child.

And without balance, social media use can become a problem, says says Alyson Schafer, a psychotherapist, parenting expert and mom of two. "Any time you have a huge time-suck that is pulling you away from your family responsibilities, in a sense what you are saying to your kids is: 'You are less important and I value you less than these other things I'm working on.'"

For many parents, whether they're catching up with high school friends on Facebook or following favourite celebs on Twitter, social media can feel like yet another ball to juggle in already full hands.

For people who essentially make their living online, like Erica Ehm, a mom of two and the creator and publisher of the popular online magazine [yummymummyclub.ca](http://yummymummyclub.ca), balancing screen time with face time is something of a sore point, not to mention a fine art. "It's not uncommon for my son to have to ask me a question twice: the

**We recently surveyed *Today's Parent* readers about how they use technology. What did we learn? For starters, most families are quick to work new devices into their lives and routines. Here's what else our survey uncovered:**

#### **YOUNG FAMILIES ARE INTO TECHNOLOGY**

- 1 in 5 families own tablets, such as the iPad, and many 2- to 6-year-olds are using them.

#### **LITTLE KIDS ARE CONNECTED**

- Nearly half of 4- to 6-year-olds access the Internet from home for about an hour a day.

#### **WE'RE ALL FACEBOOK FRIENDS**

- 99% of parents we surveyed have Facebook accounts; 86% allow their 13- to 17-year-olds to participate in social networking sites.

first time I'm too engrossed in online discussions; the second time I pay attention to him fully."

The phenomenon has grown as more and more moms become so-called "mompreneurs," like Ehm. In 2008, there were 910,000 self-employed women in Canada, many of whom are moms, and most of whom used the Internet to generate sales and publicity for their businesses.

Of course, even women who aren't mompreneurs spend hours online every day. Almost 90 percent of Canadian moms go online for parenting advice. Many log on to manage their own blogs.

As a writer, I tend to regard social media sites as a necessary evil. While I want to connect with others, and love the word-of-mouth aspect of sites like Twitter, the last thing I want is to make those connections (or tweets) at the expense of my loved ones.

"Mommy is working," my three-year-old son says in a sad voice. I know when it gets too much because the whining starts or he inevitably goes into destruction mode — a tactic guaranteed to get my undivided attention.

While working from home may be a boon on the face of it, when your kids only recognize your profile in the artificial glow of your laptop or PC, Houston, you've got a problem.

It took me a long time to warm up to Twitter, the site where you share thoughts in 140 characters or less. But once I did it was hard to stop. My husband called me on it, and he was right: My social media habit was getting out of hand. Twitter was making a twit out of me.

I know I'm not alone. Social media sites are an outlet, after all — a means to unwind and regroup at the end of a long day. Besides, those of us who need to use social media in the course of our ▶



## 7 HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE CYBERMOMS

**1 Set a timer.** The shrill bell will jolt you out of your online stupor and help you to transition to another activity.

**2 Go in with a plan.** Draw up lists and target specific followers/friends. Then sign off after you've made that contact.

**3 Stay away from the games.** It's incredibly easy to get sidetracked on social media sites. If you're not careful, you will end up frittering away hours on FarmVille or Angry Birds.

**4 Choose "dead" time to tweet and text.** In waiting rooms, parking lots, airports, train stations, during public-transit commutes — these otherwise idle moments not only add up, but are typically solo time, so no one is being neglected.

**5 Keep it real.** If there's a golden rule of using social media sites, this is it. Even if you connect with only one person, make it count and be genuine. When pressed for time, opt for quality over quantity, always.

**6 Make rules, then keep them.** Set up boundaries within your family (for example, no phones during dinner) and ensure you are fully engaged with your partner and kids during those times.

**7 Be present for events.** Turn off social media when you're at an important game or when you pick up your kids from school. Clearly communicate your availability to outsiders beforehand, then be either completely "on" or "off."

### KIDS ARE WORKING AND PLAYING

- Gaming is the most popular online activity among all kids. Older kids are going online for homework and social networking.

### TWEENS AND TEENS ARE TEXTING

- Kids with cellphones don't have free rein. The parents we surveyed set rules about number of calls and camera usage, particularly for kids 7 to 12 years old.

### SECURITY IS IMPORTANT

- 90% of parents are concerned about identity theft, child luring and phishing; 75% are also concerned about cyberbullying. Most parents we surveyed have established rules around the time their kids spend online, and enforce them strictly, whatever their kids' ages. (You can find tips to keep your family safe online at [Todaysparent.com/online-safety](http://Todaysparent.com/online-safety).)

workday always have the excuse that it's important, that it's business. And in this squeezed economic climate, who can argue with that? As a result, many couples wind up on the couch night after night, cuddled up with BlackBerrys and iPads, instead of each other.

And with more and more of us packing smartphones, electronic companionship need never be out of reach, wherever we are. "I am never without my phone; it is always in my hand, my pocket or at least within arm's reach," confesses mom of four Amanda Patton, who averages 10,000 texts per month, half of them to her husband. "My phone comes to the bathroom with me, and sleeps under my pillow. I check it all day long, whenever I have the opportunity, even while driving."

Patton attributes her texting addiction to being a stay-at-home mom with a partner who is home only six days per month. "I feel as though it is my lifeline, my only contact with the 'real world.' I guess I just don't want to miss anything."

For a lot of us, social media consumption has become incredibly hard to regulate — kind of like quitting after just one square of your favourite chocolate bar. It doesn't have to be that way, though, says Schafer. "There is this belief that we are a victim of our schedules. But the world doesn't really end if you do not reply to that email right away but in three hours' time. We feel that we're succumbing to some greater pressure we can't control when I would argue that, in fact, we can." (For tips on limiting your screen time, see "7 Habits of Highly Effective Cybermoms.")

Annabel Fitzsimmons, a freelance writer, yoga guru and mom of two, typically goes "off-line" on weekends. And I'm reining in my usage to a level my family (and I) can live with. That means making lists, deciding what's crucial and doing away with the rest. The other day, I took a deep breath and deleted my Facebook profile. As far as I know, the world is still turning.

As for Twitter, I've been told to think of it as a party. "You get there," says Fitzsimmons, "you stay for as long as your schedule allows, you mingle with whoever is there, then you leave. You wouldn't expect to have conversations with everyone at a party, right? Well, Twitter is no different."

Now, please excuse me while I go and tweet that. ★

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