

Mixing moms and Facebook is not something everyone wants

May 18, 2014 by Daniel J. Bauer

When our local news begins to taste dry and I begin to worry about finding a topic to write about in this space, I usually say a prayer and hope for a new survey to appear. You'd be surprised how often my prayer is answered.

Not one, but two surveys came to my rescue this week. Both address the subject of mothers and their involvement with Facebook (FB).

The one survey said that some 584,000 mothers in Taiwan have opened Facebook accounts. A whopping 72 percent of these mothers say they use the system every day (TT 5-12-14 p. 2). Nearly 80 percent of our "facebooking moms" have talked their children into "friending" them there.

For the uninitiated, "friend" status on FB offers a range of possible windows to view the private life of others. A slew of photographs, messages, and exchanges of personal views on topics hot and cold, ordinary and special suddenly leap into the public domain for FB friends.

I don't feel mothers "friending" their children on FB constitutes an earth-shaking problem. This type of parental behavior, however, does raise questions in which I've long been interested. Those questions are linked to words such as autonomy, privacy, and pure, old-fashioned trust between parents and children.

Now let's turn to the other survey. This week the Tapei-based King Car Education Foundation published findings of a survey it conducted over the past two months on Taiwan youth and their feelings about FB (TT 5 12 14, p. 2). Media coverage of the results included information that reports on Taiwan surveys often lack, details for example about where and how many. Students at 16 schools and in 7 counties participated in the King Car study, with 1519 of a possible 1800 valid questionnaires returned. This leads us to surmise that the outcome here may be fairly representative of our younger population at large.

The study said that 37.5 percent of the elementary school, 43 percent of middle and 44.4 percent of the high school students did not want to add their parents as "friends" on FB.

I told one of my students earlier this week that I was considering writing about these surveys. I asked for her reaction. She said she didn't use FB much herself,

so she didn't care. Her sister, however, was a different case.

"My sister is pretty not okay with the idea of being friends with parents (on FB). She doesn't want them to know where she's been and whom she's been with. She also doesn't want them to know her 'touchy-feely' posts."

When in the past I taught ethics on my campus, I always offered several periods a semester on what I called "family ethics." I also insisted that my students and I discuss the "problem" of cultural sensitivities. What may appear to be only natural in one culture, and thus seem an "automatic good," might in a different culture appear to be ethically questionable or clearly wrong.

Is it right for a parent to secretly flip through a diary a teen-age son or daughter keeps? Is it right for a parent to eavesdrop on phone calls, to open mail without the knowledge of their child, or to search book bags, closets or shelves containing the personal belongings and possibly embarrassing secrets of their teen-age children? I doubt my views here will win me any friends with readers over the age of 30.

Parents wanting to "friend" their children on FB are acting with good intentions, I am sure. They simply want to understand what goes on in the lives of their loved ones, that's all. They want to protect the innocent from harm. They want to be "good moms" and "good dads." They want to guide and nurture their own flesh and blood.

Nevertheless, even teenagers, and certainly college students, should enjoy a degree of autonomy about their decisions and personal lives.

To respect the autonomy of other people is to allow them to be free to be who they are and to shape their lives and personalities. Young people need privacy if they are to successfully do that.

FB at the right time and in the right way is a wonderful addition to contemporary life. To help our youth grow into responsible adulthood, however, we've got to give them room to succeed and, occasionally to fail, even on Facebook.

So, Moms, and Dads, too: be friends with your children, but not on FB. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points :

1. Facebook may or may not be an important part of your life. Over According to a recent survey, over 580,000 mothers in Taiwan have set up FB accounts. Of that number, 72% use their FB accounts every day. Nearly 80% of these moms have become "friends" on FB with their children. Do these statistics surprise you? Why or why not?
2. A survey different than the one mentioned above shows that approximately 44% of elementary school, middle school, and high school students do NOT want their parents to be their friends on FB. How do you respond to the Q of SHOULD PARENTS BE FRIENDS ON FB? DO YOUNG PEOPLE WANT THEIR MOMS AND DADS as friends on FB?
3. If you were a parent of a teenager today, do you think your views about FB use might be different than your current views? Why or why not?

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