

Parents, Don't Let Your Children Be Victims Online

Sound advice from life partners and co-hosts of a podcast for analog parents raising digital kids.

Michelle Dennedy: Kids today are such digital natives that it sometimes seems like they were born with chips implanted in their brains. The reality is online risks are everyday events for teens, but they rarely tell their parents. So, what's a concerned parent to do to help their youngsters navigate online risks and help them anticipate and solve negative online solutions? My guests today have some ideas and some good questions and some good answers.

Cybersecurity, data protection, privacy. You like to stay ahead of the curve and listen to experts who are leading the way in deriving greater value from data, with a more organized approach to data privacy. You're like us, just a few deviations past the norm. You are a Privacy Sigma Rider.

Hey riders. I'm Michelle Dennedy, the Chief Privacy Officer at Cisco and the leader of the band of a great discussion today. We've got two guests today. They are partners in life and on the airwaves. They're the hosts of a brand new, ragingly hot podcast that you need to download and subscribe to today called Their Own Devices. It's a podcast for analog parents raising digital kids. Marc Groman is a leading voice in privacy policy and a good buddy of mine, and his life partner and husband David Reitman, Dr. David Reitman, brings the human element to the conversation as a medical professional who specializes in adolescent patients. Gentlemen, welcome to The Riders.

Marc Groman: Thank you. It's great to be here.

David Reitman: Thank you. It's great.

Michelle Dennedy: Now as you guys can tell, these guys have been married forever and together forever, so we're going to have to parse their voices from one another. They've started to sound like each other.

Marc Groman: Our mothers say the same thing.

Michelle Dennedy: I think it's very sweet actually. Marc, I'm going to give a little background on both of you guys. Marc is an internationally recognized privacy and technology expert who's served as the Senior Advisor for Privacy in the Obama White House and as Chief Privacy Officer at the Federal Trade Commission here in the US. In fact, my ex accused me of being delusional because I was telling him that the White House was calling and I couldn't talk. It was just Marc. I may be delusional, but the White House really was calling. Since leaving the White House in 2017, Marc has been advising senior leaders in business and government on policy, risk management, and technology issues. He serves on many boards and advisory councils, and frequently speaks about privacy, technology, and innovation. Welcome, Mr. Marc. So excited.

Michelle Dennedy: And I'm also delighted to have the long-time ... I know the personal side of Dr. David Reitman through Marc, but I'm super excited to get to work with you. David is a doctor who specializes in adolescent medicine and treats teenagers for a range of health issues, far too many of which are related to the use of technology. As well as being an expert at the top of each of their fields, Marc and David are raising a teenage son who is adorable. So, we have lots to talk about as parents, as professionals. Welcome, Dr. Reitman.

David Reitman: Thank you so much. Great to be here too.

Michelle Dennedy: So excited. So, we have in common that we're raising kids as the first completely digital generation. I have a 17-year-old called Miss Thang online and a 13-year-old that I call Sweet Cheeks, and you have a son. Jared is 13 now?

David Reitman: Yes, he is.

Michelle Dennedy: Lord help us all.

David Reitman: Exactly.

Michelle Dennedy: And this is new territory. So, let's talk a little bit ... and this question's for both of you really. What are some of the issues, and why did you decide to put together a podcast on this? I think that's so cool.

Marc Groman: So, I'll start, and then I will send it over to David. This is Marc. In January of 2017 when I left the White House, I suddenly had actual time to parent again and to engage with my son and his peers. And at that time, he was about 12 years old. I had just finished two years of some of the most difficult, challenging, and controversial privacy and technology issues I've ever worked on. But suddenly, I was watching my own son engage with technology, digital content, social media, and of course, video games, and his peers. And I suddenly had a whole new vision into this world through my son's eyes. I was starting to become concerned, not as much about what Jared was doing, but about some of the things that I saw his peers doing online. And I started to speak more and more with some of the parents as we sat on the bleachers watching little league games or at PTA meetings, and discovered that many parents were ... and I mean this with love and respect ... clueless, just totally clueless.

Michelle Dennedy: Yes, lovingly clueless.

Marc Groman: But didn't understand or appreciate what their kids were doing at the time, that their profiles were public, that they were having their locations tracked. And so for me, that really combined my professional expertise with my personal life as a dad and started this discussion. My side of it, the privacy and tech side, over time and at dinner, collided with David's perspective as an adolescent medicine doctor who is seeing technology issues from his advantage point as a doctor.

David Reitman: Well, I'm not sure it really collided as much as it kind of colluded maybe.

Michelle Dennedy: Oh, I like that.

- David Reitman: To use an interesting word. Marc was sitting here being shocked about what he's seeing and the issues, and I would kind of sit here and say, "Yeah, I deal with this stuff every single day. I've been working with teenagers for 10 years, 15 years, and this is the trend that I've been seeing." So, when it came to things like issues around social media, and what kids are posting online, and what are the consequences that they're seeing, and then this whole question about addiction and sexting and all kinds of stuff that teenagers are just getting themselves into, I've been kind of living in this world for years. It was just kind of very interesting to see all of a sudden Marc saying, "Oh my god, this is a problem," because we hadn't had a teenager up until that point.
- Marc Groman: I think that's David's polite way of saying, "For two years when Marc was in the White House, he was checked out and I was solo parenting."
- David Reitman: I wasn't going to say that. That said ...
- Michelle Dennedy: Thank you for keeping the rest of the world safe while the home fires were carefully tended at home. That's all good.
- Marc Groman: I was fighting about encryption in the West Wing, and he was taking care of kids.
- Michelle Dennedy: It takes a village, people.
- David Reitman: But when we talked about this stuff and Marc would get understandably riled up, and our friends get riled up, I would say to people, "But you understand this is what a teenager does. This is what they're about. This fits into their development, how they're supposed to function. This is just a variation on what we've been seeing." And so after having enough discussions about that, Marc and I ended up one night at kind of a PTA meeting talking about this stuff. We were supposed to be on a panel with a bunch of other high schoolers talking about these things, and we were the only two who showed up, talking about and really addressing these issues with little kids, like 12-year-olds ... which are not that little ... and their parents. And after that, someone said, "You really should start talking about this a little bit more." And little by little, it kind of grew into, okay, we were going to start to do a podcast.
- Michelle Dennedy: I love that, because I think there's sort of two reactions. One is, "Oh my god, let's just keep all this stuff away. Take away the devices." But as you've noted David, this is part of their identity. This is part of their maturation process. And just taking it away, what does that leave your child with? I think that's one side of the issue.
- And then the other side of the issue that I've confronted going into schools is sort of angry engineers coming up to me and saying, "You work for a tech company. I came here tonight to hear the answer. Where is the answer?" And my response is typically, "This is about parenting as much as it is any sort of ad blocker."
- Marc Groman: So, you teed up a lot of issues there, Michelle. I know you work at a big tech company, and there are times when I ... since I no longer work for the government and I can say what I want and don't represent any particular companies ... I do hold Silicon Valley's feet to the fire on some of this. And so obviously I'm a passionate believer that parents need to be far more engaged, and I want to talk about that.

But I don't want to let tech companies off the hook, because I have highlighted on the podcast my views and others, experts, people who have written books, that there are features in many apps and platforms and technology that are oriented towards children ... and we know it ... that are designed to keep them, as they would say, engaged. As parents might say, addicted. And that there are default settings that maximize data sharing. There are default settings that maximize certain types of use. And even where there's choice, as we know, where the UI and UX are built ... Choices, yes they're there, but the outcomes are often predetermined, and not always with the children's best interests.

And so I want to get back to parents and their role, but I want to make sure we don't let tech off the hook completely, because I do think there are improvements we can make in applications and platforms that are for our kids.

Michelle Dennedy: Yeah, and I'll bring the bankers into account as well, because I think some of the business models inherently set the way that we're building the tech to meet them. I want to nerd out with you just a quick second here, Marc, and talk about the federal law in the US here, the 1998 COPPA law, the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act. What's different from today than 20 years ago when that law was first established?

Marc Groman: Well, in Internet terms, everything's different. That was web 1.0, and the concerns at the time were really straightforward like brand new things like AOL chat rooms and basic websites. This is pre-social media. This is before the iPhone or the smartphone. And there were concerns in Congress about privacy, and also about maybe kids interacting with strangers, or predators finding them in this new world of online chatrooms. And a lot of that launched Congress into this debate, as well as work by the FTC at the time.

So, now you fast forward two decades really, and we are now in the Internet of Things and a world of social media and user-generated content, and a wide variety of other different kinds of technologies, data collection, machine learning, algorithms, artificial intelligence, Alexa in your living room, and other sensors in your home. And so it's really evolved.

That said, the FTC did do an update to the rule several years ago, and made it clear that COPPA is not limited only to websites, but also applies to things like mobile applications and even smart toys, and also updated the definition of personal data to include identifiers. Those were steps in the right direction, although it was controversial, but COPPA and other laws ... or in fact, the absence of other laws ... mean that we're not keeping up with this rapid rate of evolution in technology with innovation, particularly around ... you know, I don't like buzzwords ... but the Internet of Things and this growth of connected devices, where it's not so much about individuals affirmatively giving information to a company or submitting it. It's around passive data collection, passive surveillance, machine-to-machine communication, making inferences about us. That's a whole new world that we have to grapple with, COPPA and other laws need to address.

Michelle Dennedy: Yeah, absolutely. And you know, COPPA, as you rightly point out, in 1998, we didn't have cars where you might have a child sitting in the passenger seat in your smart cart that's collecting all sorts of information. So, let's go back, and I think this feeds—

- Marc Groman: Interestingly though, Michelle, case in point on COPPA that's important, is that COPPA only applies when a company knowingly is collecting data about children who are under 13, or if it's a product or service directed at kids. And so if a company in the scenario you just presented, which is that you have data collection about a kid in the passenger seat, COPPA likely will not apply there, because the company will argue that, "I did not have actual knowledge that the passenger was under 13, and I didn't design it for kids, so I can collect away." Whether it's willful ignorance or avoiding facts, "I don't need to comply with COPPA because I didn't know."
- Michelle Dennedy: Yeah, it's interesting. And I wonder if we'll continue to watch this space, if there's going to be a differentiation between self-driving mini vans and things that are specifically for kids. But I think all of that is a brave new world, if you will. But I tell you what, in my own gut, I feel anxiety, so I want to turn to David for a second.
- David Reitman: Sure.
- Michelle Dennedy: It's my observation as a non-professional ... I have never seen the amount of preteens and teens admitted for three-day holds in hospitals based on anxiety. Suicide anti-pacts, where I see kids watching each other online on FaceTime to make sure no one harms themselves. Or other kids writing letters online saying goodbye to their peers, either as a cry for help or an actual notification. What are you seeing in your practice with anxiety, and how is that intersecting with all of these devices and all of this observation?
- David Reitman: Well, what I'm going to say is going to be prefaced by the statement that you can't necessarily sit here and say there is a cause and effect here. There's no real data that has ever shown that this causes anxiety. However, it is a conduit, alright, and it is another mechanism by which kids are communicating. So, yes, a lot of this stuff, kids are going to be presenting themselves very publicly online and on Facebook and various different venues, and they're going to post stuff, and because they don't understand exactly what they're posting, it's going to be seen by a lot of people.
- I think that what I will say is anecdotally ... I think that many of us who work with teenagers will see this ... is that there is a piece of being connected like this that creates anxiety in kids. It's the fear of missing out. It's the fear of everything. What if somebody sends me a text and I don't respond right away? What are they going to think of me? Am I considered to be the loser if I don't respond right away? The bullying piece that we've talked about on our podcast ... It's very easy to do stuff, bad stuff, to another kid if you're just looking at a screen. It's very artificial. There's not the personal or relational piece of it that you have to do if you're going to "bully somebody" face to face. So, I think that we are seeing a lot more anxiety, depression, that type of thing in adolescents, in college students, much more than we've ever seen in the previous generations of kids.
- It's not just about the technology, but the technology does provide a conduit for this. And it does make it somewhat more public, that parents are seeing stuff, which is a good thing in some ways, that the parents are able to recognize things and be able to intervene before things get to have a bad outcome. But I think that we are seeing this. Whether or not this is technology being the cause or being the result of it, hard to know.

- Michelle Dennedy: Yeah, and we'll get more into shamefully using our own experience as parents in a second, but do you think ... and this is a question for both of you ... do you think it sucks more to be a kid now?
- David Reitman: Oh my god, yes. Absolutely. I think is really difficult being a teenager right now. Marc and I have joked many times that if we had had these kinds of devices when we were teenagers, we would have gotten into a lot of trouble, like we wouldn't be where we are today. But at the same time, I think that there's a reality that this is the evolution of technology, is the way we've seen it happen. We had computers when we were teenagers. Kids have super computers now. It's not the thing where I'd say, oh, this is an all good or all bad thing, because frankly, we've got plenty of technology in our house, and there's plenty of good things that come out of it. But it's when the technology kind of takes control, when there's no filters, that the parents have, a lot of times, to kind of help the kids navigate the technology. That's where this becomes more problematic for the kids.
- Michelle Dennedy: Yeah. I think it's interesting. In my own observation of my girls and the circles around them, there's one side where they have a sense of community for the things that differentiate them. It's so interesting ... and it's kind of a cliché thing ... that you spend your adolescent years trying to fit in, and then you spend the rest of your life trying to stand out. But I think there is some truth to that. You want some sort of safety in the pack. But if you're a different kind of kid, you can find community online. But at the same time, the norm of ... is it polite?
- I actually talked to a 12-year-old that I wasn't raising ... just to be clear to my ladies ... and she had gotten into a sextortion ring. She thought that she was sending nudes of herself to a young man who was of a similar age, and it turned out that he was using sort of a Justin Bieber looking like avatar, and once he got her to do one thing, it led down the path of much more things because he basically threatened her. And I asked her, "Why did you send that very first nude?" She was about 12 at the time. And she said, "Well, it was polite. He sent me his picture topless, and so I sent him one." And never in my childish, nerdy imagination would I think that's a matter of simple manner and etiquette. Are the norms changing?
- David Reitman: Well, based on the discussions that we had when we talked to two teenage boys around sexting, I would say to some degree they may be. There's once again, not a ton of data out there, but I think there is sort of a cultural shift, yes, that if somebody sends you a picture, that it is rude not to respond with something. And then could there be a consequence if you don't respond? Are you going to be ostracized or anything else?
- One of the things, also, that a lot of the time the kid who feels like they are lonely and that no one understands them, which is a very ...
- Michelle Dennedy: Every kid.
- David Reitman: A good number of 12- to 15- and 16-year-olds. They meet up with someone online who just kind of says, "Yeah, I get you. I know what you're feeling, and I'm feeling the same way." That person very easily could be somebody who is really not another teenager. I've seen this happen with multiple of my patients, where they've actually gotten in situations like this extortion thing you're talking about, where they really thought they were talking to another 15-year-old, and that's how they ended up sending up these pictures. And the person was absolutely not a 15-

year-old. They were 45, 50 years old. So, your story there actually is more universal than I think most parents want to believe.

Michelle Dennedy: And it crosses all demographics too. This is not lonely, neglected children run feral. This is people with loving households and families, and intact whatever. It feels like this is something that sort of reaches across the political and socioeconomic spectrum. Has that been your experience?

David Reitman: Well, remember, teenagers are supposed to make mistakes. That's their job. And teenagers, we kind of always joke about on the podcast, their frontal lobe, it's a big thing. And they don't see the consequences, and they don't stop to think a lot of times. They're not supposed to. In fact, the teenager who's got too much caution in there is almost not doing their job as a teenager. So, that's something that crosses every culture. It crosses every socioeconomic status. It crosses race.

Teenagers make mistakes. The question is, are the mistakes they make going to be ones that are going to have lasting consequences, or are they mistakes they make that they can actually learn from, grow from, and move on? When it comes to teenage pregnancy, there can be a lasting consequence. When it comes to doing stuff that's risky and illegal, there can be a lasting consequence. And when there is something that's going on where they're online and they're posting stuff that could follow them, whether it be just them looking stupid or drinking or anything like that or something more significant, that's going to follow them. But this is all part of that spectrum of ... they're just not programmed to use their heads to make good choices. The problem being that the consequences, when you throw in the digital stuff, is so much more permanent.

Michelle Dennedy: Yeah, and it escalates. I mean, if you added adult fear to a 2-year-old learning how to walk, they'd never learn how to walk, because every third step they're going to fall. I think it's similar, and it's hard for us as adults to look at a teenager that looks like they're a rational being and creature, but you're exactly right. If they're not failing now, they will as adults.

David Reitman: Right, right. And this is normal. Where I think most parents get freaked out is because of the fact that there are these significant consequences. And some of the stuff can be very in your face when there's pictures and stuff like that involved. And they are going to have to potentially face consequences, or the parents will, that are not what parents really expected when they first gave this cute little 10-year-old a smartphone.

Michelle Dennedy: Yeah, won't this be fun?

David Reitman: Which goes back to the role of the parent, right?

Michelle Dennedy: Yeah. That's what I was going to ask next. You guys are highly, highly successful. Doctor, lawyer. You're like the dream couple. And then you specialize in exactly this stuff. What's that like? How do you bring that home and maintain freedom?

Marc Groman: Our son would tell you it's horrible, and he is the most unlucky kid in the world. He has told more than one person, how did he get so screwed to have the only dad in the world who reads privacy policies?

Michelle Dennedy: I do too, honey.

Marc Groman: But I think what I would say is first, and you know this, notwithstanding my earlier comments about some of the features in technology. I love tech, and I love innovation and digital content, and our house is completely wired, and we have more devices and game consoles than I care to admit. Some people are surprised when I say that, but we do. Which then brings us to the role of the parents, which is that just like before you would give your child an automobile or their first scooter, or you teach them to ride a bike, we have a role here.

And one of the things that does frustrate me is when mom or dad, particularly where we live, gives their 10-year-old an iPhone for Christmas, and they unwrap it and off they go, when what ought to occur, what needs to occur, is the parent needs to sit down with their kid before it ever gets turned on ... and frankly, it should be way before its handed to them ... to discuss the kind of technology they're being given, the kinds of sensors on their device. What is location data? Where are the privacy settings? Why do we care about privacy settings? When they're younger, I control the apps and the administrative apps, and you can't just download any app without coming to us first. And then when you do want an app or a social media application, let's look at it together. Let's explore the features together and decide what makes sense and what doesn't.

And if that's not happening, then we can't be shocked as parents and as a society when we later find out that our children have engaged in sexting, or there's cyber bullying, or things are being posted online that shouldn't be. We have to engage. Part of it is understanding the technology they use, and part of it is simply conveying to our kids that our values, our morals, our ethics don't change because you're in front of a screen. If there's something you wouldn't do offline, don't do it online because you're not face to face with someone. And getting that across as well.

Michelle Dennedy: Yeah, I love that. And I'll tell you a game that I used to play with the girls before they ever got any sort of thing online. It's called spot the risk. We would use stories in the paper or even just pictures, and sometimes I would take the pictures on my phone and say, "Spot the risk." And sometimes it was like, "Here's the driver's plate. Here's the address to our home. But you think you're taking a picture of your best friend." Or, "Here's a picture of a sleepover, but your friend is getting dressed in the corner." Or, "Here's a picture that one of these faux celebrities have posted of their butt, and look at the comment section." Spot the risk is something that an analog parent and a digital kid can come together and have at least a discussion about why it's my concern, why does this make me uncomfortable for you. When you see it as being friendly, I see it as permanently going up on a dartboard somewhere.

Michelle Dennedy: So, we're sort of running up to the top of the half hour here, and I don't want to escape without asking you guys both your takeaways for parents, caregivers, privacy professionals, lawyers. What are some quick wins here? My recommendation, of course, is to subscribe to Their Own Devices, where you can hear Marc and David talking about these things. So, that's my reco. What do you guys ... some takeaways for parents and caregivers?

David Reitman: Marc, want to go first?

Marc Groman: So, there are a few quickly quick ones. If you have not had this conversation with your child at least 12 times, you're not being a parent, which is that delete doesn't mean delete. Teaching our children very early and quickly and repeatedly the lasting potential consequences of data, posts,

and photos you place online. Whether it's Snapchat or any other platform, data can be there forever, and making sure they can apply and understand that in their own terms. Not as a lecture, but make it relevant to them, and explain that just because you want to post something about your principal today, maybe not a good idea.

And then the other thing is just this higher notion of bringing your values to your digital life. They're not separate. And again, it goes to this point of if there's something you would not say to a peer on the playground face to face, because you're online on social media looking at a screen does not make it any more acceptable or any less harmful. And trying to get those two points across. We don't have time for others, but you asked for a couple, and so I like those two nuggets.

David Reitman: So, and as the doctor of the couple here, I would also throw in a couple things or a few things having to do with remembering that there is a life outside of one's screen, and how to kind of continue to parent and finding that balance. The big thing that I see with my patients is that screen time tends to intrude onto sleep time, and making sure that there are some pretty solid rules about how you manage that time, what time screens go off, what time gaming stops, what time they're allowed to send that final text or instant message, that type of thing at night. Really talking about not having the screens in the room so that there's not going to be buzzes or notifications that are going to wake the kids up.

As well as in general, about the fact that having technology, I really do believe as a doctor and as a parent, is a privilege, just like being able to drive a car is a privilege. It is not a guarantee. It is not something that is a right. And so if there's any kind of risks that are getting involved, that technology can be taken away. It's nothing that they have to have. And parents do have a right to say, "I'm going to confiscate your phone. I've got expectations that I want you to meet in terms of responsibility and being a good digital citizen, and if you're not doing it, then we're going to have to have a reset and reevaluate this."

Michelle Dennedy: Yeah, I like that. And every now and again, I may or may not have changed the password on our wi-fi system, just because that right was not being respected.

David Reitman: Absolutely.

Michelle Dennedy: I really, really want to thank you guys. I cannot tell your voices apart, and I think it's kind of amazing. And I think for all the parents out there, the question is really, do you let technology collide into your family, or do you collude to keep your kids safe online? Your choice kids. But I love what you guys are saying. Bring your values to your digital life. And there is life outside of the box. And the final, final word, get some sleep kids.

David Reitman: Absolutely.

Michelle Dennedy: You'll thank me later. Well thank you very much gentlemen. And it's a wrap, all you Sigma Riders out there.

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