

On Educating Girls: The Connected Girl Episode 5

Title: Navigating Life Online, with Laura Tierney

[00:00:00] **Trudy Hall:** Tweets, sound bites, texts, emojis. In our modern world, that's how we connect. But in a world where we are supposedly more connected than ever, why are so many young people, and girls in particular, feeling more disconnected from themselves? At the International Coalition of Girl Schools, we're invested in ensuring that girls are whole, healthy, and well. We believe keeping them connected to their voices and their confidence is the key to keeping them so.

[00:00:35] **Voice Notes:** Like a gentle wind chime, my voice knows music happens. When connection begins. My voice, my voice, my voice synthesizes with my friends and teachers. Allows other voices to complement mine. Harmonizing and mixing as one. My voice leaps across the hallway to say hello to my classmate who's having a bad day. Our voices speak of powerful magic. Tell a story that will unfold long into the future. Together. Together. Together. Together. We make history every day. Together. We are instruments of change.

[00:01:05] **Trudy Hall:** Connection often begins with an invitation. The Connected Girl, a podcast series curated by the International Coalition of Girls Schools, is an invitation to those who know, love, and believe in empowering girls. To engage with the experts we have gathered to understand the power and possibility of the many connections in the lives of girls.

[00:01:33] **Voice Note:** Well, so especially around this issue of 2D visual environments, right? Things like Instagram, Facebook, they don't use Facebook so much. But, you know, they use a lot of two dimensional visual environments. TikTok and things like that. I think the way to walk up to it is to say to them, these environments are about people's containers. These environments can only display the container. They really can't tell you much at all, if anything, about the contents. These are container environments. That's what they're designed to showcase. And so, yes, there's a wide variety of containers. Yes, our society values some containers over other containers. But, you need to remember all the time, you have very little control over your container. You have a great deal of control over your contents.

[00:02:20] **Student voice note:** I am not a big social media user at all. My parents have kind of regulated and been like, hey, we don't want you to have this or this. And even though I'm here and I like could, I respect their decisions. And so right now I only have Snapchat and that's how I like connect with my friends. And I think it's had a lot of positive as well as negative effects in my life. Makes it a lot easier to connect with people I don't see every day, people who live at home. But I've also realized, I think it really depends on the person. And for me, I went through periods of struggling with feeling really vain because I was constantly taking pictures of myself. And I was like, oh, I look like this and I look like this. And some days I'd be like, well, I just don't feel like I look pretty enough today. So I'm just, like, not going to snap

people. And that was unhealthy for me. So I've taken breaks from it. Um, and sometimes I do feel disconnected because people will be showing posts that they have or this funny video or something. And I'm just not even on the app, so I don't see it.

[00:03:19] **Trudy Hall:** A compelling report by Common Sense Media in 2023 tells us what we already knew. 98 percent of the teenage girls in the survey used social media daily, spending about two hours on average, on average, specifically on YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram. This most likely sounds like the young girl in your life. While this report, the first to ask girls what they think, made headlines for many reasons, I was drawn to the findings about how conflicted girls were about their relationship with social media. Nearly half mentioned the word addicted. They knew they often wasted time scrolling, but found social media to be essential. For creative inspiration, relaxation, and connectivity. Frankly, they already know social media plays both positive and negative roles in their lives. Clearly, it is a powerful influencer. And we need to be proactive in how we help girls manage their connection to social media. So that their social media use doesn't manage them, or doesn't disconnect them from their real lives. Hi, I'm Trudy Hall, your host for On Educating Girls, a podcast produced by the International Coalition of Girl Schools. This is the fifth episode in a series of six, in which we're talking about critical connections in the lives of girls. Each episode addresses a different sort of connection that is vital to a girl's well-being and any series about connections and girls simply has to include an episode on social media, right? Of course it does. And though this is that episode. I've invited Laura Turney, the founder and CEO of the Social Institute, a group of digital natives who are using a unique approach to help students navigate the possibilities of social media so that it can fuel wellness and future success. Laura, a social media expert who previously managed social media for ESPNW, Nike, Disney, and P&G, has worked with researchers, schools, and students to design an approach which showcases role models and leans into character strengths, such as empathy, integrity, and teamwork, to inspire students to make good choices with their social media use. You'll want to listen to learn more about ways to partner with your daughter as she makes daily decisions about what to watch and what to share online. Laura, I am so pleased to welcome you today.

[00:05:52] **Laura Tierney:** Thanks for having me.

[00:05:52] **Trudy Hall:** And I'm curious, Laura, how did you find your way into the work that you're doing now? There must be an interesting story behind the founding of the Social Institute.

[00:06:01] **Laura Tierney:** Well, I was 13 years old when I got my first phone, and it's nothing like the one I have today, but it did connect me with all of my friends, and it was, you know, a huge part of my social life. Uh, going through middle school and high school, and I remember being in the school auditorium, you know, in high school, and my school brought in a speaker to talk about, uh, social media and the impact it was having on our generation, and it was framed in such a negative way, you know how this is destroying our generation and um how it's only gonna lead to

more and more problems with our mental well-being and, and I was sitting there thinking gosh this is just such a such a negative way to look at a tool that is not going away in our world. And so I ended up working ah, in social media for some time after I graduated from Duke as a student athlete, a four time Duke All American, and I loved that intersection of technology and character development and all these wonderful skills. I was learning from being a student athlete, and when I was working in social media, I started huddling with students to hear all the amazing things that they were learning and that they knew about social media and tech. And oftentimes they know much more than adults do. And I just thought, wow, how amazing would it be to build an organization that locked arms with students across the country to inspire positive change and more positive moves in this modern world we live in. Out of that idea, ah, came the Social Institute and we are now a team, ah, that supports hundreds of schools across the country, students, parents, and educators. And it is, it's such a labor of love because I feel like I lived this problem, you know, myself as a teenager.

[00:08:08] **Trudy Hall:** Wise, wise move to link arms with teenagers because we know that this is really impacting their lives. If you noted that it impacted your own life years ago, and now we have the documentation that it's really impacting their lives. Are there some things that our listeners should know about how it impacts the lives of girls specifically?

[00:08:28] **Laura Tierney:** Absolutely. Just recently, right, the U.S. Surgeon General, ah, issued a national warning talking about the effects of social media on the five inches between a young person's ears and their mental well-being. And there's been certainly research done that shows, uh, how, uh, a significant consumption of social media, we're talking, you know, more than three hours a day, uh, can lead to increased, you know, feelings of insecurity and lower self-worth because of how much comparison goes on and that research is so important to keep in mind as we think about as educators, as parents, um, as users of technology, how can we help, you know, these students make, make positive moves and strike a balance with technology. Uh, press send on things that represent their core values and, of course, handle all the different social pressures, uh, that come with the world of social media and technology. The latest, you know, research showing 95 percent of students now have access to smartphones, um, and social media is simply how they are social. We can put restrictions in place, but it's not going away fully anytime soon. So the more that we can get ahead of this and help students, the better.

[00:09:55] **Trudy Hall:** I am intrigued by the fact that, you know, we know it's not going away. And so as with any other technology, it's really important that we dive in and understand what symptoms we're addressing. And I think we've all heard that anxiety is one of the realities. Increased anxiety is one of the realities for girls in particular. Can you tell us anything about that?

[00:10:16] **Laura Tierney:** I think when you think about anxious feelings that you get from using social media or using technology. It can feel like this out of control, you know, feeling I'm, I'm not in control of what my friends are saying. I'm not in control

of, of this. And there's this kind of downward spiral, uh, that's happening and you're doom scrolling, you know, and looking through Tik Tok, looking through Instagram and comparing yourself to others and more, and it doesn't have to be that way. I think you, you think of social media as something, you know, it's a tool. And if people aren't equipped to navigate it positively, you are going to see those negative consequences like anxiety and depression, posting something that chips away at future opportunities, like a job or an internship and so much more. I liken social media to giving students the keys to a car, and you can imagine if a student didn't go through driver's ed, you would see terrible consequences from students getting behind the wheel of a car and not having the education, right, to make positive choices, ah, on the road. And that is what's happening right now when parents, when educators, when schools are giving students, you know, school issue devices or personal smartphones or tablets. And we're not huddling with our children about those important foundational skills that helps you prevent those feelings of anxiety, ah, depression, and that that list goes on and on. And so this is about empowering and equipping students, rather than scaring and restricting them, um, so we can go on and on about the headlines about, you know, anxiety and, and other negative consequences. But the more that we could take a positive, proactive approach to this, it helps students learn those moves to prevent the negative from happening.

[00:12:25] **Trudy Hall:** So you must have intuited exactly where I want to go next in this conversation because I do want to move into proactive strategies. It's I think why a lot of our listeners tune into this particular podcast. So how can a parent get out ahead of this phenomena in their daughter's life?

[00:12:43] **Laura Tierney:** It's such a great question, and it's so hard for parents, right? Especially with this topic because you are behind the curve in many ways. One analogy I share with parents, um, when I visit schools across the country is how, think, think about this, I'm not sure about you, uh, Trudy, but when I was 13 kind of teenage years, I would go to the mall on a Friday night. There was not much to do. Right? In, in small town, Pennsylvania, where I grew up and you went to the mall and you hung out with friends, you didn't even really buy anything. You were at the mall. You were sitting at the food court, you know, with your friends and love my family. But if my mom or dad showed up at that mall while I was hanging out with my friends, I would just scoot on over to a different mall or a different place to hang out with friends. And I think that is the inherent challenge with social media is that parents are showing up at the mall that the students are at, right? They showed up at Facebook and students left Facebook and went to Instagram and the parents are now showing up at Instagram and the students are like, we're heading out of here. We're going to Tik Tok. And the challenge is that parents are constantly at the old mall. And so to your question, how do we get ahead of this as parents? Awesome strategy that I see students and adults using is students like coaching up and coaching their parents on what the new mall is like, right? Coaching them on, you know, who are they following on Tik Tok and why? Um, like what are they sharing, uh, to Instagram? Coach me. How does do not disturb while driving work? Coach me. I want to set up focus mode on my phone. So as a parent, I can make sure I'm giving you all of my attention, ah, when it's time to focus on family time. These are all

settings and these are all moves that students know rather well, and I believe like there's no better way to learn something than to have to teach it to others. So the more that we can empower students to coach up, it, it's such a gift, and it really is an empowering feeling for students to the thousands of students that we've spoken with.

[00:15:00] **Trudy Hall:** I really like the emphasis that you're placing on empowerment. Coaching up seems the perfect way to do that.

[00:15:08] **Student voice note:** I know some parents over worry. They overthink about the negative implications, which is completely fair. I understand their concern, but then there are others who believe it is the most wonderful thing in the world and unfortunately, I see really, really, really young girls, um, go on social media acting in ways and speaking in ways I would have never spoken that when I was their age.

[00:15:30] **Student voice note:** Somebody who's going to give their kid a phone. I think that they need to have this connection with the kid and say like, Hey, I'm here for you. If anything happens, I want you to tell me, right? Instead of the kid maybe seeing something on social media that they don't like, or some cyberbullying happening, and then the kid keeping it to themselves. So, keeping, um, a really good connection with that kid, as well as communicating things like, um, screen time and age controls, which are really important. And those are features that are designed to help kids and parents navigate social media.

[00:16:04] **Student voice note:** I think social media is a, a good thing as well as a bad thing. I don't think it's just negative. I think knowing what your child is seeing is probably one of the most important things just because on social media you can access literally anything and everything. It's so easy. Sometimes it's even by accident. You just click on one post and click on another and then you're on some crazy thing. I think knowing what your child is viewing is a really important thing and also the age restrictions are there for a reason.

[00:16:31] **Trudy Hall:** Are there other strategies? I heard you earlier on, you mentioned the word huddle. Are there other strategies that parents can, can buy into here?

[00:16:41] **Laura Tierney:** Yes, absolutely. One, you can always huddle with your child about social media and technology. And sure, at first it might feel daunting because you might not know as much about this world as they do. But again, empowering them to coach up, huddling often. You can huddle around the dinner table. You can huddle when you're driving your child to the soccer game or theater practice. There's so many opportunities every single week or weekend to huddle. There's research that shows that students are also, uh, eager to huddle when they don't have to necessarily, like, look you directly in the eye. And so even on, like, a walk around the neighborhood is a great time to huddle about these topics. Number two is when you do huddle, talk to your child about different positive moves that they could be making

across different apps because apps are going to come and go right, but the timeless moves that you could be teaching them include different standards. And we have seven standards at the Social Institute that we challenge students to live up to playing to your core values. Protecting your privacy like you're famous, striking a balance with technology, cyber backing by having each other's backs, finding positive influences, the people you follow, the new sources that you consume, using your mic for good is number six. And last but not least, seven is handling the pressure, handling different pressures that come with social media and technology, because let's face it, there's going to be a new version of Tik Tok that comes out six to 12 months from now. And those timeless moves your child could be applying to that last but not least, third is it's wonderful when parents can be reinforcing what their school is also teaching. And so I applaud parents for reaching out to your school community, ah, to the school leadership and just asking what is our school doing to equip kids for this modern world of social media and technology because right, repetition is the mother of learning. So if schools are talking about these important standards and then you are reinforcing it at home, it's such a team effort and in the end, students, students win.

[00:19:05] **Trudy Hall:** Again, I hear you again and again, it's positivity, it's character development, it's going back to core values, core values that have been discussed and practiced and how essential that is to embed that in their own decision making about the social media. So having said that, you and I both know that there are lots of schools that are now into, uh, suggesting detox strategies or camps that take away phones. Or I think we'd all agree that these phones are here to stay, but what's your sense and how do you advise when parents do think about detox strategies?

[00:19:38] **Laura Tierney:** I know that question is top of mind for many parents, especially given the U.S. Surgeon General's recent warning and, you know, limiting our time on social media and technology, and I'm a big believer, and this has resonated with parents across the country and educators across the country, of easing our children into technology so they're building the mental muscle where they don't, they might not need, ah, to take that time step of completely, you know, detoxing and they know how to set up focus mode. They know how to limit notifications and distractions when they're doing school work. And that is a muscle that you are building over time well before you get your smartphone. I've also had parents ask, well, you know what? I haven't really been doing this routine huddling. My child's kind of jumped into getting a smartphone of their own because we needed it as a family, maybe during COVID or prior to COVID to stay in touch with our child. And now they're in this space where they have a ton of freedom and they don't really have that mental fitness to know when to step away. And I think every family is different. And if you feel like, yes, you need to take that step to say, you know what, we are going to completely block this out and, uh, tune out kind of this need, then you know, your child's best, or, you know, your student best. That said, the more that we can get ahead of this and huddle with our children about these moves, about these settings, we can use tech to control tech, um, rather than vice versa. And technology really overwhelming our attention that we need to take, um, a more drastic step, like, like a bootcamp where you completely step away from technology.

[00:21:31] **Trudy Hall:** Sounds good. And because we do know that social media is an influence in the lives of girls. I want to take a different turn now I believe girls have used it in so many positive ways to become more socially active and socially active in, with activist strategies with all kinds of change agendas. Can you talk a little bit about that?

[00:21:49] **Laura Tierney:** Yes. Well, I mean as an entrepreneur myself, I can say that Social media has been an amazing part of my journey in, uh, landing three out of my four jobs after college, helping me land internships, following positive role models, starting my company and connecting, you know, with, with mentors. And again, it's how we are social in an entrepreneurial and professional way too. The power of LinkedIn, uh, the power of handshake and so many other platforms that you could use to expand your professional network, but you don't need to be looking for a job, you know, or an internship or a college admissions opportunity to use social media thoughtfully. You know, I think back of when I first started the Social Institute. I was so inspired by this one middle school story where there was a middle school student and she went into her school library and her name was Marley, and she saw that the library did not have many books that represented a young girl like her. And Marley said, you know what, I want to use social media to go raise more books to help out our school community. And she went home and she was in sixth grade. So she asked her mom, you know, for permission to use Instagram and she asked her mom if her mom can kind of help her tackle this problem that she sees in the world. And it was within a few weeks that she had raised Over a thousand books for her library by using social media for good and wow, if we could capture every story like that that's going on every single day of young women and young girls across the nation amplifying their voice, ah, to create a better place where students feel heard, they feel respected. I just applaud students for doing that and we're seeing more and more of it, which is amazing. And I think something us adults can, uh, sit back and learn from because students are speaking up in really respectful, thoughtful, meaningful ways. And that force is only growing, which is very exciting.

[00:24:16] **Trudy Hall:** Well, this is sounds also like that perfect opportunity for the intersection of huddling and coaching, that if your daughter comes to you and she's got this idea about making the world a better place how do you intersect with that? Will you do it by huddling and having her show you how various tools work? And then she asks you for advice on how you might spread the word and you're off and running now you're doing a project that the two of you can take great pride and it seems to me, right?

[00:24:42] **Laura Tierney:** Absolutely right. There was a study that came out from Penn State University, uh, not too long ago, before the pandemic, and it showed that students want to huddle with their parents about what they're navigating online, but they worry that their parents are going to overreact to some of the ideas or experiences that they share. You know, hey, I got into this disagreement in a group chat. Or my friend said this to me and they fear my parents going to take away my phone. They're going to take away Instagram and so the more that as parents, as educators we can sit and listen and truly understand these modern student

experiences that they're going through the more you reinforce that positive loop of students wanting to come to you and I think you have that great story of Marley and her mom

[00:25:37] **Trudy Hall:** Such a superb point and thanks for making it because I hear that again and again when I talk with girls their parents really for so many of them are their go to people and that's who they would choose to go to but for the fear you've talked about so the more we can train up parents to just be respectful listeners and deep listeners in those first moments and take an internal breath. So thanks for raising that. So as you continue on in your journey in this ever changing terrain of social media, What's your hope for how girls will come to better understand or better utilize this tool for good or asked another way? Are there things that you hope that will happen to help them disconnect from the negative influences?

[00:26:17] **Laura Tierney:** I believe that in a world of social media and technology that's not going away anytime soon, we can elevate our like social awareness and understanding of each other. Social media bridges the gap between, you know, you and someone overseas. It bridges the gap between you and other people that may not think exactly like you. And there's two sides to that. You could look at that and see, I don't, I don't want to understand people that are different from me. My hope is that we can teach students and adults the positive moves of understanding different perspectives. I mean, it's back to that amazing skill that we all learned growing up, right. And empathy and putting yourself in other people's shoes and social media allows you to do that. It allows you to see different perspectives. And my hope is that millions of students across certainly the nation and the world can build these modern life skills and even coach, uh, generations above them on how to use it positively. And I think it's, it's already happening. And again, I think the more that we elevate and amplify student voice through this important work, uh, through media, through podcasts, through educational curriculums, the better off we all are.

[00:27:46] **Trudy Hall:** Totally agreed. And so, as we bring this important conversation to a close. Can you offer some final thoughts, one to two words of advice or wisdom to our listeners as they head off to huddle with their daughters?

[00:27:59] **Laura Tierney:** It would be that, kids can't be what they can't see and the more that we recognize that every day we pick up our devices we set a standard for girls. We set a standard about who to follow. We set a standard about how to use our device in the presence of other people who matter a lot to us. And they're looking to us for positive role-modeling. And so my advice would be to, you know, help them see what they could become and using tech for good.

[00:28:38] **Trudy Hall:** This has been terrific. And I've really appreciated the way you framed ideas through a lens of positivity. I think the world needs more of that. I want to thank you for using words like empowering and coaching up and huddling. All of those things are going to make such a difference. And I think we, we tackle this reality one daughter at a time, one girl at a time, one child at a time. And we all look for the outcomes that I think you're hoping for as well. This generation is going to fix

the world that we have handed to them. And they're probably going to do it through social media as one of the fine tools that they pick. So thank you so much, Laura. I've appreciated this.

[00:29:14] **Laura Tierney:** Thank you, Trudi.

[00:29:19] **Student voice note:** When I think social media has given me a platform to use my voice, it's made me so much educated, especially in lockdown with like, kind of world views and what was going on, it's allowed me to make so many friends that I'm really close and so grateful for. Not like in a dodgy way, as in like, you know, making connections, again, making connections with friends of friends and then meeting up with them and I'm so grateful for the things it's done in my life.

[00:29:14] **Student voice note:** When you say the word connection my mind immediately goes to like an image of me sitting in my room with my friends laughing at night after we finished our homework and it's just like the laughter and the hugs and the smiles on people's faces instead of um thinking about like social media or snapchat that's not where my mind goes my mind immediately goes to the people that are in person and like the real world um emotions that I'm feeling.

[00:30:09] **Trudy Hall:** You've been listening to the fifth episode of The Connected Girl, a specially curated series produced by the International Coalition of Girls Schools for its On Educating Girls podcast. This episode is the fifth of six podcasts engaging listeners to think about the many ways that the connections in girls lives keep them whole and healthy. The International Coalition of Girls Schools created this series in true partnership with Two Stories, Audio editing, engineering, and sound design were done by Kozi Mzimela and Jordyn Toohey. Thanks to the girls of Wickham High School in Wickham, England and Culver Girls Academy in Culver, Indiana for the audio clips of girls voices used in the Connected Girls series. The story of the poem, Tell Our Story, used in the intro, can be found on the ICGS website. For more information, please refer to the show notes. Thanks for listening. It's important to the girls in your lives that you do.