



GOOD PARENTING

in the Digital Age



Parents in today's modern world

face a number of new issues they haven't had to face before. Parents today have to make decisions about what they should let their kids do online and when it's okay to give them a cellphone or let them set up a Facebook account. It leaves many people wondering what good parenting in the digital age looks like.

In today's world, it is common for American teens to have cellphones, computers, iPads, iPods, and more. They have grown up in a world filled with high-tech electronics that give them instant access and the ability to communicate whenever they want. While kids a generation ago would take a phone call on a rotary

phone as the family sat nearby listening in, today they have their own devices that give them the ability to engage in a wide variety of activities within seconds and in the privacy of their own rooms.

The digital onslaught is not going away anytime soon, so it's important that parents learn to navigate their way through. The good news is that there are ways to make things easier and to allow everyone to feel good about the compromises. The more we know about the dangers and concerns regarding technology use among today's teens, the more we can take measures to help them learn to use technology in a positive way and avoid pitfalls.



Areas of Concern

Some parents who have elementary or middle school children may be faced with whether or not they want their kids to have phones, social media accounts, and access to other electronic devices. Those who have teens likely already know some of the challenges that arise from the use of technology, such as when they see their teen's fingers move across their phone's keyboard without them even looking at it, while they are simultaneously having a verbal conversation with someone else.

Even many of today's schools are encouraging kids to bring their technology to school because it's used in the classroom for assignments. We are living in a whole different world because of all the technological advances, but these can pose some challenges and concerns. Some of those areas of concern include the following:

■ **Social media.** According to research conducted by Pew Research Center, 24 percent of teens go online "almost constantly." That alone may be a problem, because if they are constantly online it stands to reason that they are engaged in doing little else. They report that 71 percent of teens use Facebook, and 71 percent of teens use more than one social media site, such as Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter. The concern with social media is that teens may befriend people they don't know who could be potentially harmful, and they may share personal information with these people. This danger is, of course, in addition to the large amounts of time that some of them are putting into it. Social media also exposes them to a lot of images that they may not be mature enough to see or that can leave them feeling bad about themselves. Social media tends to have a negative impact on helping teens develop a healthy self-image.

■ **Sleep matters.** Parents have long known that kids, including their teens, need enough sleep to function well. Getting proper sleep each night helps kids perform better academically and in just about everything they may take on. What parents are not all that aware of is that many kids with cellphones are losing sleep because of them. Once they head to bed for the night, they are often leaving their phone on and are hearing a barrage of text messages and notifications from their phone. This often makes them want to check the phone and that in turn helps them lose sleep at night, as well as not get a good quality night's sleep. Research out of Rutgers University on this issue has found that the nighttime texting can negatively impact a student's grades, too. To help kids get a good night's sleep, have them turn their phone off and leave it out of their room at night so they are not tempted to check it and lose sleep.

■ **Safety issues.** According to the November 2016 issue of the journal *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, close to 90 percent of adolescents now own or have access to a mobile phone, and they are using them frequently. They report that adolescents send and receive an average of over 60 text messages per day. Their research shows that threats in the online world mirror those in the offline world. The Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire reports that one in every seven youth are threatened by online predators. Most parents know that there are risks when their kids are out of the house or their view, but today's technology has allowed the predators to gain access to teens right in the comfort of their own homes.

■ **Cyberbullying.** While bullying has been an issue for generations, it has become an even more widespread one today. According to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 15 percent of high school students have been electronically bullied within the last year. Technology has made it easy for people to bully others by posting things online about them, sending them messages, or creating fake accounts in their name. Cyberbullying is often difficult to deal with because people are able to hide their identity more than if they were bullying in person. This is a major concern because as pointed out in the February 2016 issue of the journal *Pediatric Clinics of North America*, cyberbullying has become a large problem, and these technologies are related to increased suicide rates, as well as deaths due to texting while driving.

■ **Sexting.** Parents have always had their hands full when it comes to teens and sex, but now they have to worry about sexting. That's where there are texts of a sexual nature that are being exchanged, such as sending nude photos and explicit messages. Many of these exchanges can easily be saved and used against the person, including someone sharing the photos and posting them online.

These are just some of the modern day challenges that parents face with the technology-driven world that we live in today. There are others, too, including doctors becoming concerned about "texting neck" from teens looking at their phone so much or whether their texting is impacting their grammar skills. It's enough to make any parent's head spin and wish for simpler times to come back into fashion.

10 Tips for Good Parenting in the Digital Age

1. Discuss proper technology usage with kids, including safety concerns when driving, conversing with strangers, sending inappropriate texts and images, and cyberbullying. Nothing inappropriate should ever be posted or shared.

2. Teach kids when and how to use their cellphone appropriately, including following the rules at school, restaurants, and movies. Discuss technology usage rules that they need to follow in order to maintain the privilege of having the devices.

3. Set boundaries and limits for what they *can* do, and then hold them accountable if they cross those limits. They need to know your expectations and rules for proper use.

4. Encourage them to limit their time spent on technology devices each day so they don't become addicted and they get stimulation and entertainment away from a screen too. Make family dinner time a technology-free zone, and keep phones away from the table.

5. Have one spot in the home, outside of their bedroom, where their phone and tablet needs to be stored each night. This way it's shut off and won't interfere with their sleep.

6. Discuss camera use with them because taking pictures today is easier than ever before. However, posting or sharing some photos could be embarrassing for others and lead to problems.



Doing Good

Good parenting in the digital age comes with a big heaping side of technology-driven challenges and issues of concern. However, it doesn't mean that parents can't still do a good job. Quite the contrary, good parenting takes place every day *despite* the technology issues that are all around. For most families it is a balancing act of allowing kids to take part in using technology and taking steps to keep them safe both physically and mentally.

Parents can take on these challenges and come out ahead by having an open dialogue about the issues with their kids. Let them know about the dangers, as well as what they can do to help protect themselves. Stress the importance of making sure that they don't give out their personal information to strangers and not to send things that may be seen as bullying or sexting. They may not realize that there are some dangerous and long lasting implications that can result from doing these things.

Some parents want to simply keep the technology away from their kids in order to avoid the challenges and concerns that accompany the devices. While that may work for a little while, kids at some point are going to have access to these things even if it's at their friends' houses or at school. The more ideal route to take is to teach them the appropriate ways to use technology. This way they can still engage as their peers do, use the devices at school and home, and know how to take measures to keep themselves safer.

7. They should be aware of the risks involved in installing and using particular apps. Before downloading apps, it's important to make sure they are legitimate.

8. Help kids understand the true costs involved in having a cellphone, including the monthly fee, data usage, download fees, and more. Put limits on how much they can use if you don't want to be billed additional fees each month.

9. Depending on the age of the child, parents may want to **use some of the parental controls** that are on cellphones and tablets. Enabling these can help you avoid problems, including being billed for app purchases that you didn't approve of.

10. Discuss how much information is appropriate to share online so that there will not be privacy concerns. This goes for photos, texts, sharing phone numbers, etc.



Our Example

Many parents don't like how much their kids, especially their teenagers, are so addicted to cellphones and other electronic devices. What many parents don't realize, however, is that they, too, are addicted, and that's the example that is being set for their kids. Researchers have been studying how social media and cellphone usage is actually distracting parents to the point that they are not being mindful or engaging with their kids. One look around a restaurant at lunch time and it's clear to see this is happening, with the parent staring at their phone as their child looks on, being ignored throughout the meal.

Mindful parenting is good parenting, including in the digital age. Mindful parents pay attention to the

here and now and give their kids attention when and where they need it. If parents are busy staring at their phones more than they are paying attention to their kids, negative consequences are bound to arise.

It's important that parents set a good example for how kids should use electronics. By setting time limits, adhering to usage rules, exercising caution, and not being addicted, parents can provide a good example for their kids about proper use of phones and technology. Remember, kids are going to pay more attention to what you do, rather than what you say, so if you are addicted to the cellphone, it's difficult for the warning to your child *not* to be addicted to get through.



Focus on the Pros

Not everything to do with kids using technology is a bad thing, even though that's what is usually focused on by the media. There *are* positives to technology use, too, and it's good to keep them in mind and focus more on them when challenges arise.

Kids having cellphones has made it easier for parents to keep in contact with them and to know where they are at all times. There are apps that can be used to locate, using GPS, where they are at any time during the day.

Computers and technology devices are also credited with helping kids have better fine motor skills, improving cognitive function, giving kids some entertainment, and helping them keep in touch with friends or family members who don't live nearby. Using technology in the

classrooms helps kids enhance their skills and become more prepared academically.

We live in a technology-driven world. Cellphones, computers, and other electronic device are everywhere, and they are not going to go away. In large part, parents are faced with the choice of either running from technology so that their child doesn't use devices at all, doing nothing and letting the chips fall where they may, or taking measures to teach kids how to use the devices safely and responsibly. Since there is little chance that we can hide away from technology entirely, and doing nothing is too risky, good parenting must include focusing on educating kids about the proper use of their devices.



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