

FACE TIME

Maintaining Healthy Family Communication in a Digital World by Rhea Maze



Parents today have more to worry about than TV time. There's Facebook time. iPad time. Cell-phone time. Video-game time. But if parents don't offer guidance on the unprecedented amount of technology this generation has at their fingertips, it could be trouble time.

While technology can enhance knowledge, technical skills and social connectedness, overuse can lead to a host of problems, from gaming addiction and sleep deprivation to Facebook depression and cyber-bullying. And if parents don't pay more attention, experts worry, they could be raising a generation of social misfits.

"I often notice families of four sitting together at a restaurant, yet no verbal communication is happening," says Dr. Donald

Traver, pediatrician at Pediatrics 5280. "Instead, everyone is on their cell phone communicating via text, email and social sites." That's not the way for parents to role model in the technology age.

In fact, Traver and other experts fear that most parents don't know the amount of time their children are in front of the screen, which can interfere with important developmental activities, such as playing outside, reading, and interacting with friends.



A BALANCING ACT

“We want kids to be well-rounded,” says Dr. Sheryl Stefaniak, a Denver-based child and adolescent psychiatrist. “They need to be able to function in the technological world yet still be able to be a social human being face-to-face.” From learning to utilize and interpret eye contact, body language, and voice tones and inflections, to being able to pick up on nonverbal social cues, parents should ensure their kids have adequate opportunities to learn and develop people-to-people life skills, Stefaniak says.

Children who don’t learn these nuances of nonverbal communication could grow up to face relationship issues, says Dennis Ballinger, manager of child and family services at Arapahoe/Douglas Mental Health Network. Parents should make sure kids are engaging in pro-social activities, such as sports and other extra-curricular activities, and pay attention to their kids’ ability to interact and converse with others, Ballinger says.

A FUTURE RIDES ON IT

Teaching children socially acceptable practice within the technological world is also a new parent role and could mean the difference between future success and failure. “Kids don’t always understand the impact their social media usage can have,” Traver says. “Inappropriate postings and photos that may have seemed funny in the moment can be really harmful to future endeavors like applying for a job or for college,” he says. “They can also harm friendships and become ammunition for bullies.”

Parents should also discuss appropriate use of text jargon and technology. For instance: Don’t use OMG and LOL in your college essay or first cover letter. And don’t break up with a girlfriend of two years via text. It’s still common-sense social parenting, just in a high-tech era. “If your kids are well-rounded and getting a balance of activities and social interactions,” Ballinger says, “then you don’t worry so much about the number of text messages they send. Worry when technology is all-consuming and skewing the balance.” ■

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Check out the book: “The Parent App: Understanding Families in the Digital Age” by University of Denver Professor Lynn Schofield Clark for more ideas and strategies.

DOCTORS’ TIPS

It’s important to show an interest in how your kids participate in media and technology, talk to them about it, and help them make good choices. Recommendations from the AAP include:

Limit the amount of total allowed entertainment screen time to less than two hours per day.

Discourage all forms of screen media exposure for children younger than age 2. Instead, initiate more interactive activities, such as talking, singing, playing and reading, which promote proper brain development.

Keep TV and Internet-connected electronic devices out of kids’ bedrooms.

Educate yourself about what media your kids are using and accessing, including web sites and social media, and monitor their usage.

Establish a family home-use plan for all media. Consider enforcing technology-free mealtimes and a bedtime curfew for all devices.

For more information: www.healthychildren.org.

SAY WHAT?!

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, young people now spend more time with media than they do in school—it’s the leading activity for children and teenagers other than sleeping.

Teenagers talk less on their cell phones than any other age group except for senior citizens, yet send an average of 3,000 text messages per month.

Most parents have no established ground rules regarding their kids’ use of electronic media.