



INFORMATION FOR PARENTS, CARERS AND TEACHERS

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Technology, the internet and the 21st century child - how parents can tame the beast

by Joseph Degeling, Psychologist

200 years ago, information travelled as fast and as far as a horse could. Letting our family and friends back in mother England know what we were up to would have taken months on end. 10 years ago we had to walk to our computer to get on the internet or check our emails, print out our photos to show them to friends, play a DVD to watch our favourite movie and phone a friend to hear what they were doing (right at that moment?). These days, to our great advantage, messages and "status updates" are sent almost instantaneously. We can go to the bank, watch our favourite movie, receive live sport updates, follow our idols, and play Scrabble with someone on the other side of the world all from our mobile phones.

The value that the internet and technology can add to our lives is enormous, but how aware are we as parents of the content that is actually available to our young people, and what do we actually know about the internet, technology and all that it entails in the 21st century?

I want to write a little about some of the emerging trends I am seeing in the use of technology by young people, with some suggestions of what we can do as parents to help our kids learn to engage more

responsibly with it. However, even as I write this, I must confess that I feel somewhat inadequate – like a lot of other parents out there, my knowledge of technology is not that great. You see, the way that we adults use the internet and technology is vastly different to the ways in which our young people are using it, and I think that this can place us at a great disadvantage. Adults tend to use the internet for practical or work related tasks, whilst young people use it as an extension of their social world – their participation in the real and cyber world is much more seamless than it is for adults. Parents need to understand this difference, as it will more than likely filter down into a very different set of expectations around the use of technology and, more than likely, be a source of conflict and tension within the household.

In my clinical work I am seeing more and more the effects of the improper use of technology, albeit more so amongst teenagers, but also in younger children as well. Some of my observations have been: chronically reduced sleep quality due to late night usage of smart phones; increases in the reporting of cyber bullying; problematic levels of internet and computer use (most notably computer

games); problems associated with sexting (sending and receiving explicit images of oneself or somebody else); problems associated with accessing adult content, and content which just shouldn't be available; as well as parents talking to me about the difficulties they have in setting limits on computer and mobile phone usage. For many of the young people and parents I see, technology has become a beast needing to be tamed!

Parents have started way behind the eight ball, and continue to be placed so as the rapid increase in technology continues. Kids live so much more in this world and are so much quicker at absorbing and adapting to the pace of technological change. How do we best assist our children in developing appropriate attitudes to their use of technology? A top down, reactive response to improper usage, where technology is restricted may be the default response of many parents, but it is not the best parenting technique in the long term. In fact some researchers argue that restriction of the internet can be worse for kid's safety online.

Developmental considerations also need to be taken into account - it is normal for young people to take risks, to react

negatively to boundaries and to experiment. The internet and technology are no exception. Just like any other behaviour in the home, we are going to have to encourage good ethical behaviour and set clear boundaries, maintain a high level of consistency and enforce consequences when our kids don't meet these expectations. In this sense there is no difference from parenting in the digital age, to parenting at any other time in history. We may just need to think more about adapting practical parenting to this modern context. The earlier that we can establish these expectations in our children's lives the easier it will be for us and them – kids will naturally fight for lost territory!

Some key tips that may help you think more about parenting in the cyber age (please continue reading other sources for more tips) –

1. **Develop your knowledge of the ins and outs of the digital world** – read, explore and experiment yourself. Talk to your fellow parents, talk to the IT teachers at school, and attend talks and presentations. But most of all talk to your child: get them to be the “expert” – sit alongside them and be inquisitive about what they are doing – enjoy all of the great aspects of technology together;
2. **Recognise the different ways in which your children use their technology** – it will invariably be much more social, and hence much more important to them than we may have imagined;
3. **Monitor your child's usage of technology** – good monitoring of your child's internet and technology use is an important factor, and one which needs to be based on the age and maturity of your child. Having your computer in a public space where it is easily monitored is a sensible step. Setting other practical rules about where and when the computer is available would also be recommended. Setting time limits on usage is a reasonable strategy, but may lead to (normal) issues around compliance etc. Coupling this with software that manages the time they spend on the computer automatically can take the fight out of it (such as *Net Nanny*). But, don't rely solely on this software to monitor your child!
4. **Set firm rules about when and where your kids can use their electronic devices** – Young people do not only access technology and the internet in our presence – thanks to wireless and portable devices, they can access the internet in their rooms, in the bathroom, in the backyard, on the bus etc. A fair and firm rule around where and when kids can use their portable devices at home is a sensible action.
5. **Do not let your children take their electronic devices to bed** – Some parents I have worked with have very successfully set a rule that all phones must be kept plugged into their chargers in the kitchen from 9pm onwards. Some parents have also turned off Internet modems at night time so as to discourage continued phone and computer usage. If they argue that they need their phone because it's their alarm as well, buy them an alarm!
6. **Talk to your kids about cyber bullying** – as with other forms of bullying, changes in their mood or behaviour may be indicative of some form of cyber bullying. Parents should talk with their kids regularly about how things are going in their friendship circles; particularly if there have been big changes. Limiting the child's internet usage will probably not be a good way to stop cyber bullying, as, according to research, most kids are less likely to tell adults about cyber bullying if they think their access will be curtailed in some way. One good way that parents can teach their kids about responding to cyber bullying is the **Stop, Block, Tell** approach: **Stop** correspondence immediately, **Block** the person from sending messages and **Tell** a parent/talk to the school.



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