

“Teens and Technology: Roles, Responsibilities and Developing Healthy Habits”

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When it comes to cell phones, texting, social media, and electronics in general, do you find yourself saying to your children and to other parents, “back in my day before cell phones...” Or, “kids don’t know how to talk to each other anymore.” Or, “there is nothing good about this stuff – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat...I don’t even understand it all!” If you have in fact said these things, you are definitely not alone.

A source of tension and often times of conflict between parents and their children relates to the use of technology, specifically, social media and how we communicate with one another. Teenagers may express the belief that cell phones are essential to daily living, and parents will sometimes claim that technology is often a primary stressor for their children. Neither is wrong. Technology allows for the exploration of various areas of interest, provides access to a wealth of information and is the avenue by which we often stay connected with those important to us.

Impact on Critical Thinking and Learning

As technology has played a bigger role in our lives, our skills in critical thinking and analysis have declined.¹ For instance, in the past, after having a difficult experience at school, there would have been time to think or sometimes brood about the situation overnight, before actually responding the next day at school. Now, there is less time taken to think about the interaction or statement (or gossip, meanness, thoughtless comments, even compliments) before making a response. The result is often an impulsive and retaliatory response with little thought given for the consequences, which only perpetuates the negative cycle. It is important that children learn how to process information they receive over social media both emotionally *and* intellectually. We need to “train” ourselves and our children to not immediately respond to a text or social media post. For instance, if you see a post or receive a message which is emotionally undesirable, put the device down. Try to spend five minutes thinking about the message and ask yourself: “Why did it affect me in that way? Is the message really that important? Does it deserve this much of my emotional attention? Does it deserve an electronic response at all?” Take time to THINK. The immediacy of texting and posting has become the norm. We need to learn to take a breath and THINK, not react. For parents, just like turning your phone off when you drive, be a role model in your use of social media as well. It will be better for everyone!

¹ University of California - Los Angeles. "Is Technology Producing A Decline In Critical Thinking And Analysis?" ScienceDaily. ScienceDaily, 29 January 2009.



Healthy Use

As with everything in our children's lives, when they engage in unhealthy behaviors, we attempt to find ways of decreasing the likelihood of repetition. Technology is no different. Parents are often frustrated with the way children use their phones and technology. A text stating, "Mom and Dad, I'm staying after school to get extra help in math" is seen as a healthy use of technology, while a sexually explicit text is clearly an unhealthy use of technology. The actual phone is not responsible for the content of either text. Rather, it is a result of the decision making of the user. We need to help children learn what safe, appropriate and healthy use of technology is. Remember that mistakes will happen, and the phone did not cause the mistake. Have a face-to-face conversation about expectations and safe and healthy use!

Expectations for Usage

Establish expectations for how technology should be used. The best time to have this very important conversation is before the purchase and use of your child's first cell phone or before establishing your password on Wi-Fi. Chances are, the teenager will know how to *operate* the technology, but we should set guidelines for the manner in which it will be used. Some ideas include:

- Define "healthy" use.
- Clarify appropriate times to be using the device.
- Implement strategies to help the teen disengage from technology when their interactions, or style of using the technology, become unhealthy or problematic.

Consider the following:

- **WHO** are the people your children are connecting with through technology?
- **WHAT** are teenagers using the technology for? Learning? Staying connected?
- **WHERE** are they using technology? In class? At the dinner table? While driving?
- **WHY** has technology become problematic for your teen?
- **WHEN** are they using the device? Late at night? During face-to-face conversations?
- **HOW** frequent, intense and appropriate are their online interactions?

"You can't put the toothpaste back in the tube"

Technology and social media are here to stay. In fact, there is a high probability you are reading this through a social media site right now! We should not fight the idea that our children will be using social media to engage with others, communicate with their peers and learn more about the world. Instead, let's learn and teach new ways to manage it in a healthier way.



Parent Resources

There are many resources available to parents and teens about using and managing the electronic world in which we live. In fact, there are “apps” for all kinds of things like relaxation, meditation and crisis intervention, including:

- **741741** - crisis intervention text line
- **Calm** – app to help with relaxation techniques, specifically deep breathing, meditation and sleep
- **Pacifica** – app for relaxation techniques, support network and strategies for specific situations
- **Daylio** – app for tracking mood and implementing coping strategies
- **TeenSafe** – app which allows parents to help the child manage cell phone use in a healthier fashion.
- The Contract: The Contract that started IRules and the Slow Tech movement.
<http://www.janellburleyhofmann.com/the-contract>
- Teaching Kids to Be Smart About Social Media. <http://kidshealth.org/en/parents/social-media-smarts.html>

Editor’s Note: The therapy team at Four Winds Saratoga understands that technology and social media play a significant part in a teen’s world. We take this, as well as many other teen issues, into consideration as we provide psychiatric treatment to each patient and support to their family. For information about our Child and Adolescent Inpatient Services or our Adolescent Intensive Outpatient Program, please visit our [webpage](#) or call Clinical Evaluation Services at 1-800-959-1287.

