

Technology advice for parents

It is impossible to ignore the important role that technology plays in our lives. We use it to communicate with colleagues, family and friends. It enables us to readily engage with the wider world. And it has become essential to success in most areas of work. Internet access, smartphones, tablets and laptops are extremely useful technology, but there are many downsides. In particular, it is becoming increasingly obvious that overuse of technology can have serious implications for young people. The following links are just a sample of the growing body of research into the effects of excessive screen time on children and teenagers:

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/dramatic-rise-screen-time-phones-tablets-childrens-health-at-risk-who-report-a7739621.html>

<http://time.com/5437607/smartphones-teens-mental-health/>

The purpose of this document is to expand on some of the issues around teens and technology, and to offer parents some suggestions as to how these issues might be managed.

Technology issues affecting teens

Among the recurring themes in the research are that increases in screen time are leading to decreases in physical activity, and increases in obesity, social isolation, depression, etc. These are unquestionably serious issues, all of which parents would prefer their children avoided.

This is what these serious issues might look like in the early stages:

- Night time use affecting sleep: It is important to understand that adequate sleep is vital to the developing mind of a teenager, and it can be tempting for them to stay online after the lights are out and you think they are asleep.
- Distraction from school work or homework: Interacting with friends on social media, watching YouTube clips, keeping a snapchat streak going, etc. can seem much more interesting than completing homework.
- Accessing pornography or other inappropriate sites: Causes distortion of attitudes and perceptions.
- Attention span decreasing as screen time increases: This is something you may notice with careful observation.
- Issues associated with bullying or being bullied on social media: These issues can become all-consuming and difficult to escape without blocking people and turning off digital devices.
- Not understanding that information and/or pictures they share on social media become public property: This leaves young people vulnerable to making mistakes that continue to cause them issues well into the future.
- Excessive online gaming: Excessive or compulsive use of computer games are characteristics of video game addiction.

These are just some of the behaviours that may indicate a more serious issue is developing.

Strategies that parents may wish to consider

There are a range of parental attitudes and strategies that may be helpful in managing the technology use of children and teenagers. The following discussion and strategies are offered for your consideration.

Complete abstinence from the use of technology is not a viable option if we or our children want to fully participate in the modern world. If we accept this premise, then children will be using technology to some degree. What can parents do to minimise the negative effects of technology use by their children?

Through their teenage years, young people are working towards the better decision making and self-regulation that will be required as an adult. This applies to all aspects of their lives, including the use of technology. While these qualities are still developing, parents have a responsibility to monitor their child's use of technology. And it is important that children and teenagers accept that as a parent you have the right to restrict where and when your child accesses technology.

A good place to start might be the development of some family technology rules. A parent led discussion on technology use can lead to improved understanding and the setting of clear expectations. This discussion might include respectful online behaviour, the effects of online bullying and abuse, the implications of sending naked or semi-naked selfies to others, and the damaging effects of pornography. Once these family rules are in place, being a good adult role model is an excellent way to reinforce those expectations without resorting to nagging. And, as with the setting of any rules or expectations, be firm and consistent.

Where should you allow the use of digital devices? Keeping digital devices out of the bedrooms of children and teenagers ensures that use of these devices doesn't interfere with important sleep time. Ensuring they are used in a public part of the home gives parents the opportunity to monitor how digital devices are being used. They can even be charged in a public area in the home.

Access to the internet at school and at home is vital. At school, that access can be via the College WIFI network or by using a College owned desktop device that can access the internet via an Ethernet connection. Connection via either of these methods at home will be important in terms of homework and assignment completion, and accessing classwork when absent. There is no need for a child or teenager to have data access on their phone plan. This data usage is very difficult for parents to monitor. And access to data via their phone gives them the capability to bypass the College network (and our associated filters and checks) by establishing a hotspot connection to their laptop or tablet. Access to data on their phone makes life difficult for both teachers and parents.

When should you allow access to technology and the internet? Here is some advice from the Office of the eSafety Commissioner on finding balance in young people's online time:

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/education-resources/iparent/staying-safe/balancing-time-online>

Parents might consider allowing access to digital devices for certain times of the day only. There is even the possibility of setting the times at which devices can access the internet via the modem, or by using the parental controls on the device. Here is some advice on using Parental controls on a range of devices:

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/education-resources/iparent/online-safeguards/parental-controls>

And to restrict what can be seen on a device, consider using filtering software:

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/education-resources/iparent/online-safeguards/filtering-software>

Filtering software can be used for a wide range of purposes, including social media monitoring and blocking, which is particularly pertinent to children given that most social media platforms have a minimum age of 13.

There is a great deal more information for parents available on the website of the Office of the eSafety Commissioner and parents are encouraged to browse through them for ideas and resources:

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/education-resources/iparent>

Of course, you may be using strategies that are not mentioned here. If you have any strategies that are working for you and your family, then we would love to hear about them and possibly include them in future updates of this document.