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A Christian Psychologist's Take on Parenting in a Tech-Driven World

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A Christian Psychologist's Take on Parenting in a Tech-Driven World

Abstract

"Technology is changing faster than any of us can comprehend or adapt to, and we must keep on the lookout for good research to support our decisions in coping with it."

Posting about adapting to a digital world from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/a-psychology-professors-take-on-parenting-in-a-tech-driven-world/>

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A Christian Psychologist's Take on Parenting in a Tech-Driven World

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Luralyn Helming

April 17, 2018



As a parent today, a major factor to consider is how technology will impact your parenting, your child, and your relationships with each other. Children now have access to technology that was not even dreamed of when their parents were children. This means that our children have a different childhood than we had, and we have to parent differently than our parents parented us. Technology is changing faster than any of us can comprehend or adapt to, and we must keep on the lookout for good research to support our decisions in coping with it.

Flexibility is key to managing parenting with technology. As with all other facets of parenting, we need to be flexible and responsive in our parenting in a way that is developmentally appropriate and appropriate to each individual child. Expectations about technology access and use should depend on the child and where he or she is at developmentally. But, you also have to be aware, as a parent, that rules need to account for the fact that technology is changing incredibly fast. New apps are released weekly. Apps that are old may acquire new options or may suddenly be exploited in different ways. Parenting technology requires both flexibility in practices and also rules that can account for the rate of these updates.

When considering technology use, first consider your own technology use and what you are modeling for the children in your life.

Children learn how to interact with the world by watching the people around them. If you are on your phone, they are learning to imitate that behavior. Remember also that if you are on your phone, you are not interacting with your child, nor modeling interaction with anyone they can see.¹ Consider your use of technology in front of your children and whether you would want to be on the receiving end of it.

Technology and Parenting Children

With children, developmentally appropriate use of technology is of central importance. Children under a year old have no reason to be using technology. Between then and elementary school—and, really, middle elementary school—technology use should be a shared activity between adult and child as much as possible. For example, many games and programs can be watched together. This will allow them to play games at the top end of their skill level (according to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development) and learn how to play new games. These decisions also give opportunities for bonding and interaction, and might open new avenues of communication—creating a pattern for your children to be discussing technology with you. It also allows you to model appropriate behaviors (such as stopping after a set time), and demonstrate appropriate reactions to losing.

You should always know what your young child is seeing or doing when accessing technology or media. You want to be able to discuss it with them and guide their thinking and responses through your interactions. There are many wonderful activities available online today, but they are *supplements to* rather than *replacements for* direct interaction with other people. Use technology to open conversations and build bridges with your children, rather than to replace their time and conversations with you.

Always make sure your children are getting plenty of physical activity as well; they should be getting at least an hour a day, so don't let screen time take away from that.²

Technology and Parenting Teens

As your child moves from childhood into adolescence, interactions with technology should change. You can allow your teenager freedom to use their own technology, within certain guidelines. There are still factors to consider with this new freedom.

For instance, teens use technology differently than adults. Teens are always in contact with their peers through their technology, and it is part of their social interactions. To cut your teen off from access to social media is, in most cases, to end his or her social life. Although they will still see their friends in school, keep in mind that even during school they are using their technology to connect and interact. Their communication might be made up entirely of sending pictures and videos.³

On the other hand, just as you might have had a hard time ending a fun evening out with friends in high school, very few teens have the self-control to walk away from the interactions coming in via social media. It is perfectly acceptable to have a time of night at which technology turns off and is put away. Research demonstrates that the use of screens at night negatively impacts circadian rhythms and the ability to sleep.⁴ Also, be aware that teens share information differently on the internet than you do. Because it is their source of communication with friends, they might post a video to the internet that you would have considered a topic for

an emotional rant in private to a single trusted friend. If you find they've posted content that is concerning to you, discuss it with them—but not in front of their friends, and not when you are emotionally charged.⁵

Be aware of violating the family rules you are creating. If your child is not allowed to use tech at the supper table or after 9pm, then why are you? Just as you cannot have a conversation with them if they are on their phone, they cannot have one with you if you are. Show them it is not a double standard and that you believe there is a good reason for the rule, so you follow it, too. Model respect for others in your social media use, including asking their permission before posting images of them.⁶

Safety in technology use should be a priority for you. You can search online or talk to your local police department or school about lists of apps that are unsafe for people to be using. You can ban these apps; you can also use this process as an opener to a discussion with your children about being aware and safe both online and in real life. It is also acceptable to have access to your child's phone and laptop, but be aware that snooping in their online life is as much an invasion of privacy as snooping in their room.

Use technology with your teenagers. Learn from them and ask questions. Using technology together should be an opportunity to bond, to share something. Remember, if you are their friend in social media, this is the same as hanging out with them and their friends. If you were going out to dinner with your teenager and their friends, what would those interactions look like? That's what public online interactions should look like. You are their parent, not their friend, but you also want to provide them some autonomy and independence.

Model wise technology use for your teenagers, from sharing images with respect to setting appropriate times for putting technology down. Talk to (and learn from) them about technology. Use technology as another means of connecting, both face-to-face by discussing it, and at a distance by using it for communication. Teach them safe practices, and set appropriate rules.

Technology Use and Research

Beyond considering how to interact with our children about the use of technology, it is also helpful to be aware of what current research is saying about the influences of technology. One recent study suggested a link between technology use and anxiety and depression.⁷ (Of course, much of this research is correlational, rather than experimental in nature, but it is worth being aware of.)⁸

There are a number of suggestions available to help cope with these potential issues. One common suggestion is to improve face-to-face social-emotional connections. That means parents should be talking to and interacting with their teens and encouraging them to engage in friendships that are face-to-face.⁹ Another suggestion is physical activity, especially outside, that could help counteract effects of depression and anxiety in general and leads to less time spent online. Restricting online access in general, even for older teens through family rules (like no technology after a certain time), is another possibility.

A final major factor that is beginning to appear in the research is that of the changes that technology seems to be making in how we think.

¹⁰ Technological updates across history have changed the ways humans are required to rely on their minds. These changes in cognitive processing will also have implications for the future—but this isn't always bad. The advent of writing meant that stories and information no longer had to be memorized. The printing press opened the door for reading for the masses. The availability of information on the internet allows us to focus less on remembering information and more on remembering *where* or *how* to find information. This seems to be changing the way we process information for storage in our long-term memories. Researchers are finding an increase in visuo-spatial capabilities and reaction time in people who use technology often. Reading on the internet is more about scanning rapidly than focus and imagination.

Parenting today is complicated by the rapid onset and growth of the technology field. Parents need to regularly monitor changes in this field to cope with the impact on their children. However, remember that flexibility, developmental appropriateness, and safety seem to be good guiding lights to such decisions. Use technology to your benefit to engage your children in conversations, allow the resources it opens up to supplement activities and interactions, model good technology use for them, and be willing to admit what you do and don't know about technology.

Footnotes

1. <https://psychcentral.com/lib/how-do-smartphones-affect-childhood-psychology/> ↩

2. <https://www.choosemyplate.gov/physical-activity-amount> ↩

3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRljitV9zPA> ↩

4. <https://www.sciencenewsforstudents.org/article/evening-screen-time-can-sabotage-sleep>
↩

5. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRljitV9zPA> ↩

6. <https://www.heysigmund.com/technology-social-media-rules-children-teens-wish-parents-follow/> ↩

7. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/going-beyond-intelligence/201711/preventing-and-calming-kids-technology-fueled-anxiety> ↔
8. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/more-feeling/201712/can-t-fight-feeling-technology-and-teen-anxiety>
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563209000971> ↔
9. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/going-beyond-intelligence/201711/preventing-and-calming-kids-technology-fueled-anxiety> ↔
10. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-power-prime/201212/how-technology-is-changing-the-way-children-think-and-focus> ↔