Navigating the Virtual Playground

Making Healthy Choices, Avoiding The Hazards

For better or worse, technology has become a part of modern life. Luckily, teens report more positive interactions than negative ones when using social media - 65% had connections that made them feel good about themselves, and 86% percent of teens surveyed said that they've received at least some general advice about safe and responsible internet use from their parents.

The flip-side though isn't as rosy. In a poll of over 1,200 teens, 50% considered themselves to be addicted to their mobile devices, and 78% check their phone at least once an hour. The average daily media use for teens is an astonishing 9 hours, with almost 7 hours of that being screen-time. This is problematic for many reasons. A study of 3,461 girls, ages of 8-12, found the more time they spent on their devices, the less sleep they got and the lower their self-esteem. Conversely, the less time kids spent engaged with screens and the more they spent connecting with others face-to-face, the greater their social success, the more "normal" they felt, the more sleep they got, and the fewer friends they had that their parents believed to be negative influences. So, short of locking up every smart phone, ipod, tablet, and TV in the house, what's a parent to do?

The answer: create a Family Media Use Plan *together*. This helps parents model healthy media usage and helps children learn to be selective about what they consume. The [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) has a customizable tool for families to set up ground rules around:

- Screen-Free Zones & Times
- Device Curfews
- Choosing Appropriate Media
- On & Offline Time
- Good "Media Manners"
- Good "Digital Citizenship"
- Staying Safe Online
- Sleep & Exercise

Kids need practice making media decisions with you, so they can make better ones without you.

> **Spark** - an activity in which you can "lose yourself," but isn't technology-based. *What's yours?*

This Is Your Brain On The Internet...

Smartphones are a perfect fit for the addictive parts of the human brain. The rewards of use are instant and withdrawal is uncomfortable, just like other addictions.

This is especially true for the evolving brains of young people. As we grow, our brains develop from the inside out and from back to front. The last parts of our brain to come fully "on-line" are the frontal lobes - they aren't mature until a person reaches their mid-20s.

This is the part of the brain that, when fully developed, can quickly ask questions like:

- Is this a good idea?
- What are the consequences of what I'm about to do?
- What plans do I need to make to reach my goals?

Young people *do* have frontal lobes, and they *are* able to use them to make good decisions. Typically though, a teen's ability to access them will be slower than an adult's. This lag time is when impulsive choices are made.

Until their brains are able to work for them, instead of against them, it's the job of the adults in their lives to help them navigate this process. Kids make mistakes. That's a big part of how they learn. How can we turn mistakes into learning opportunities? We can model good "messing up" skills by acknowledging our own mistakes and how we try to fix them. And, we can let them know that we love them, no matter what speed their frontal lobes are working at.

Your child is begging to download an app. *YES or NO? How do you decide?*

Try asking him/her some questions. You'll be better informed and she/he will get to practice thinking critically about app quality and safety.

- What does this app do?
- Who can see it or use it with you?
- Who does it connect with and how?
- Tell me about it's location settings.
- What do you know about its privacy settings?
- How do your friends use this app?
- Have you heard of anything bad happening with this?
- What are positives and negatives that YOU see about it?

Hot Potatoes!

Parenting Help When Things Get Hot!

Safely exploring the digital world

It isn't just tweens and teens that are wandering around digital minefields. Seventy-five percent of 0 - 8 year-olds have access to a mobile device, and half of them have their own. *How can we keep ALL our kids safe when they're online?*

- Teach them to trust their instincts. Never dismiss something or someone that gives them an "uh-oh" feeling.
- Never share passwords, even with best friends. Change passwords frequently, just to be on the safe side.
- Let them know that if they ever see anything on the internet that's confusing or upsetting, they can tell you, and you won't take their phone.
- Avoid using:
  - ➔ "Open" profiles
  - ➔ Birthdays, address, or phone #
  - ➔ Information about schedules
  - ➔ Real or full names
  - ➔ Incriminating or sexual photos
  - ➔ Intentionally hurtful language

Sometimes kids run into situations that have the potential for trouble, and sometimes they stumble into situations that are flat-out dangerous. They should tell a trusted adult immediately.

- There is no good reason that anyone would ever ask them to break a safety rule (Example: Share your password with me. Don't tell your parents that we're friends....).
- Just like a stranger in the park asking a child to help find a lost puppy, similar requests online are a red flag. Trustworthy adults don't need that kind of "help" from kids.
- If someone makes a "Boundary Violation" (asking about sex, bodies, inappropriate pictures...), let your child know they should get out and don't worry about being polite. This isn't flirting. It's sexual harassment.

- Teach them the difference between "Connectors" and "Disconnectors." Connectors are people that are happy when kids have strong, loving relationships with other people and work to make that happen. Disconnectors try to break those links and pull kids away from the love and support of family and friends. People that really love you, love you no matter what, and will never threaten to stop loving you.

Cyber-bullying:
Laugh at it, and you're part of it.

Resources for help and information

One of the best resources for helping to keep your child safe is to make sure he has a "net of five-" five adults that he trusts to help him. Why five? If your child or teen only has one, what happens if that one person is in a situation where he/she isn't able to help - or worse yet, what if that person is the one that's hurting your child? Ask your child who makes up her safety net. If she can't come up with five people, brainstorm ways that you could assist her in building stronger relationships with adults that you already know and trust.

This brave new technological world may seem scary at times, but there are places we can go for information to make us stronger and our world safer.

- The Jacob Wetterling Resource Center
  www.gundersenhealth.org/ncptc/jacob-wetterling-resource-center/
  Their vision is to end all forms of child abuse, neglect, and exploitation through training, education, advocacy, prevention and awareness, providing care and treatment for children, families, and adult survivors. Lots of free information and webinars. This newsletter is based on information from one of their workshops!

- Common Sense Media
  www.commonsensemedia.org
  Common Sense is dedicated to helping kids thrive in a world of media and technology. Providing unbiased information, trusted advice, and innovative tools to help harness the power of media and technology as a positive force in all kids' lives.

- HealthyChildren.org - Media Plan
  www.healthychildren.org/mediauseplan

- Search Institute
  www.search-institute.org
  Research and practice to help young people become their best selves.

- It's time we talked
  www.itstimewetalked.com.au/
  Porn is now the most common sex educator for many young people.

- Parents.CultureReframed.org
  Helping young people thrive despite hypersexualized culture

- The Impact of Pornography on Children, Youth, and Culture by Cordelia Anderson

- Parental Control Software - 2018
  www.pcmag.com/article2/
  0,2817,2346997,00.asp

- WHY Do They Act That Way? A Survival Guide to the Adolescent Brain for You and Your Teen by David Walsh, Ph.D.

Cook County
Public Health &
Human Services

Sawtooth Mountain Clinic
Together Through Life
a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization