

PLUGGED IN PARENT'S GUIDE TO
technology and entertainment

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introduction BY DANIEL HUERTA, FOCUS ON THE FAMILY VICE PRESIDENT OF PARENTING & YOUTH

Everywhere I go, I see some kind of technology. It has transformed society, much like the printing press, radio or TV. However, what makes technology unique is that it's so intertwined in our lives that it's unavoidable.

Technology was supposed to make life easier. More information at our fingertips. More shortcuts to simplify daily routines. But as parents, technology often makes our lives more difficult. Apps, video games, binge-watching and social media can become a time drain for our kids. Technology also creates a direct—and sometimes dangerous—portal of influence to our children. Instead of enhancing our kids' lives, it can isolate them and open them up to cyberbullying, distorted messaging and risky behaviors.

The Plugged In Parent's Guide to Technology and Entertainment is designed to help you take the first steps toward being up-to-date on the latest research. The goal of this resource is to encourage you to stop and think about the technology your family uses and the entertainment you consume. It will also help you understand and navigate the pitfalls of today's most popular digital platforms and games. As parents, we need to educate and support our children in developing healthy technology and entertainment habits. God, through His Word, tells us to be attentive, be authentic and pursue unity with one another. That's great advice on how to live—and how to act in our use of technology and entertainment.

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my son was 11 when he first asked, “Can I have a cellphone?” Then he quickly added, “Most of the kids in my class have one.”

Statistics show the average age that a child receives a smartphone is 10.¹ I knew my son was not yet ready for the onslaught of information and decisions that come with owning a mobile device—most kids aren’t. Convincing them of this fact can be a challenge, but it’s a challenge worth accepting.

The online world seems to become more enticing every day. With more immersive gaming and new social media outlets, it’s also more addictive. Fifty-four percent of teens even admit to spending too much time on their cellphones.² Teens may spend up to nine hours every day on video games, YouTube and social media. Eight-to-12-year-olds aren’t far behind, staring at a screen for six hours a day.³

As a counselor, I interact with parents who have questions about technology use for their kids and entertainment choices for their family. Many wonder if it’s OK to give a toddler a child-friendly tablet, or to allow their school-age children to have their own mobile phone, or for a young child to watch a PG-13 movie.

Technology and entertainment certainly add complications to the important job of raising kids. That’s why it’s important to approach technology and entertainment use with intentionality and sensible limits, which are two of Focus on the Family’s 7 Traits of Effective Parenting.

A TOOL LIKE ANY OTHER?

Technology by itself isn’t good or evil. It’s a tool, just like fire or a power saw. Today’s technology can enhance our lives or cause serious damage. In order to keep your children safe, it’s important for parents to recognize how technology and entertainment can affect a child’s brain and mind.

Influence

For the last 20 years, Dr. B.J. Fogg, a behavior scientist at Stanford University, has studied how technology can be used to influence people’s attitudes and behavior. In 2007, he developed what is called the “Fogg Behavior Model,” which contends that behavior occurs when motivation, ability and a prompt merge together at the same time. Several companies, including Instagram, have reportedly used his extensive research to make their technology more influential in impacting people’s behavior.

Additionally, the past decade has ushered in a rise in *neurocinematics*, which is the study of the impact movies or films have on a person’s brain activity and perceptions. Filmmakers have applied this research to create projects that take a person to a deeper emotional and sensory experience.

45%
OF TEENS SAY THEY ARE
ALMOST “CONSTANTLY
ONLINE.” IN 2014 THAT
NUMBER WAS JUST 24%.

95%
OF TEENS HAVE ACCESS
TO A SMARTPHONE.

Source: Pew Research Center “Teens, Social Media & Technology 2018”

the brain and the mind

There is a real difference between the brain and the mind. The brain is a physical organ that processes what comes in through our five senses and helps with maintaining our automatic bodily functions. Our minds are different. Our personalities, memories and decision-making are included in our minds. God said to love Him with all of our heart, soul and mind (Luke 10:27). Let’s help our kids learn to train their mind in this age of ever-changing technology.

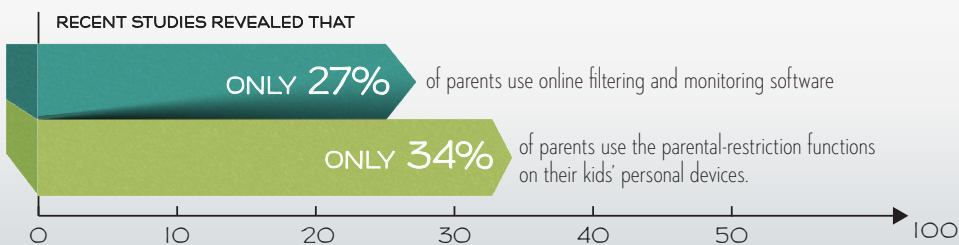
the brain and technology

Social Experience

Video games are also capitalizing on brain science. By creating a strong social experience, they give the player an illusion of power, unity and acceptance. This sense of belonging and power are especially motivating for a male-dominated audience. Some kids have reported that they find video games an escape from feeling sad, purposeless, isolated, inadequate and inferior. However, once they stop playing the game, reality becomes mundane, painful and boring.

Through these examples and many others, it's evident that our brains are directly impacted by what we experience through technology and entertainment. And one of the most influential ways is through the release of *dopamine*.

PARENTS CAN HELP REIN IN THE ONLINE WORLD THROUGH USE OF TECHNOLOGY-FILTERING SOFTWARE



Source: Pew Research Center "Teens, Technology and Friendships"

Dopamine

Dopamine is a powerful neurotransmitter that helps us pay attention, be motivated and remember what we like or dislike. I believe it is no accident that tech companies design their products to increase the release of dopamine into the reward and pleasure pathways of our brains. The user feels rewarded by the interaction with the phone or other technology and wants to continue using it to get that next spike.⁴

God designed our brains to experience reward and pleasure. But without limits and intentionality, the release of dopamine can cause unhealthy dependencies or addiction.

It's sort of like having a wallet full of money. We may start the morning with lots of cash, but we spend it throughout the day. If we spend it too quickly or make poor decisions, there are consequences. In the case of dopamine, these technology-triggered spikes could make us less attentive, motivated and emotionally stable. Other tasks can become boring and mundane. Regular life cannot compete with the "thrill" of technology.

Technology and entertainment are designed to capture and drive attention by triggering little rushes of dopamine. Kids need to learn how technology works and affects their behavior. Teens also need to understand that their brains are primed for risk-taking. Technology and entertainment offer the opportunity for the brain to experience "risks" without much loss, yet many of these risks aren't worth taking.

topics to talk about

Have a hyper-private teen?
Here are some conversation topics to get things going:

- A recent study revealed that just 30 minutes a day on Instagram has been shown to contribute to negative body image in teens.⁵ Why do you think this is true?
- Social media "likes" activate the brain's reward circuitry and give a person a similar rush to eating chocolate or winning money.⁶ What does it feel like to receive likes?
- Twenty-five percent of teens have experienced a face-to-face argument or confrontation as a result of posts on social media.⁷ Have you experienced this?

the brain and technology

WISE LIMITS

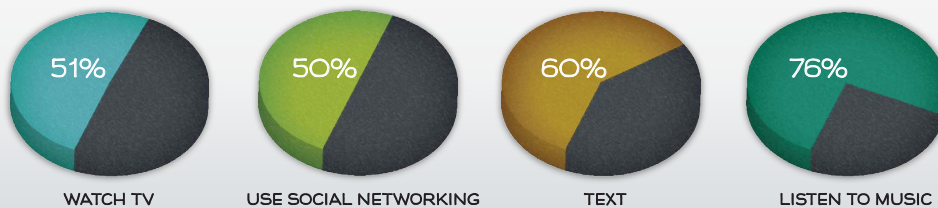
A 10-year-old brain is not ready for the digital decisions that today's smartphones introduce. That's what I told my 11-year-old son when he asked for a cellphone. Yet many parents, whose children already have computer privileges, feel a cultural pressure to get their kids a cellphone.

As you work through the "when can I get a cellphone?" conversation and other technology and entertainment issues, help your children understand these realities:

- **Technology is not bad**, but you have to be ready for it. Our family's goal is for our children to be trained in the healthy use of technology with supervision.

TECH DEVICES ARE FINDING THEIR WAY INTO STUDY TIME FOR TEENS AND TWEENS

TEENS SAY WHILE DOING HOMEWORK, THEY OFTEN OR SOMETIMES:



Source: Common Sense Media

- **Entertainment carries a message**, and you need to be aware of what it is. Powerful storytelling can influence our beliefs. Movies and TV shows often communicate messages that directly contradict what's in the Bible. As we consume entertainment, we need to keep our minds alert.
- **Our brains "mirror" what we see.** Have you ever noticed your body moving and shifting during an action movie or crying during an emotionally moving scene? Our brains "act" as if we are participating in what we're watching. The implications of this with sexual or violent content is disturbing.
- **The brain is vulnerable** to the quick distraction that technology and entertainment offer. But these distractions can rob the brain of amazing, imaginative moments. Boredom can be a gift. When the brain isn't being actively stimulated and distracted, it is an incredible opportunity to be creative!
- **The mind needs moments of serenity** to think, process and perceive. Technology and entertainment make it hard for the

music to our ears??

Music provides emotional expression and can be quite calming to the teen mind. However, musical lyrics have a direct influence. A national longitudinal research survey of close to 1,500 teens found that:

- Teens who listen to music with degrading sexual lyrics are more likely to be sexually active sooner and to participate in more graphic sexual behavior.
- Rap and rap rock were more likely to have degrading sexual lyrics.
- Sexually degrading lyrics send the message that people are objects to be used.⁸

Music brings a lot of messaging with it, so . . .

- ✓ Set limits
- ✓ Discuss the lyrics
- ✓ Explore a win-win finding great music to listen to.

There are a lot of great Christian music artists! What do you listen to? What is being modeled?

Interestingly, some teens are able to do their homework better with background music, especially music that does not have lyrics. Experiment with your child as to whether or not music helps or distracts when doing homework.

the brain and technology

mind to be still. Discuss what Scripture says about stillness: the importance of quiet moments in our relationship with God and others. Explain that people who use social media on a regular basis are more prone to anxiety, depression and stress.⁹

- **To play smart you must guard your heart** (Proverbs 4:23). Assure your kids that you are committed to helping them with all vigilance. The benefits of guarding your heart far outweigh the rush that can be found on a mobile device.
- **Sleep is critical for the brain.** Many kids with unwise boundaries are not sleeping enough because of technology use late into the night. Without enough sleep our brains don't have time to go through the necessary process of balancing, repairing, filing and processing the events from the day in preparation for the next day.¹⁰
- **Face-to-face interaction is best.** The availability of texting, social media and even some gaming often causes relationships to go digital. The temptation to connect digitally can be hard to resist because it is so quick and convenient. God designed our brains for face-to-face connections and loving and respectful touch, which has been consistently confirmed through scientific research. A child's brain mirror neurons (see sidebar) need to have face-to-face contact to help them learn how to interact with others.
- **Time limits are necessary** because our brain can easily lose its awareness of time. Time is precious and given to us by God. Technology can cause us to lose track of time, which results in responsibilities being overlooked and relationships neglected.¹¹ We need to help our kids learn to live within limits and be stewards of their time.

what are mirror neurons?

Have you ever seen little boys come out of an action-packed movie ready to take on the world? Mirror neurons in our brains cause us to mimic behaviors that are observed.¹² These neurons are in charge of how we learn and empathize with others.

As infants begin to learn, they mimic people. Kids continue mirroring what they see whether on TV, online or with people. For instance, a youth basketball team can watch videos of players and envision themselves doing plays that they aren't physically practicing.

These neurons also help us empathize. The more these neurons are exposed to consuming content rather than connecting with people, the more we are disposed to being a "consumer" of people. Our brains gradually begin to interpret others' value through the question of how useful they are, rather than how precious they are in God's sight (see Ephesians 2:10).

PARENTAL LIMITS ON TECHNOLOGY



75%

OF PARENTS PLACE
TIME LIMITS ON
VIDEO GAME
PLAYING



71%

OF PARENTS PLACE
TIME LIMITS ON
INTERNET
USAGE



68%

OF PARENTS PLACE
TIME LIMITS ON
TV
VIEWING



61%

OF PARENTS PLACE
TIME LIMITS ON
MOVIE
VIEWING

Source: Entertainment Software Association

the brain and technology

YOU AND TECHNOLOGY

As parents, we have an opportunity to model healthy technology and entertainment use through our phones, computers, media and tablets. When we tell our kids not to use their phones at the table, but then use our devices, our actions can become a point of contention and ongoing conflict.

Sometimes parents and kids are on a journey together to break free from the stronghold of technology and entertainment. I once met with a dad trying to help his teen son break free from video game addiction. This dad was a computer programmer who spent a lot of time gaming online. He saw computer games as his escape from physical and emotional pain. This resulted in the dad not being as connected as he could have been with his kids. His son also turned to video games—finding power, belonging and competence in an online world. He felt inadequate and inferior at school and with his peers, so he gravitated toward a place where he felt a sense of worth and power. He also admired his dad and wanted to be like him. Recognizing the root of their addictions helped this family develop healthier habits together.

As you work through a strategy for how technology and entertainment will be used in your house, go through these questions as a family:

- 1. Are technology and entertainment consuming your time?** What steps should you take as a family to find balance? Why are limits important and which ones do we need for our family to win at guarding our minds?
- 2. What is good about technology and entertainment and not so good for your family?**
- 3. Are technology and entertainment impacting your identity?** Are you developing a distorted sense of the real you? How is this impacting your understanding of how God sees you?
- 4. Are technology and entertainment bringing your family closer together** or are they creating separation? What do you want as a family?



tip!

The easiest way to limit app time and also supervise TV and movie viewing on your kids' devices is by using a parental control software called [Forcefield](https://Fotf.Forcefield.me). Check them out for free at Fotf.Forcefield.me.

boys and girls

In recent years, the Pew Research Center has revealed that boys are much more likely to talk with their friends while playing online video games than girls.¹³ They also found that girls are more likely than boys to talk with their friends through social media channels or phone calls. A boy who feels inferior can control a powerful figure in an online world, while a girl who feels insecure believes she can find acceptance through social media.

video games and your kids

BY BOB HOOSE

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY, PLUGGED IN EDITOR

Game manufacturers are motivated by profit. So they aren't all that concerned about the kids in the audience. They crank out sleazy, blood-gurgling new video games because they make money.

As a parent, this may make you angry. But grasping this fact will help you determine how to best handle video games in your home. Plus, it'll help bolster your argument when your kids come begging to play the new, cool game that all their friends are playing.

GAME TYPES AND THE SPORT OF E

Video games have been created that cover just about every combination of activity and genre you can imagine. There are fighting games, shooting games, musical rhythm games, survival horror games, interactive novels, simulation games, building games, strategy war games, racing games, sports games, faith-focused games and classroom-based teaching games. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. Many other types of online or offline games can involve lots and lots of participants. Internet-connected role-playing games called MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games) can gather in literally thousands of players at the same time.

Then there's competitive video gaming. eSports is a booming industry. Fans fill stadiums or watch online as guys and gals who have sharpened their strategy and button-crunching skills compete against fellow gamers for cash prizes. Announcers call the action, just like at a football game, as crowds watch online shooters or battle games, such as League of Legends.

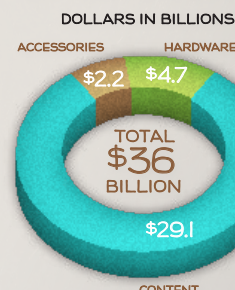
Fortnite

Fortnite is a video game that nearly everyone—from famous rappers to that neighbor kid down the street—seems to be playing. Millions of gamers have downloaded it and encouraged hundreds of thousands to tune in to just watch somebody else play it.

Fortnite: Battle Royale is essentially a massive online brawl that drops 100 players onto a large, lush digital island and says, "OK, gang, have at it." Weapons (crossbows, grenade launchers, rifles, etc.) are hidden all over the island. Participants explore, build defenses, find hiding places and aim to destroy each other. In general, this is a last-man-standing kind of challenge where the blasted are sent packing and must leave the contest.

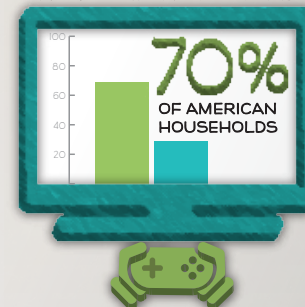
Younger players won't encounter any vile dialogue in this game, but that may not keep them from hearing it from the rest of the crowd online. Also, as with any adrenaline-filled shooter, this game is addictive. After making it past the first 60 or 70 contestants and running through vast online maps, it's easy to lose track of that ticking bedtime clock. The average single match is fast-paced and only goes about 20 minutes. But who can play just once when it's so easy to join the fray? Plus, the game can be played using everything from a gaming console to a smartphone.

TOTAL CONSUMER SPENDING ON VIDEO GAMES 2017



Source: Entertainment Software Association

VIDEO GAMES ARE PLAYED ON TV SCREENS IN NEARLY



Source: Entertainment Software Association

Fortnite fills Fort Knox

Fortnite: Battle Royale made \$1.2 billion in its first year of release. Not bad for a "free" video game.

video games and your kids

Adding to the addictive nature of *Fortnite* is the customizable nature of the characters. The game is free to play and doesn't have any pay-to-win elements, yet players open up their wallets to outfit their characters with backpacks, pickaxes and other accessories. So what starts as free can end up costing big money.

In just the month of April last year, *Fortnite* brought in \$300 million of revenue. Epic Games even offered up \$100 million in prizes for *Fortnite: Battle Royale's* 2018-19 competitive season.¹

Even if your kids aren't being drawn into competition, any aware mom or dad needs to realize that, with an ever-growing selection of game types and an evermore high-tech set of gaming consoles, gamemakers are stretching the boundaries of what they can create. Sexuality is being pushed. Violence is being glorified. Today's first-person shooters showcase graphic violence. And some gruesomely torturous games have even gone so far as to reward points for prolonging a digital victim's agony.

ESRB RATINGS

Now maybe you're wiping your brow and thinking, *Thank goodness consumers can make informed choices with all those Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB) rating codes.* Well, think again. The ratings aren't the solution.

Yes, those warning labels on video games—eC (early childhood), E (everyone), E10+ (everyone over 10), T (teen) and M (Mature)—can be helpful. But they're still just the opinions of a small group of assigned evaluators.² Just as with the movie rating system, nothing is foolproof. And some unsavory content can dribble into the “kid-friendly” ranks.

Besides, let's be honest, as the graphics get more realistic and the action more grisly, the “cool” factor increases. Finding even the rawest video game titles isn't as difficult as it might seem—especially since so many parents continue to think of video games as toys for the kids.

EFFECTS OF GAMING

Ever since video games began making their way to the family room, people have rightfully worried about what effect they might have on a growing tyke with a controller in his hand. This part, though, is tough to nail down.

In the many, many studies that have been produced over the years—studies that measure aggressive correlations, quantify learning benefits, evaluate game addictiveness, even studies that study how all the other studies got it wrong—nothing definitive has really been produced. Some standouts include:

- **The American Psychological Association.** Researchers concluded violent video gameplay was linked to increased aggression in players, but there was no link between playing violent video games and criminal violence.³



EARLY CHILDHOOD

CONTENT IS INTENDED FOR YOUNG CHILDREN.



EVERYONE

CONTENT IS GENERALLY SUITABLE FOR ALL AGES. MAY CONTAIN MINIMAL CARTOON, FANTASY OR MILD VIOLENCE AND/OR INFREQUENT USE OF MILD LANGUAGE.



EVERYONE 10+

CONTENT IS GENERALLY SUITABLE FOR AGES 10 AND UP. MAY CONTAIN MORE CARTOON, FANTASY OR MILD VIOLENCE, MILD LANGUAGE AND/OR MINIMAL SUGGESTIVE THEMES.



TEEN

CONTENT IS GENERALLY SUITABLE FOR AGES 13 AND UP. MAY CONTAIN VIOLENCE, SUGGESTIVE THEMES, CRUDE HUMOR, MINIMAL BLOOD, SIMULATED GAMBLING AND/OR INFREQUENT USE OF STRONG LANGUAGE.



MATURE

CONTENT IS GENERALLY SUITABLE FOR AGES 17 AND UP. MAY CONTAIN INTENSE VIOLENCE, BLOOD AND GORE, SEXUAL CONTENT AND/OR STRONG LANGUAGE.



ADULTS ONLY

CONTENT SUITABLE ONLY FOR ADULTS AGES 18 AND UP. MAY INCLUDE PROLONGED SCENES OF INTENSE VIOLENCE, GRAPHIC SEXUAL CONTENT AND/OR GAMBLING WITH REAL CURRENCY.

Source: Entertainment Software Ratings Board

video games and your kids

- **The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP).** Researchers found moderate gameplay that didn't dominate free time could lead to pro-social behavior and lower levels of peer problems.⁴

The AAP also put out this statement about kids' media use that's packed with a lot of common sense and truth: "Pediatricians and other child healthcare providers can advocate for a safer media environment for children by encouraging media literacy, more thoughtful and proactive use of media by children and their parents, more responsible portrayal of violence by media producers, and more useful and effective media ratings."⁵

WHAT TO DO?

So, what then does all this mean for the average parents who want to do the right thing by their child? For all the dangerous and destructive video games, there are plenty of titles your family may enjoy. Sifting and winnowing to find them, though, can take work and a discerning eye.

And that's really the key to this family video game puzzle: You need to put in a little work, followed by communication and involvement. Take the words of Proverbs 22 seriously and work at training up your kids to handle things that are potentially harmful—without forgetting the part about all the folly that's bound up in their inner workings.

Here are some suggestions:

1. **Talk it out.** Make sure your kids know exactly what your family's standards are. Let them know what types of games can hit the spotlight on your family room stage and which you consider to be bad actors. Sit down as a family and write out what you expect when it comes to video games. Set time limits on gameplay. Studies show that children who play for an hour or less per day tend to be more social and satisfied with life than kids who don't play video games at all. But gaming can be addictive. Define what homework or chores must be finished before anyone dives in. And let them know that if emotions start to rise, the games must fall.
2. **Understand the ratings system.** Figure out what the difference is between an "E" and an "M" rating. And use those ratings as a starting point—not a stamp of approval.
3. **Make it social.** Get the play out in the open, buy multiplayer games and keep plenty of controllers handy. Allowing gameplay in a bedroom is the video game equivalent of inviting monsters to set up residence in the closet.
4. **Play along. Knowledge is power.** The more you know about these games the easier it is to give something a yea or nay. There are plenty of games that parents and children can enjoy together. So get in there and give it a try.

be the parent

The Bible says to "train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6). That training should cover all areas of your child's life. Ask yourself:

1. **What areas do I need to pay attention to when it comes to technology?**
2. **What would make me a more authentic parent?**

Check out Pluggedin.com, Focus on the Family's online source for video game, movie and TV reviews. Millions of parents use this website every month to learn more about popular culture and technology.



family gaming

If you're going to have video games around, experience them with your kids. It's a bonding activity and keeps you in touch with what's being played on the console. Plus, it's a good way to make sure that things stay fun and playful.

Some teens spend upwards of nine hours a day on social media. Nearly a quarter say they're online almost constantly.

The importance of social media to our kids is nearly impossible to overestimate. So in most families, it's unrealistic to ask teens, particularly older ones, to forgo social media entirely. Much of their lives are lived online. It's how they connect with friends to make plans, coordinate schedules and share their dreams.

And social media, at least by some measures, may have an unexpected upside. Rates of teen sexual activity, drug use and alcohol abuse have been steadily dropping for years. Some experts credit social media for keeping teens relatively safe and sound at home.¹

But social media has swapped one set of dangers for another. Twenty years ago, adolescents would have to actively search for pornography. Today, it's accessible with just a click or two and often it just "appears" on their phones. Instead of boys and girls passing notes to each other in class, many are sexting.

And while it's easy to connect with friends online, it's equally easy to connect with strangers who have unsavory motives.

But there is hope. Not only do parents have the power to curb their teens' social networking, they have an incredible amount of influence on how their children think about social media. According to the Pew Research Center, "Parents are the most often cited source of advice and the biggest influence on teens' understanding of appropriate and inappropriate digital behavior."²

But to wield that influence, parents first have to know what's out there.

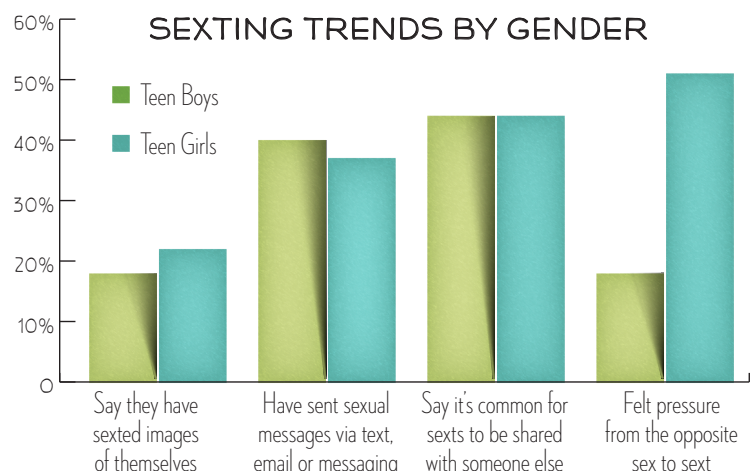


Eighth-graders who spend 10 or more hours a week on social media sites are 56 percent more likely to be unhappy than those who spend less time.³

THE SOCIAL MEDIA "STREAM"

The world of social media is a little like a fast mountain stream. If you dip in your toe, then dip it again, the stream may look the same, but the water you touch the second time is different than what it was before.

New sites and services pop up all the time. The sheer volume of services can be dizzying. But even in this ever-changing world, there are some sites that have remained relatively popular. (Note: Technically, children are required to be at least 13 years old before using almost any social network, though most services don't make it too hard to skirt those restrictions.)



Source: GuardChild.com

social media



YouTube: Think this site is just about music videos and LOLcats? Sorry. While much of YouTube's popularity is built on consuming videos, it's a social network at its core—giving users the ability to share their own videos and solicit comments and conversations about others. According to a 2018 survey, 85 percent of teens between the ages of 13 and 17 watch YouTube. Nearly a third say it's the social media site they use most often. In fact, teen and tween traffic to the site has nearly doubled in the last three years.⁴ And with more than 300 hours of videos uploaded to YouTube every minute, it stands to reason that the content of those videos run the gamut, between innocent family films and how-to vids to flat-out pornography. (YouTube tries to weed out the most extreme content and it encourages users to flag any vids they feel are inappropriate, but given the sheer volume on the service, lots of stuff can slip through the cracks.)



Instagram: Three out of four teens use Instagram, not just as a platform to share photos and videos (which it was designed to do) but as a prime social media hub for conversation, connection and sometimes flirtation. Coquettish posts aside, bullying is the biggest hazard on the site (facilitated by the ability to make anonymous profiles). According to *The Atlantic*, "No app is more integral to teens' social lives than Instagram."⁵ And with more than 1 billion folks using the service monthly, that bullying can go viral "in hours."⁶



Snapchat: When you look at the overall usage of social media by teens, Snapchat comes in third behind YouTube and Instagram.⁷ But drill down a bit and you'll find that when teens are asked what social media app they use the most, Snapchat is the hands-down winner. Thirty-five percent say it's their favorite network.⁸ Teens like it for its ease of use and fun filters. Plus, what's posted automatically "disappears" shortly thereafter. This feature makes Snapchat popular because it allows teens to be silly or awkward with no lasting record, sort of like a normal face-to-face interaction. But because posts are allegedly short-lived, Snapchat is also a favorite app for those who wish to sext. And the truth is those "disappearing" posts don't always disappear.⁹ A simple screenshot can allow them to live forever.



Facebook: Nearly 2.3 billion people use Facebook regularly, but fewer and fewer of them are teens.¹⁰ In 2015, about 71 percent of teens said they used the service. Now just a little over half do. The network does have some safeguards to protect kids from strangers and allow parents to check their children's profiles and post history. But that doesn't mean it can't be misused.



Instagram is the worst social media network for mental health and well-being." While the photo-based platform gets points for self-expression and self-identity, it is also associated with high levels of anxiety, depression, bullying and FOMO, or the "fear of missing out."

social media



Twitter: Twitter is the fifth-most popular social media service for teens.¹² Best known for its short, 280-character missives and “status updates,” it also allows users to post pictures. Everyone from celebs to politicians connects with their peeps via Twitter, making it a sometimes surprisingly newsworthy outlet. Twitter is, by default, a public forum. Making contact with strangers is not just possible, but almost a given. And because of its open nature, experts warn that users open themselves up to bullying and harassment, which can play havoc on a teen’s mental health.¹³ Moreover, foul language and adult topics are common. In addition, the service allows, by its own admission, “some forms of graphic violence and/or adult content in Tweets” as long as they’re appropriately called out as such.



Tumblr: This is sort of a cross between a blog and Twitter. More than 500 million people use it each month, but its penetration in the youth marketplace is comparatively low. Just 9 percent of teens say they deal with it.¹⁴ Maybe that’s because, technically, they can’t, or at least shouldn’t. While the site technically is meant for people 17 and older, it’s not hard for youngsters to sign up. It’s popular with budding writers and artists, because it provides an easy forum to share their work. But historically, it has harbored an overwhelming level of pornographic content. That may change with Tumblr’s recent decision to ban adult content (with some exceptions) from the site. But for now, the jury’s still out.



WhatsApp and Kik: These two messaging apps are crazy popular with teens. WhatsApp—a service owned by Facebook—now boasts 1.5 billion monthly users. Many are teens. Part of this app’s popularity is due to its privacy: You can message someone without it showing up in your text history. Also noteworthy: the service makes it pretty easy to sext. Unlike Facebook and YouTube, there’s no limit on the sort of content you can send. Kik, meanwhile, has garnered around 300 million registered users. Both of these services seem to open the door to communication with strangers. Some users solicit underage kids for illicit photos or videos. And while Kik has promised to remove users who’ve been “convicted of crimes related to child abuse,” some believe the service’s success in this regard has been spotty at best.¹⁵



Live-Streaming Apps: Heard of Houseparty, Live.ly, YouNow or Live.me? They fall under this networking umbrella. Houseparty allows groups of teens to connect via video (as many as eight at a time) for wholly unmoderated get-togethers. Live.ly, Live.me and YouNow facilitate public, live-streaming video. Teens who watch can be exposed to sexual content and lots of swearing. Teens who broadcast often do so to strangers, who may make inappropriate requests.

ways social media affect mental health¹⁶

1. It’s addictive.
2. It triggers sadness.
3. Comparing our lives with others is mentally unhealthy.
4. It can lead to jealousy.
5. More online “friends” doesn’t lead to greater social activity.

social media

SOME ADVICE

Given the bewildering world of social media, what can a parent do? Thankfully, moms and dads do have some tools.

The first line of defense is really good communication. Talk with your kids and teens about the dangers of these online worlds and how they can distract us from what God has for us. Make sure that you're in the know about what networks they're using (or would like to use). They need to understand that you have to approve of whatever social media they utilize: You're in control. Just as you wouldn't want them driving off with your car without permission, neither should they head into these sometimes dangerous social networks without your say-so.

You can find Christian alternatives to the popular social networking sites, as well. **MyPraise** may offer the most flexibility right now: It boasts parental filters, customizable templates and even a Facebook interface. **GodTube** offers a YouTube-like experience with an obviously Christian bent, particularly in terms of its impressive collection of music videos. **Cross.TV** claims to have "the world's largest library of Christian media content from around the world." But obviously, the world of social media is constantly churning. The popularity of these sites will wax and wane, and other sites will replace them.

Discuss with your children what a Christ-centered use of social media would look like. Ask them to explain the difference between being controlled by social media and controlling their participation in this technology. Where do they see themselves on this continuum?

There's no foolproof way to protect your teen from every sort of social media pothole. But God calls us to pass down wisdom to our children. It's a little like driving. You can teach them to follow the rules and do everything right, and bad things can still happen. But with a little foresight and knowledge, and lots of communication with your teens, you can shrink those potential dangers significantly. And if something does go awry, those critical lines of communication between you and your teen can help fix it.

content blockers

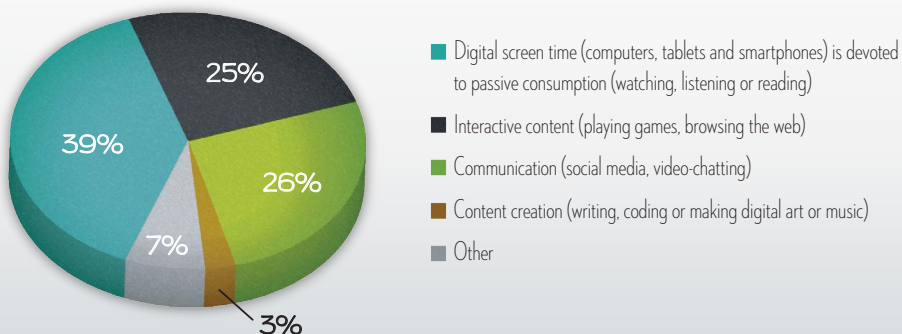
A number of companies provide internet filtering software that monitors and blocks sites that you don't want your kids to access. Focus on the Family partners with [Forcefield](#) and [Net Nanny](#), but there are others. Many send reports to parents regarding online activity. Some allow parents to manage the time their children are online. These services can work not just on computers, but smartphones and tablets, too.

tip!



Find out more about these services at Fotf.Forcefield.me and FocusOnTheFamily.com/NetNanny.

TECHNOLOGY USE ON AVERAGE AMONG TEENS



For many parents, allowing their children access to screen time is a conflicted topic. Yes, they want their kids to have the amazing possibilities of education, engagement and entertainment that the internet affords. But with those possibilities come pitfalls. The online superhighway of information is filled with harmful, disturbing content.

Filtering Software

Filtering software can provide a great solution for parents of young children who are new to devices as well as those with older kids—who might have already stumbled into or sought out inappropriate content. Yet finding a specific filtering option that works for your family takes time and research. When parents begin this process, it's important to understand how filtering software works in order to discover the right solution for your family.

There are essentially two approaches to protecting kids' digital experience: White list and black list.

White List

White list filtering blocks the entire internet except for any sites that have been "white listed" or approved. Given that most children under the age of 11 typically only visit 10 sites (or less), this is a convenient solution for parents who don't want them to stray into unsupervised web browsing.

But as kids get older, they will request more expansive internet access. Whether it's to connect with friends or do homework, parents may decide to open the door to the internet a little wider. This is where a black list approach may work best.

Black List

Black list filtering allows in all content, except that which has been flagged as inappropriate. A classic black list solution is Google SafeSearch, which filters out explicit search results on Google. The company is quick to point out this is not a foolproof solution. Inappropriate content can slip in. But is it better than nothing? Most definitely. YouTube Restricted Mode offers an even more sophisticated form of black list filtering. It not only blocks access to inappropriate videos, it also blocks inappropriate suggested videos that often lead unsuspecting kids down a rabbit hole of disturbing images. With Restricted Mode, comments are also disabled, so kids can't see the expletives and bullying messages that are often posted.

App Monitoring

Of course, not all inappropriate content comes via the internet. Apps also need to be monitored. Filtering solutions can either block specific apps from downloading on devices or alert parents any time a child has installed an app in real time. Other monitoring solutions grant kids access to the entire internet and all apps and then send parents alerts when algorithms detect that a child is using profanity, sexting, being bullied or showing signs of depression.

app-ealing talk

Find out what apps are favorites for your child and his friends. Ask:

1. Which apps do you like to use?
2. How do you use them?



it's black and white

- White list filtering blocks the entire internet except for any sites that have been approved.
- Black list filtering allows in everything, except content that has been flagged as inappropriate.

filtering through technology

The incredible benefit to using a high-quality filtering solution is that parents can give children screen time without hovering and spying. Not only is it near impossible to physically be in the room with our kids at every moment, constant hovering can also erode trust. With a thoughtfully selected solution, kids can gain independence while staying within a sphere of protection.

HOW KIDS HIDE APPS

At the same time, studies show teens spend an exorbitant amount of time trying to hide their social media activities from parents, using a variety of unsavory or secretive apps to obscure their online lives.¹ Knowing what apps are on our kids' smartphones can be incredibly challenging—even when they aren't intentionally hiding them.

Here are some signs your child may be hiding something:

1. Turning the screen off or quickly pivoting position when you enter the room.
2. Refusing to provide passwords or refusing to let you near his or her smartphone.
3. A spike in data usage or messaging rates.
4. Exhaustion due to staying up late at night using apps in privacy.

As parents, it's incredibly important for us to be aware of what apps our children are using. We should inform ourselves as to what these apps do and who can access our children as a result. The learning curve can be steep. Check out these ways that your kids may be covering up their app activity:



Password-Protected Apps. Vault, KeepSafe and Best Secret Folder are some of the most popular password-protected apps. While these apps can serve a good purpose, like providing a password lock on sensitive information, a lot of them are used to hide things from parents. In addition to needing a password to get into a user's phone, you then need an additional password to get into the contents of these apps. Users can put videos, photos and even messages in these kinds of apps.



Disguised Apps. These are apps with entirely misleading names, designed to throw off inquiring parents. One of the most common is Secret Calculator, which despite the mathematical sounding moniker, is actually used to discreetly store videos and photos.



Innocuous Sounding Folders. Kids might title a folder "Games" or "Music" or "Homework" and hope their parents will gloss right over it. Remember it's critical to actually look inside your child's smartphone folders.

Removing Apps from Screens. In addition to secret apps, kids can hide apps from appearing on the screen.

*Consider this:
In a recent study,
researchers discovered
that children
whose parents have
an ongoing dialogue with
them about screen time
are three times less
likely to meet
a stranger
they met online
in person.²*

in the light

Hiding things is dangerous . . . and it doesn't work. The Bible tells us the Lord will bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart (1 Corinthians 4:5). As you talk with your children about hidden apps, ask some important questions:

1. How are hidden things dangerous to our souls?
2. What happens spiritually and psychologically when we try to hide things?

filtering through technology

THE TECH TALK

Even if you inform yourself about hidden apps and use a filtering system, the best way to keep your kids safe in the world of technology is: You. Think about how many times you reminded your children to look both ways when crossing the street before they learned to do it on their own. Online safety is no different. It's not a one-time discussion. Start young and repeat often. Many experts agree that parents and kids should have a "tech talk" every two weeks. During this time, it's important to openly discuss what your children are experiencing online. Here are key topics to keep in mind during discussions with your kids:

Privacy

It is critical that kids understand the importance of protecting their privacy. Consistently remind them of the following:

- Not to give out their phone number, address or email to people online.
- Not to talk to strangers online. If someone is contacting them, they need to tell a trusted adult.
- Only to give you their passwords—not anyone else.
- Not to download any software on their own.
- Not to use their first or last name (or anything similar to it) when creating an online username.
- Make sure their social media settings are on highest privacy and explain why this is critical.

Transparency

Don't ask, "What happened at school today?" Instead try saying, "What happened on Instagram/Snapchat today?" Encourage your kids to share what's happening in their online lives.

Does your teen have a finsta account?

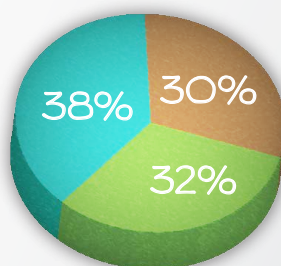
Teens often have more than one Instagram account. One is fed all of the pretty pictures and silly hashtags. That's the one Mom and Dad know about. Then there's a second (or third) profile known as a Finsta account ("fake Instagram"). This is often private and only followed by a teen's closest friends. Finsta accounts are typically where teens post their less filtered, less perfect images that can range from silly to scandalous.

To find if your child has Finsta accounts, open the Instagram app on his iPhone or Android device. Then:

- Tap on the profile in the bottom right corner.
- Tap on their username in the upper left.
- From the drop-down menu, you can see how many Instagram accounts your child has.

PARENTAL AWARENESS ABOUT TEEN'S USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

- Know "A Lot"
- Some Knowledge
- Know "A Little" Or "Nothing"



Source: Common Sense Media

filtering through technology

Also, be aware of how much time they're spending on their phones. When kids are involved in an ongoing discussion about their screen time, schedules are more likely to stick. Come up with reasonable limits. Also, keep in mind that the amount of screen time can shift dramatically between weekdays and weekends, as well as during the school year versus summer or holiday breaks.

Give your children the opportunity to be honest with you—and themselves—about their use of apps and other technology. Ask them if they're hiding any apps on their phones or participating in any online activities that your family wouldn't approve of.

And if you discover your kids have hidden apps, resist the urge to punish them by taking away their device. This will only further encourage them to conceal their activity. Let them know that they've damaged your trust, but that trust can be rebuilt. Talk about options that will give you greater insight into their online world (like a technology monitoring program) and allow them to build maturity and better decision-making in this area.

Finding these secret apps on your child's phone may be scary, but it's a great way to introduce the topic of appropriate smartphone use and to foster an ongoing conversation about responsible and safe use of technology.

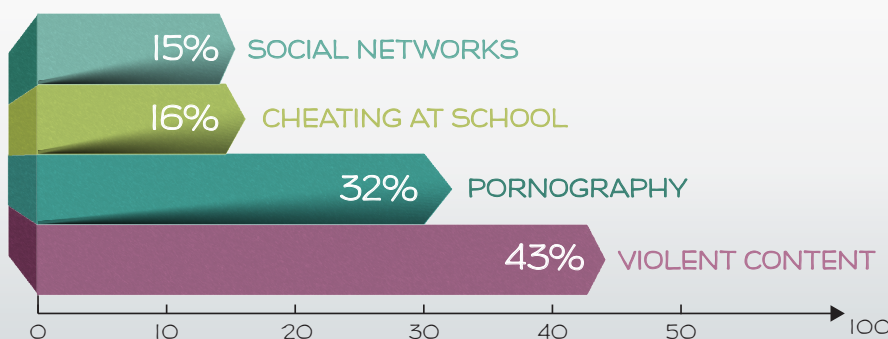


put up a forcefield

Forcefield is one of the only parenting monitoring solutions that allows parents to both white or black list their children's internet access, depending on the age and stage of each child. Parents can choose to restrict access to a limited number of sites of their choosing, while also giving their children access to Forcefield's library of curated educational websites. Or they can give their child access to the entire internet, with Safe Search and YouTube Restricted Mode locked in to filter out pornography and other forms of inappropriate content. Whether parents have blocking on or off, they can always see their children's internet browsing in a daily activity report. As our preferred parental control software, we've arranged for you to try it free for 30 days at Fotf.Forcefield.me.

SEVENTY PERCENT OF TEENS HIDE ONLINE BEHAVIOR FROM PARENTS

BEHAVIORS INCLUDE:



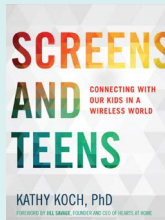
Source: "The Digital Divide" McAfee Study

CHECK OUT THESE RESOURCES AT

FocusOnTheFamily.com/techguide



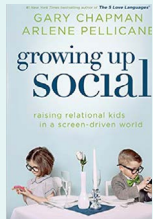
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by Paul Asay
- "[Four Ways Parents Can Protect Their Kids from Sexting](#)"
by Jim Daly
- "[Another App You're Not Supposed to Know About](#)"
by Bob Hoose

If your family is facing any of the issues discussed in this resource, please feel free to contact Focus on the Family's Counseling Department. One of our caring Christian therapists is available to discuss your family's situation with you. We can also provide you with a list of referrals to mental health professionals practicing in your area.



855-771-HELP (4357)
Monday – Friday
6 a.m. to 8 p.m. (MT)

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