

How parents can set technology boundaries for their kids

By Julie Mitchell

Published March 24, 2017

When I was teaching high school ten years ago, keeping kids off of cell phones during class quickly became one of the most annoying and time-consuming parts of my job (and that was even before iPhones were a thing). The school finally adopted a policy where any cell phone taken during class was kept in the vice principal's office and would only be returned to a parent. The most frustrating part of the process was the role the parents played. They would call and text their kids in the middle of class (knowing that their kids were in the middle of class), and the parents were often annoyed at the teachers when they had to come into the office to collect their child's phone. Some parents didn't believe the school had a right to impede their ability to communicate with their children at all times.

As a parent I understand the comfort and ease of being able to reach our kids at any time, but as a teacher, I know the futility of trying hold the focus of 30 kids who have one eye on their cell phone and the attention span of a 140-character tweet. In fact, according to author Adam Alter, a professor of marketing and psychology at NYU, our attention spans have gone from 12 seconds to 8 seconds in the ten years since iPads and iPhones entered our world. (Alter's book on technology addiction, *Irresistible*, and his interview on NPR's *Fresh Air*, are fascinating.) Before I was a parent I was naïve. I thought, "I just wouldn't let my kids have a phone, or play video games about killing things, or watch YouTube videos on their iPad all day." Then a wise friend of tween kids corrected my thinking. Tweens talk to each other about video games and YouTube videos, and they socialize on the phone. When you don't let your kid have access to those things, you make it harder for your child to socialize (as if tween socializing needs to be any harder) and easier to have your kid feel left out. So how do we give our kids access to some of the social ease of technology and still give them face to face social skills and real world expectations of time and gratification?

1. Be a good example

As with everything we teach our kids, it starts with our own behaviour. If you are addicted to your phone, you are teaching your kids to be addicted. Don't text and drive. Don't drive and hold the phone. Don't check your texts while your kids are trying to talk to you. Don't email people during your kid's ballgame. Be present. Be social.

2. Set a technology curfew

Put a tech hub in your bedroom and set a time in the evening when all phones, tablets, and laptops must be plugged into the hub. This prevents your kids from all-night texting or screen time.

3. Keep bedrooms, homework times, and dining tables technology free

A friend offered this great tip: technology should only be available for use in public spaces in the house. That way parents always have access to what their kids are seeing, playing, and saying. Most importantly, they have access to what other kids are saying to their kids. There's no reason a twelve-year-old needs privacy while texting, watching videos, or playing a game. Make a family rule of no screens of any kind during homework time or dinner. Some forced personal interaction everyday is good for the soul.

4. Know your school's rules and stick to them

Teachers and administrators have it hard. Make it easier for them. Make sure there are consequences at home if tech rules are not followed at school. If your child isn't allowed to bring a gaming device on campus, don't let him bring it. If your daughter has her phone taken up in the classroom, leave it there until the end of the week. You can always reach your child the old fashioned way, call the school and send a message to your kid in the classroom. Tell your child that she can always ask to call you from the office.

5. Monitor the usage time and set limits

I babysat for most of my life and I have seen boys who could play video games for six hours at a time and not even stop to eat. Internet gaming disorder and other technology overuse can produce negative effects on our emotional and social well-being. That's why it's important to keep track of how often we and our kids are on screen time. Then we can set limits, take breaks, and get ourselves outside and into nature. Alter used the iPhone monitoring app *Moment* to discover just how often he was using his phone everyday. The average is a whopping 3 hours a day. He also suggests a browser

extension for your computer called WasteNoTime which helps you set time limits on using certain websites (like Facebook). A friend of mine with tweens suggested OurPact or MMGuardian for monitoring usage on iOS and Android devices.

6. Strict social media rules

This is a tough one. In general, I think it's best if kids avoid social media all together. A friend of mine teaches middle school, and has seen so much drama around social media communication. I've seen so much drama with adults trying to communicate on social media. If your child feels the need for a social media account to keep up with socializing, set some very serious rules. Only allow one account. Have your child choose Facebook or Instagram or Snapchat or whatever the kids are using these days. You need to also have an account on that site and understand how the privacy settings work. Your child has to be friends with you on that account and you have to have access to your child's password. Set very clear expectations about pictures, chatting with strangers, talking religion or politics, expressing opinions, and being polite.

7. Make a contract

Some excellent parents I know made a contract with their eleven-year-old before giving him a phone. It is so much easier to set the boundaries ahead of time instead of establishing them after a problem arises. Have your child sign a technology contract that includes any or all of the bullet point in this post (like adhering to a curfew or having a tech free bedroom). Plus, you may want to include a rule that both parents have access to the phone or tablet at all times (including all passwords and lock codes). No apps, games or songs are to be downloaded without parent permission. Absolutely no communicating with strangers, and no sending pictures (with the exception of close friends and family).

8. Encourage phone calls and visits

When your child has been texting the same friend for 30 minutes, offer to go pick that friend up and take them to Starbucks for some real-time interaction. Before your child has a friend over, talk to your kid about what activities he'd be interested in doing that actually involve interacting with another human, like playing miniature golf or swimming. Then, try to subtly facilitate that interaction without embarrassing your kid. "I just don't get you kids these days. Why don't you put up your iPhones and play Hungry Hungry Hippo?!"

9. Let technology be the first line of punishment

Finally, I offer the advice that many of my friends offered me about kids and technology. Access to tablets, and phones, and games is not a given, it is a reward. Technology is not food or shelter. It is not a need, it is a want, and that means that it can be taken away at any time if it isn't earned. Don't be afraid to take away the phone. It's not cruel or unusual punishment. It's good parenting.