Technology in the Family: What Is a Parent to Do?"

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Technology surrounds us and changes almost faster than we can keep up with it, and children often are quite engaged with technology. Parents are frequently unsure whether to limit or to encourage time with technology in their homes, and they often worry about the effects of technology on their children.

The amount of time young people spend with entertainment media has risen dramatically, especially among minority youth. Today, 8-18 year-olds devote an average of 7 hours and 38 minutes to using entertainment media across a typical day (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). Teens ages 15 to 18 spend almost two hours sending text messages each day (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010). Cell phones, the Internet, Twitter, e-books, Blackberrys, I-pods and I-pads, Droids, Wii, and the influence of current technology is almost certain to expand beyond even our wildest imaginations in the next decade. Futurists have even predicted that families will one day have personal robots to entertain and tutor us in subjects such as math or foreign languages, and that high speed cars will drive themselves on the freeways, according to destinations we program into a computer.

Is excessive time playing video games harming children’s ability to think critically? Is it causing children to have attention problems in school? Is it keeping them from reading good books and experiencing other types of learning? Is it discouraging children from playing outside? Do they have real face-to-face friends, as opposed to computer or texting friends? Is technology hampering children’s ability to use their imagination and to entertain and play by themselves?
Research has shown both positive and negative effects of technology. Overuse of gaming technology has been associated with decreased academic performance and interpersonal interactions, as well as with an increase in aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Gentile & Anderson, 2003). Some studies found an increase in smoking (Kasper, et al, 1999), and obesity (Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2010) in children who are highly involved in video games.

However, other studies over the last 30 years showed benefits from video gaming, such as superior eye-hand coordination (Griffith, Voloschin, Gibb, & Bailey, 1983), faster reaction times (Yuki, 1996), superior spatial visualization skills (Dorval & Pepin, 1986), and an increased capacity for visual attention and spatial abilities (Bavalier & Green, 2009). One recent study found that surgeons who played video games were significantly more adept in surgical procedures and in suturing (Rosser, Lynch, Cuddihy, Gentile, Klonsky, & Merrel, (2007). Video or computer games (Rudon, 2008) may:

- inspire players to strive and reach more difficult levels presenting challenges at each stage
- help children gain self-confidence
- teach players problem solving, motivation, and cognitive skills
- encourage eye-hand coordination and quick decision making
- promote gains in motor skills and coordination in medical and physiotherapy settings.
- improve language, math skill, and social studies in those games based on history, city building, and governance, etc.
- cultivate a taste for graphics, design, and technology.
- assist children who are ill, since absorption in a game distracts the mind from pain and discomfort.
- help children with attention deficit disorders learn to focus.
- teach social skills and team play via games and computerized simulation.

How can parents make sense of this mixed research? On the one hand, it is exciting to have rapid and thorough access to information with the Internet. On the other hand, there are problems. Computers and cell phones, with their vast choices of news headlines, topics, and networking sites, easily consume many hours and can be barriers to children completing other work, as well as to real-time family conversation and relationships.

Another concern is that while technologies provide our children with immediate and widespread information, they also expose them to images or material that is not appropriate for children. Additionally, the technologies themselves can be used to hurt others, such as in cyberbullying.
Parents who allow their children to use these technologies should certainly monitor their children’s use.

Parents need to look for a balance and set limits on the amount and types of technology that gifted children enjoy. Parents should ask, “Are these technology devices blocking face to face, personal communication, and close family relationships?” How often do you find yourself communicating with your children by texting or email, even when all of you are at home? Note how often you have seen children in a restaurant or other public place, texting frantically, seemingly unaware of their surroundings or other family members who are with them. Is this good? Bad? Does it depend on the child?

Children who need more physical movement should be encouraged to spend time with those activities, and should not be sitting at a computer for hours at a time. Children who need to develop interpersonal skills by interacting with other children should have some of their free time budgeted for those kinds of real-life, real-time interactions. We should look at the child’s interests, strengths, abilities, and weak areas, and then try to develop both strengths and areas that are weaker.

Although children may be extremely bright, parents must remember that judgment lags behind intellect. Video games, Twitter, Internet, and the like are enjoyable, and that is good. However, do not let technology interfere with the development of healthy family communication and relationships. Parents are the ones to set limits, to be models for moderation, and to show how best to use technology. Since gifted children may be more at ease with technology than adults, some parents may wish to take a course on using these technologies, not only so that parents can talk with their children, but also so that they can reduce the likelihood of being outsmarted.

There are programs that allow parents to monitor or limit the Internet sites their children visit; other programs permit parents to flag key words that then forward emails or Facebook postings containing those key words to the parents’ email accounts.

We know one parent who recently caused her very bright 9th grade daughter to “lose” her Facebook and email privileges for two months when the parent discovered some of the daughter’s messages from Facebook friends discussing inappropriate topics regarding the opposite sex. After a few weeks under the new limits, the daughter came to her mom and said she realized she had been spending too much time on Facebook, and that now, without it, she was finishing her homework much faster. With Facebook, she had been allowing herself to be interrupted every time she got a new message from a friend, and taking the time to respond. This seems a good argument for parents setting limits that will eventually help the child realize how computer use eats valuable time.

Should parents simply resist this wave of technology? How many limits are needed? It depends on the child, but it also varies with the traditions that you are establishing in your family. Some families with gifted children do not permit, or severely restrict, television. In fact, the Obama girls are not allowed to watch T.V. during the week. Other families allow virtually unlimited TV watching and encourage their children to play video games.
As noted earlier, there are, in fact, strong benefits to technology. Teachers use computers quite successfully in classrooms, and communicate directly with parents about students’ progress. Tutoring programs, where a student interacts directly with the computer, have proven quite successful in teaching foreign languages (including pronunciation) and in helping children with learning disabilities.

The Internet and other communication technology are no longer a fad; they are a part of life in the 21st Century. Our opinion is that parents need to monitor their child’s use of technology and decide how much email, tweeting, Facebook, etc., is permissible and what kind of games will be allowed. If parents allow games, they should choose ones that are beneficial and that promote healthy interaction, and Some companies, such as Big Fish Games, specifically aspire to producing enjoyable games that promote personal and interpersonal development. Websites like Hoagies Gifted (http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/technology.htm) likewise provide a helpful listing of positive ways to use the Internet and other technology.

Parents want to trust their child, but parents also need to know what their children are doing with the technology. Parents are responsible for teaching children what is good and what is bad, and this applies to computers and other technology, too.

References


