

A PARENT'S GUIDE TO
today's technology

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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 and social media can become a time drain for our kids. They also create a direct—and sometimes dangerous—portal to our children. Instead of enhancing our kids' lives, technology can isolate them and open them up to cyberbullying and risky behaviors.

The goal of this resource is to encourage you to stop and think about the technology your family uses. It will also help you understand and navigate the pitfalls of today's most popular digital platforms and games. Technology will capture our children's attention. As parents, we need to educate and support them in developing healthy technology 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.

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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 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 percent of teens surveyed by Common Sense Media in 2016 admitted to being addicted to their mobile devices.²

As a counselor, I interact with parents who have questions about technology use for their kids. 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. They ask if it’s wise to allow their middle schooler to have a computer in the bedroom or sign up for social media accounts.

Personal technology certainly adds complications to the important job of raising kids. That’s why it’s important to approach technology use with intentionality and sensible limits, two of Focus on the Family’s 7 Traits of Effective Parents.

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 mobile devices can affect a child’s brain.

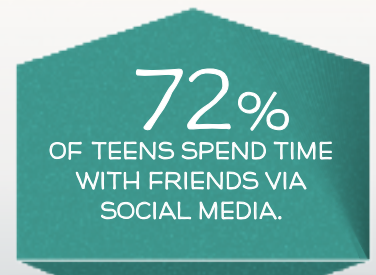
It is obvious that tech companies want to sell as many devices as possible. After all, it’s business. Companies look for profits. They pay close attention to what gets buyers to continue picking up their products and the features that entice users. They most likely ask: *How can we make our product best entertain, inform and inspire our buyers?* The result is that mobile devices are being increasingly engineered with an understanding of how human brains work—especially when it comes to 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 always be looking for 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.

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.³ 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.



Source: Pew Research Center “Teens, Technology and Friendships”

the brain and technology

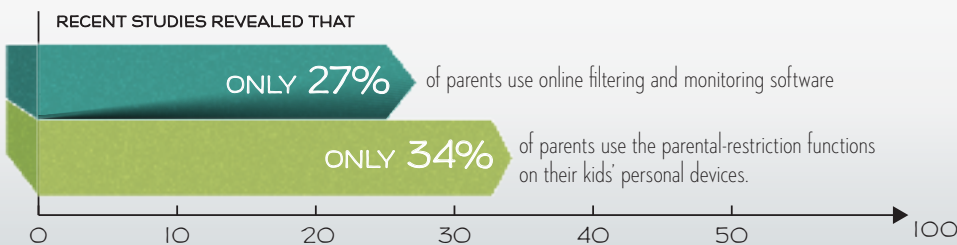
We may start the morning with lots of cash, but we spend it throughout the day. If we spend it too quickly or make poor decisions, there are consequences. In the case of dopamine, these technology-triggered spikes could make us less attentive, motivated and emotionally stable. Other things can become boring and mundane. Regular life cannot compete with the “thrill” of social- and entertainment-related technology.

Over time, people can get hooked on the stimuli that cause rushes of dopamine. And the flashy, glowing world available on every mobile device certainly creates enticing feelings of escape and excitement. Through widespread use of technology, our culture has been trained to behave differently than past generations: Attention spans are now much shorter than they once were, and many scan for information instead of reading it.

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.

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



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

WISE LIMITS

I have found that many parents, whose children already have computer privileges, feel a cultural pressure to get their kids a cellphone. But 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 and other families grappling with this reality.

Smartphones are designed to capture and consume attention through triggering little rushes of dopamine. Kids need to learn how technology works and affects their behavior. Teens' brains are primed for risk-taking, and technology offers the opportunity for the brain to experience risks with very little perceived potential loss. As you work through the “when can I get a cellphone?” conversation and other technology issues, help your children understand these principles:

- **Technology is not bad**, but you have to be ready for it. Our family's goal is for children to be trained in how to use technology with supervision, to help us prepare for healthy use of technology.
- **The brain is vulnerable** to the quick distraction that technology offers. But this distraction robs the brain of amazing, imaginative moments. Boredom can be a gift. When the brain isn't being

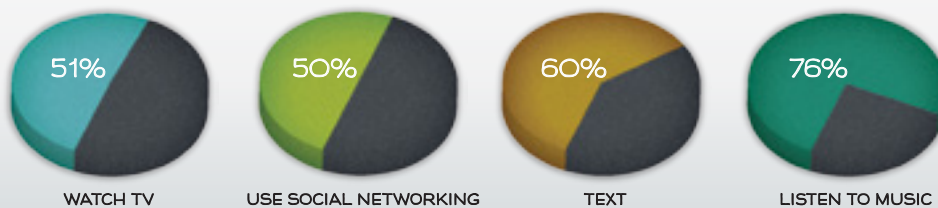
the brain and technology

actively stimulated and distracted, it is an incredible opportunity for kids to be creative!

- **The mind needs moments of serenity** to think, process and perceive. Technology makes it hard for the 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.⁵
- **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.

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

- **Sleep is critical** for the brain. Many kids with unwise boundaries are not sleeping enough because of technology use late into the night. This leaves their brains unprepared for the day. 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.⁶
- **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. A child's brain mirror neurons (see next page) 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.⁷ We need to help our kids learn to live in the present.

music to our ears??

Listening to music can be beneficial for some kids as they do their homework. But it depends on what music, what the child is studying and the child's sensitivity to noise. For most students multitasking leads to a loss of focus and comprehension.

"Nearly two-thirds of teens tell us they don't think watching TV or texting while doing homework makes any difference to their ability to study and learn, even though there's more and more research to the contrary," says James Steyer, CEO of Common Sense Media.

If your child says she can study and be on her phone, go through this checklist:

- ✓ What is being watched or listened to?
- ✓ Is homework taking longer to complete?
- ✓ How are your student's grades at school?

If you're satisfied with the answers to these questions, then your child may not have to change her study habits. But if your child isn't performing to her potential, help come up with a new study plan.

the brain and technology

YOU AND TECHNOLOGY

As parents, we have an opportunity to model healthy technology use through our phones, computers 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. 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 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 will be used in your house, go through these questions as a family:

- 1. Is technology helping or distracting you?** Give examples of each. If technology is a distraction, what steps should you take as a family to fix the problem?
- 2. What captures your attention and why?** Try to provide tech and nontech examples.
- 3. Is technology helping you be more real** or are you creating a “fake you”?
- 4. Is technology bringing your family closer together** or is it creating separation? What do you want as a family?

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.⁸ 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).

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](http://Fotf.Forcefield.me). Check them out for free at Fotf.Forcefield.me.

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

Let's start with a simple fact: Video games are not toys!

The average gamer, who plays three or more hours a week, is 35 years old.¹ (Yes, you read that correctly.) 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 for the new, cool game that all their friends are playing.

Now, if you're the old-school sort who still thinks of Mario or Ms. Pac-Man when you hear someone talk about video games, then you're probably in need of a quick course on video games.

GAME TYPES AND THE SPORT OF E

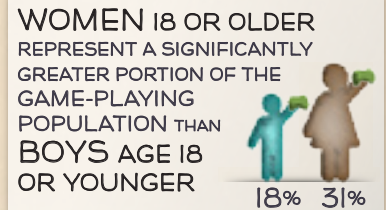
There are fighting games, shooting games, musical rhythm games, survival horror games, interactive novels, simulation games, building games, strategy war games, racing games, sports games, faith-focused games and classroom-based teaching games. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. Many other types 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 really 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 competitive online shooters or battle games, such as League of Legends.

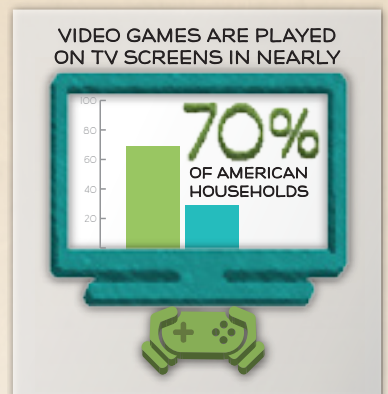
Market researcher Newzoo estimates that the various eSports entities and their gamers will bring in nearly \$700 million in 2017. By 2020, it's expected to grow into a \$1.5 billion industry. And that's not even taking into account the eSports-related gambling from a fan base of 400 million people.²

What's that got to do with young people in your household? Well, statistics show that eSports lovers and participants are overwhelmingly a young crowd. And as the media and tech giants increasingly get involved in the sporting side of things, they are challenging developers to build new titles with eSports-friendly features. "Come on in, kids, the gaming water is fine," they seem to be saying.

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 ever-more high-tech set of gaming consoles, game makers are stretching



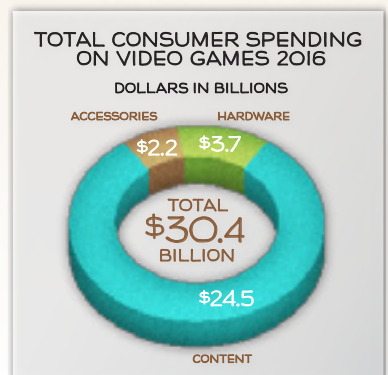
Source: Entertainment Software Association



Source: Entertainment Software Association

tennis anyone?

The idea of video gaming started in the early 1970s with simple bounce-a-ball games like Pong. These days games cover just about every combination of activities or genres you can imagine.



Source: Entertainment Software Association

video games and your kids

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.³

A Maryland mom noted in a Fox News article that the ESRB ratings didn't always line up with her values. She didn't notice much with the younger games. But once her oldest child, who's now 14, wanted Teen games, she was shocked at the content. "Even though a game may have a 'T' [for Teen] rating, which technically could be acceptable for him," she said, "there may be things in the game I just don't want him to be exposed to."⁴

That's the spot-on truth. Just as with the movie rating system, nothing is foolproof. Unsavory content can easily 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 the 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, studies that quantify learning benefits, studies that evaluate game addictiveness, 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.⁵
- **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.⁶



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 AAP also put out this statement about kids' media use of all types: "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."⁷

There's a lot of common sense and truth packed in there.

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.

It's impossible to overestimate the importance of social media to most of our kids. So in many families, it's unrealistic to ask teens, particularly older teens, 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. That realization is perhaps the first and most important step in learning how to encourage your teens to use those networks safely and in moderation.

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, even adolescents in a big city would have to actively search for pornography. Today it's accessible with just a click or two. 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 or cut 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

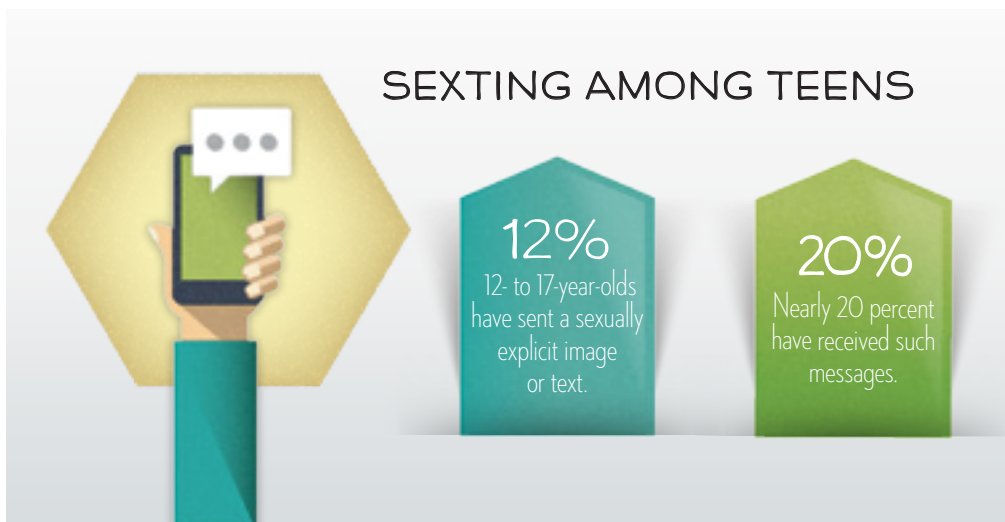
But to wield that influence, parents first have to know what's out there.



"It's not an exaggeration to describe iGen as being on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades,"

psychology professor and author Jean Twenge wrote in *The Atlantic*.

"Much of this deterioration can be traced to their phones."



Source: Cyberbullying Research Center

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 wholly 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 over the last few years. (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.)



Snapchat: Snapchat is the big dog when it comes to teens. Nearly 80 percent of youth between the ages of 13 and 24 use it. It's perhaps most notorious because what's posted automatically “disappears” shortly thereafter. Lots of teens like this feature because it allows them to be silly or awkward with no lasting record—making it a little more like a normal face-to-face interaction. But because posts are allegedly so short-lived, Snapchat is a favorite app for those who wish to sext. And truth is, those “disappearing” posts don't always disappear. A simple screen shot can allow them to live forever.^{3, 5}



Facebook: About 2 billion people use Facebook every month. Little surprise that three out of four teens utilize the site—connecting not only with friends, but parents and grandparents, too. 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.^{3, 5}



Instagram: Recent polls suggest that 73 percent of teens and young adults use Instagram. Like Snapchat, it's mainly a photo- and video-sharing service. Like Facebook, it has a broad, intergenerational appeal. Also like Facebook, it tries to remove nude images when someone tries to post them.³



Twitter: This service is 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 not just possible, but almost a given. And because of its open nature, experts warn that users open themselves up to bullying, harassment and damaged self-esteem. Moreover, foul language and adult topics are common and nudity is allowed.^{4, 5}



Tumblr: This service is sort of a cross between a blog and Twitter. Upward of 550 million users post their thoughts and art every month. It's very popular with budding artists and writers, who share their work



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.”

Source: Royal Society of Mental Health, 2017 survey

social media

with like-minded masses. But you don't just find art on Tumblr: You can easily find porn, too, not to mention posts that can encourage violence or self-harm.^{4, 5}



Musical.ly: Musical.ly is filled with singers, songwriters and lip-syncing teens performing for anonymous “fans.” While some of the videos can be quite creative, others can be objectionable, raunchy and profane. And because users tend to want to draw in the largest possible audiences, that can lead to inappropriate actions.⁴



Messaging Apps: These include services like **WhatsApp** (the most popular) and **Kik** (the most notorious). Many teens use messaging apps to share texts, photos and videos with their friends without limits, because there's little way for parents to monitor just what's being communicated.



These services may also open the door to communication with strangers. Some users solicit underage kids for illicit photos or videos. Although **Kik** has promised to wipe its service clean of users who've been “convicted of crimes related to child abuse,” it's hard to determine the success of those efforts.^{6, 7}



Live-Streaming Apps: Heard of Houseparty, Live.ly (an offshoot of Musical.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.⁴



SOME ADVICE

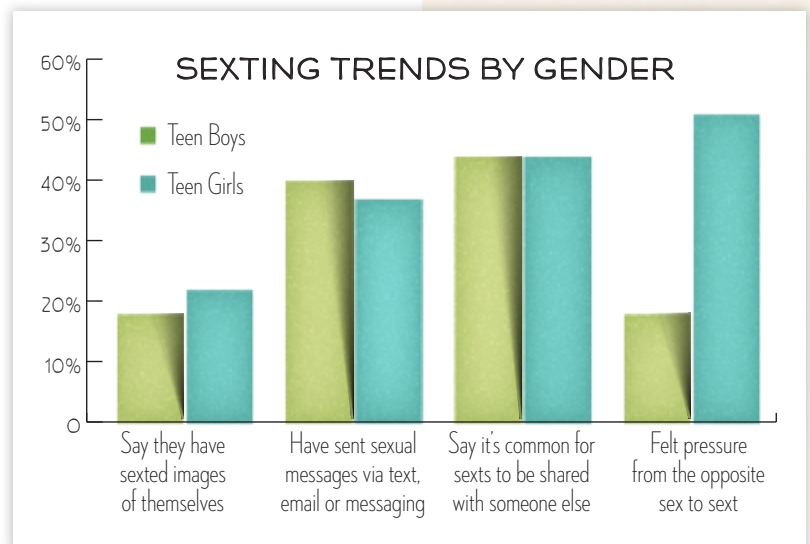
Given the bewildering world of social media, what can a parent do? Thankfully, moms and dads do have some tools.

The first line of defense is really good communication. Talk with your young children 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

ways social media affect mental health

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.

Source: Forbes magazine article by Alice G. Walton



Source: GuardChild.com

social media

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.⁸

Whether you use one of these alternatives or stick with the more mainstream networks, you should create strong and consistent guidelines for acceptable social media behavior in your house. Set limits on internet usage—insisting that devices must be shut down at a designated time. Form some internet- and social-media-free “bubbles.” Maybe during mealtimes. If at all possible, make sure that all online communication is done in the home’s public spaces—no bedrooms and no bathrooms.

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.

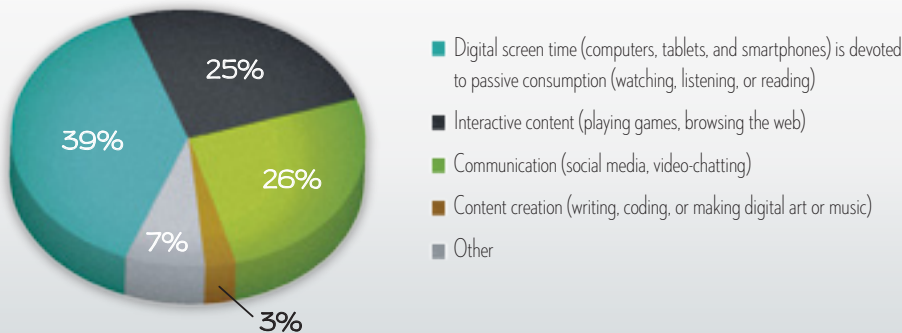
content blockers

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



Source: Common Sense Media

Knowing what apps are on our kids' smartphones can be incredibly challenging—even when they aren't intentionally hiding them. Yet many teens take an extra step to shield their online activity from their parents by hiding specific apps. This can be done in a number of ways and for a number of reasons.

WHY KIDS MAY BE HIDING APPS

Maybe you've banned Candy Crush from your son's phone and he's secretly reinstalled it. Or perhaps your 12-year-old daughter has decided that, contrary to your opinion, she is ready for her own Snapchat account. She's even installed the app, entered her age as 13 and is sending disappearing photos and videos via the app. But you have no idea because Snapchat has been conveniently tucked away into a folder called "Homework."

Here are some signs your children may be hiding apps:

1. Turning the screen off or quickly pivoting position when you enter the room
2. Changing passwords, refusing to provide passwords or refusing to let you near their 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 to know what apps our children are using. That means we may need to dig into our children's phones, looking at the home screen and deeper within the device. Then we should learn what these apps do and who can access our children as a result.

HOW KIDS HIDE APPS

Sociologists classify your kids as "digital natives." They grew up in a digital world and seem to innately understand technology. The learning curve is much steeper for parents. 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 secretly store videos and photos.

appealing 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?



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.¹ 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.² 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.³ Have you experienced this?

finding hidden apps

Innocuous Sounding Folders. Kids might title a folder “Games” or “Music” 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. On the iPhone, applications can be hidden by going to Settings > General > Restrictions and selecting which apps won’t show on the screen.

Even if you can’t write computer code or control your home’s thermostat from your smartphone, you can follow these step-by-step instructions to get the lowdown on your family’s phones.

If your child has an iPhone

Go into Settings/General/Spotlight Search. This shows you a list of all apps currently installed on your child’s device. It won’t, however, show you apps that have been deleted from their phone. In order to see all present and past apps from your child’s device, go to the App Store. Tap Updates (bottom right), then Purchased (upper left) and select All. Now you can see all apps that are currently installed on your child’s device (with an “Open” sign) or that were previously on their device (with a cloud/arrow sign).

It’s important to keep in mind that this list will only include apps installed with a specific iTunes account. If your child has multiple accounts, they can download other apps onto their device, which won’t appear in this list.

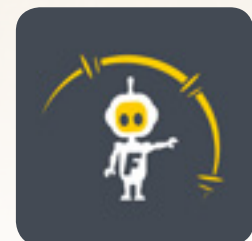
Forcefield, the company I work for and has an alliance with Focus on the Family, allows parents to see all installed and deleted apps from all iTunes accounts.



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.⁴

tip!

The Forcefield parental control software allows parents to easily see what apps are on their child’s phone and lets them remotely turn off any undesirable apps. Try it free for 30 days at: Fotf.Forcefield.me.



finding hidden apps

If your child has an Android device

Go to the “My Files” folder on their phone and open it. Click on the storage folder, either “Device Storage” or “SD card.” Tap “More” in the upper right corner. A prompt will appear, which allows you to check and show hidden files. This will show you all hidden folders, even the ones that other apps download on the phone like Facebook.

THE TECH TALK

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:

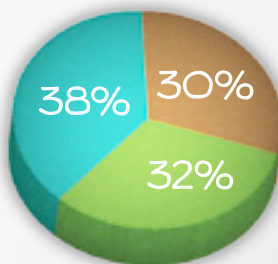
Privacy

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.
- Not to give out passwords to anyone, even close friends.
- 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.

PARENTAL AWARENESS ABOUT TEEN'S USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

- Some Knowledge
- Know “A Lot”
- Know “A Little” Or “Nothing”



Source: Common Sense Media

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 user name in the upper left.
- From the drop-down menu, you can see how many Instagram accounts your child has.

finding hidden apps

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.

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.

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?

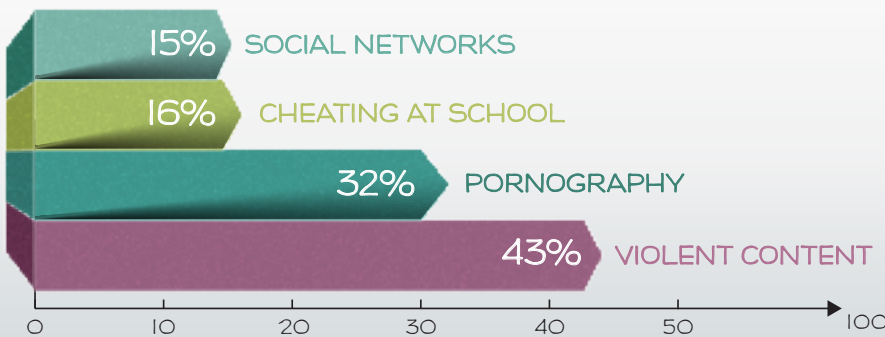


put up a forcefield

A technology monitoring system such as Forcefield can help you talk with your children about apps and their online lives. Install the software with your children, and even put it on your own phone. 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

When I was a child, there was a bully who lived around the block from me. Occasionally, he followed me home on his bike. I would pedal mine faster and faster to escape his barrage of insults. Sometimes he got in front of me and slammed on his brakes, laughing as I swerved toward traffic or fell headfirst over my handlebars.

When I arrived at my driveway, I ran as fast as I could into the house and locked the door behind me. My older brother was usually there. He gave me a hug and assured me that I was safe. I knew he could handle that bully if he ever tried to hurt me at home.

Kids today cannot escape bullying as easily. Cyberbullying—bullying over the internet or through smartphones—happens 24/7. Kids can try to ignore the bullying by turning off their phones or blocking users. But even if they cut off what they can see, they know the hurtful messages remain online for all to view. And if a cyberbully can convince other social media users to join in, the pressure to respond or read the taunts increases.

My childhood experience with a bully usually involved only two people: me and the bully. Now, with just one post to social media, a bully can inspire many others to join in with the mocking. Therefore, parents and kids need to be prepared to respond quickly to cyberbullying.

BE PREPARED

Before cyberbullying occurs, establish a few guidelines to decide how your family will respond to these kinds of situations:

- **Talk** about the kinds of messages that may indicate bullying or cyberbullying, including those that attempt to *control*, *intimidate* or *ruin* the reputation of the child.

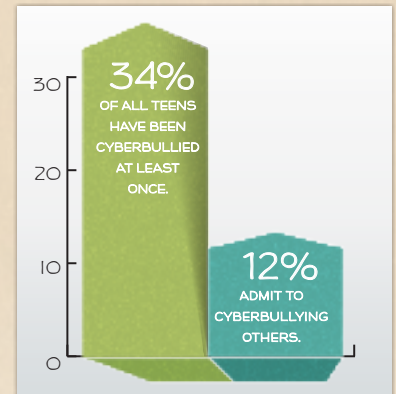
Control example: “Come to my party or I will tell Mr. Alex about how you really got that physics grade.”

Intimidation example: “I know where you live so you better think twice before you tell anyone what happened.”

Ruin a reputation example: (text placed below a compromising photo) “Becca isn’t the nice girl she pretends to be.”

Ask these questions to engage your kids in a conversation about bullying:

1. Why do you think some kids bully other kids?
2. What should you do if someone tries to bully you?
3. Have you ever been bullied in person or online? How did it happen and how did it make you feel?



Source: Cyberbullying Research Center

signs of bullying

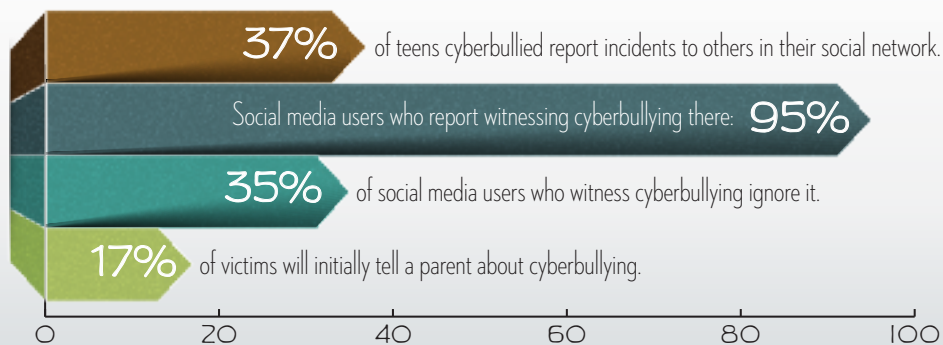
Being harassed by peers can lead kids to experience a significant decrease in self-esteem and feel isolated from friends and family. Bullying can also affect kids’ health, changing their eating and sleeping patterns. All of these may be signs of depression. Parents may not recognize some of these symptoms unless the child speaks about it. Sadly, depression can lead children to cope with their feelings by injuring themselves in an attempt to externalize their emotional pain.

cyberbullying

- **Let your child know** you will be available to talk about any messages or posts that may communicate a bullying message.
- **Partner with your children** to learn more about the social media platforms they visit. (See: "Social Media" section.) Train them to be healthy consumers of digital content.
- **Be on the alert for comments** from your kids that may indicate that they are bullying others. It is natural for parents to say, "My son wouldn't do that." However, all kids make mistakes. Sometimes they do things that surprise us. If you notice a child's tendency toward harsh comments, ask:
 1. "What were you hoping to accomplish by posting this message/image?"
 2. "How would you feel if someone posted something similar about you?"

Explain that kind words are even more important online, since tone and body language aren't part of most digital communication. If the behavior continues, provide related and reasonable consequences, such as requiring the child to apologize to the person bullied and losing internet privileges. Continue to monitor and be involved in your child's online life, providing guidance and demonstrating healthy ways to communicate online.

REPORTING OF CYBERBULLYING



Source: Cyberbullying Research Center

ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

Anxiety and depression may have biological roots. But excessive technology use can exacerbate your child's symptoms. As you parent with wise boundaries in the use of technology in your home, here are some other ways to help children proactively manage their struggles with depression and anxiety:

When kids isolate themselves while engaged in social media, they do not have the benefit of hearing from an adult, who can interpret the images they see within a broader, more realistic perspective.

rule to live by

Read this verse with your children:

"As you wish that others would do to you, do so to them."

—Luke 6:31

Then ask:

How can you apply this verse to your online activity?

- Do the messages and images I post encourage and uplift?
- Would I want to be on the receiving end of my image and message posts?
- If I make a critical post, am I commenting on the idea or making a crack at the person?

cyberbullying

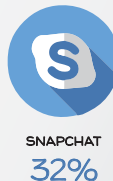
- **Encourage your children to stay hydrated** and engage in regular exercise. Eating healthy foods and getting plenty of uninterrupted sleep are also important aspects of good self-care. These activities are known to reduce stress and boost natural antidepressant and anti-anxiety agents in the body. When kids are strong and healthy, they are less likely to succumb to physical illnesses and emotional fatigue.
- **Talk with your children** about how life events can contribute to sadness or anxiety. Be open about your own personal struggles. Ask if they've ever had similar feelings. Those who are depressed or anxious often want to talk to someone but don't know how to bring up the subject. Invite your kids to share ideas on how you, as the parent, can be supportive during times when they're depressed or anxious. It may be difficult to hear what kids say about their feelings and ideas for coping, but this information allows you to know how you can help. Additionally, being willing to discuss difficult topics deepens a child's trust and tends to encourage him or her to seek you out during future hardships.
- **While all kids will experience loneliness**, isolation and anxiety from time to time, parents who notice when these feelings become more frequent can better get their child the help needed. Pay attention to your child's feelings. Do the sad feelings seem to exist in all environments or are present for a sustained period of time? Do they appear to interfere with your child's ability to maintain a social life, attend school or maintain healthy hygiene habits? If so, additional support may be warranted.

Cyberbullied Victims are almost  **2x** more likely to attempt suicide.¹

- **Remind your children** that they are created in the image of God. They are valuable, worthy and loved by you and by God. You might want to read and memorize Ephesians 2:10 with your children. Talk about people in the Bible who turned to God and found strength in Him during times of depression. Offer to pray with your children. If they don't want to pray, respect that decision, and let them know that you will be praying for them on your own time.

TOP SITES FOR CYBERBULLYING

MORE TEENS EXPERIENCE CYBERBULLYING ON **INSTAGRAM** THAN ANY OTHER SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM. **FACEBOOK** AND **SNAPCHAT** RANK SECOND AND THIRD.



Source: Ditch the Label, The Annual Bully Survey 2017

If you are dealing with a depressed teen, you don't need to struggle on your own.

You can email Focus on the Family at help@focusonthefamily.com or call **855-771-HELP** from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. (Mountain time) to find the resources you need.

“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

—Ephesians 2:10

cyberbullying

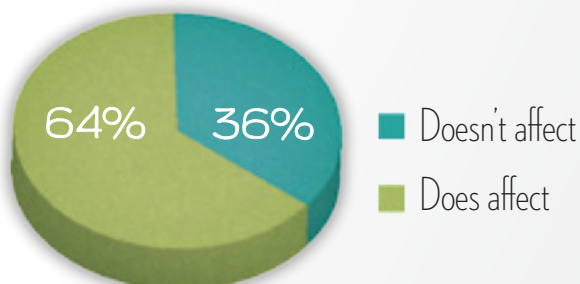
HEALTHY PRACTICES

To help encourage a healthy perspective on technology, parents can do the following:

- **Cellphones.** Carefully consider whether your kids are mature enough to manage a cellphone responsibly. Then monitor their usage regularly.
- **Computers.** Use a family computer placed in a common area until kids are mature enough for their own device. Locate computers in a place where the screen can be seen by everyone, rather than in their bedrooms.
- **Time limits.** Set time limits for computer and cellphone use, especially when these devices are not being used for schoolwork.
- **Bedtime.** Require kids to turn off their computers and cellphones when they go to bed. Designate a specific place in the house for cellphones to be left from bedtime until morning the next day. Teens should not keep their cellphones with them in their bedrooms at night.
- **Activity.** Engage in regular family activities outdoors so kids are able to receive adequate amounts of exercise and will be motivated to spend less time tethered to technology.

App and social media platforms are intended to connect people and open the lines of communication. When misused, they do the opposite. They create isolation, distort reality and draw too much attention to the user's flaws. As parents, we need to guide our children and show them what it means to be a healthy digital user.

TEENS WHO SAY CYBERBULLYING AFFECTS THEIR ABILITY TO LEARN AND FEEL SAFE AT SCHOOL



Source: Cyberbullying Research Center

Teens who spend more than three hours per day on social networks are 110 percent more likely to be cyberbullied.

Source: GuardChild.com



forcefield

Help your kids make wise choices when they're browsing the internet. Consider purchasing a technology monitoring system such as our preferred parental control software, Forcefield. Install the software with your children, teaching them that you'll be using the monitoring tool to ensure their safety, not as a means to catch them doing something wrong. Try Forcefield for free for 30 days. Find out more at Totf.Forcefield.me.

CHECK OUT THESE RESOURCES AT

FocusOnTheFamily.com/techguide



SCREENS AND TEENS BUNDLE \$13.99



This exclusive Focus on the Family bundle includes *Screens and Teens: Connecting with Our Kids in a Wireless World* by Dr. Kathy Koch. Her research and experience come together for an inspiring

book that's sure to help you expose the lies of technology and grow closer with your kids. AND a download of the Focus on the Family® Broadcast, "[Managing Technology's Impact on Your Kids](#)" featuring Dr. Koch.

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GROWING UP SOCIAL BUNDLE \$15.99



This exclusive Focus on the Family bundle includes *Growing Up Social: Raising Relational Kids in a Screen-Driven World* by Dr. Gary Chapman.

AND a download of the Focus on the Family® Broadcast, "[Helping Kids Relate in a Screen-Driven World](#)" featuring Dr. Chapman.

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This exclusive Focus on the Family bundle includes *The Digital Invasion: How Technology is Shaping You and Your Relationships* by Dr. Archibald D. Hart.

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GET THESE OTHER FOCUS ON THE FAMILY BROADCASTS

- "[Understanding Your Teen's Behavior](#)"
- "[Understanding Teen Depression and Suicide](#)"

READ THESE HELPFUL ARTICLES

- "[Family Media Commitment](#)"
by Bob Waliszewski
- "[When Should Your Child Get a Cellphone?](#)"
by Daniel Huerta
- "[Friending or Friendship: Kids and Social Networking](#)"
by Meredith Whitmore
- "[Limiting Kids' Use of Video Games](#)"
- "[Virtual Choices . . . Real-World Consequences](#)"
by Kurt and Olivia Bruner
- "[Cyberbullying](#)"
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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