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CHILDREN AND TECHNOLOGY USE

Technology can be a wonderful thing. Yet, technology can be a dreadful thing, as all parents know. Technology can be a wonderful source of education and learning. It can provide access to a universe of very useful information. And it can be an outstanding way to connect with those we are close to or with those we share interests or enterprises with. However, excessive amounts of technology usage can be devastating for our children's developing brains, can be a retardant to their social development, and can leave them with a constant flood of unprocessed emotions which make psychological stability impossible. Further, technology can be so enticing that our children can easily lose interest in their family relationships as they go further and further down the rabbit hole of technological addiction.

What does the research say about children and technology?

Researchers have been compiling data on the use of technology by children and teens. Frankly, the amount of time spent on cell phone, screen time, computer, Tik Tok, Face Time, Snap Chap, gaming, etc., by children and adolescents is astounding. In summary, **the number of hours spent and the age at which children use digital technology is stunningly in excess of what is recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics.**

 Kids are becoming addicted to cell phones. The games and apps elicit dopamine, the reward hormone, which causes children to come back for more and more. Social media and gaming are designed to be addictive. Social media creates "users" who seek validation in totally impersonal, non-intimate relationships. Yet getting many "followers," "texts," "likes" is totally engrossing

and addicting. There is no room for parents, siblings, family activities and relationships. There is less and less room for play and for just learning to be with oneself.

Actual withdrawal symptom indictors, measured though autonomic system scores, are highly elevated in children when they are not allowed to have their cell phones in class or while trying to do homework. **Cortisol, the stress hormone, is highly elevated when kids are in contact with their phones, even when they are not actively using them.**

For adolescents, preliminary research data indicates that excessive internet "gaming" is highly correlated with the loss of white matter integrity in the brain, reduced literacy skills, reduced executive functioning, and reduced ability to engage in emotional processing. Every parent knows well the frustration of trying to speak to your child when they are "playing" a computer game or trying to engage a child when they are reading an iPhone text exchange. Every parent knows well how frustrated, angry, even explosive a child can get when the lose a computer game or when they are misunderstood on a text exchange. Parents say to me *"I can't reach her when she has the darn phone in her hand,"* or *"When he is playing on that computer game, I hear a steady stream of angry and frustrated remarks and curses."*

 Young children in particular need face to face interaction to learn how to self-sooth, how to process emotions, how to relate well. They also need to be able to run and jump and sing and make stuff with their hands for full neurological development and full emotional and interpersonal development.

Older children need time to develop healthy ways to relate socially with parents, siblings and friends. They need face to face contact to develop full, healthy ways of relating.

Teens should have limits with social media and gaming. Texting or talking on iPhones in the bedroom, use of screens less than 30 minutes before bedtime, social interaction on screens, and blue light from computer screens have all have been shown to interfere with sleep.

 To think about technology in very non-technical terms, too much technology "ties the brain up," distracts the child, messes with the child's ability to relate to family and often turns your child into an "emotional hot wire."

Here are my recommendations about technology for your children and teens:

1. For children, I would not allow digital access prior to middle school except for school learning technology, and technology that is engaged in with the parent and personally selected by the parent; the danger to their neurological development is just too great;

2. For middle school kids, I would not allow access to social media; they just don't have the capacity to process all the social input which will flood them; what they get in person at school and on teams is more than enough; I would allow collaborative endeavors with other kids online, like making U-Tube videos with friends.

3. For high school kids, I would set limits. I would not allow iPhones in bedrooms at bedtime; I would insist on phone-free family dinners. I would power up all iPhones in a central area apart from all bedrooms. I would also set limits on how much total screen time I would allow. I would prioritize homework, family time, social engagement time and extra-curricular

activities over screen time. Finally, I would create a bedtime limit requiring a full hour of technology shut-down before expected sleep time.

4. For all kids, I would have monitoring, rules, and agreements about what will cause the child to have the device removed for a time. I would create cell phone/computer-free times, days and zones. Like no devices at grandma and grandpa's house, no devices on vacations or on family hikes or during family meals or family meetings or family board games.

It goes without saying that you must model what you demand. Parents should not, under any circumstances, be on their phones during dinner. They should not have their own iPhones in their bedroom at sleep time. Parents should not glance at their own devices when interacting with a child or with each other. Parents should never have their devices at the family table, even at breakfast.

There are many wonderful educational programs available via computer and iPhone and these technologies are the way that kids will increasingly interact, so total abstinence may be very counterproductive. But proceed with caution. The growing evidence about the potentially severe adverse consequences of excessive digital technology use by developing children is truly alarming.

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