

Balancing Family Life in the Digital Age

Parenting in this age of digital devices (often at least one for each member of the family over about five years of age) is challenging on many levels. We don't really need to explore these levels as you are living them every day. For some parents the feeling that they are losing their kids to "the screen" is ever so real. Is your child short on concentration with most things except when connected to a device? Do they abort a conversation when they hear the incoming message alert? Or perhaps you have a full blown melt down from your younger child when they are asked to turn off the ipad.

How do we help our children to enjoy the fun of activities and social connectivity offered by their devices whilst maintaining a balance of other things life has to offer?

Most adults love to be connected to their loved ones, stay up to date with the news, work out family and friend arrangements, stay connected to work etc by using our digital devices. Only last week a five year old girl struck up a conversation with me on the sideline of the swimming pool and she initiated, "That's my mum over there, the one with the phone up to her ear, she's ALWAYS on the phone."

One place to start is to ask ourselves, "How are our children viewing us?" Is it as a parent who is distracted most of the time? Are we modelling the very behaviour we don't want to see in our children?

This is uncharted territory. How should we handle our child's insistence that he is doing homework on the computer when at the same time he is distracted by listening to music and chatting to his friends online? What should we do about a daughter who insists she is only happy when online talking to her friends, or a son who says his only "friends" (people he has never met) are the ones with whom he plays online games?

Here are a few suggestions:

Strengthen your connection with your kids.

Make the time they spend with you fun! Kids often see their parents as very busy. It is the parent's job to seek their child's company and organise the time together and the more this happens the more readily a child will unplug. How powerful would it be to suggest you both leave your devices at home and go off for some physical activity together - walking the dog, kicking the footy, kayaking, a swim, a course related to your child's interest, yoga, meditation, camping, paint ball and the list goes on.

Talk and Listen

The greatest gift you can give another is to listen to them. Encouraging your child to talk, by listening to them, is a gift and relationship building. And remember try not to necessarily give advice first up but emotion coach and name the feeling your child is exhibiting according to the recount they are giving you.

Set Limits Whilst Encouraging and Modeling Moderation

It is your job to set the limits and the child's job to test those boundaries. Do not be afraid of a child's upset and reframe this in terms of teaching them to be resilient. Do not be afraid of the melt down that might occur because you are not going to condone hours of non-stop video gaming. It is always best to set the rules/limits well before the event and achieve agreement before the device is handed over and also name the consequence for the device not being turned off at the designated time. Be kind and assertive. It is parent's main job to teach, encourage and model the values of society and the family.

When kids see you having the kind of fun that does not require being plugged in, they'll be more inclined to follow suit. If you interrupt conversations with your children checking your own phone/computer, or engage with your devices instead of playing with/conversing with your children, it is the loudest message to them that the device is more important to you than they are. This aspect of parenting is very difficult for parents of today as being technologically connected was not modelled to you by your parents. They did not have smartphones/computers with the level of connectness that we have in 2017.

Understand the Difference Between Technological Consumer and Creator?

Help your child understand the difference between being a technological consumer and a creator. This is perhaps one of the most important distinctions concerning technology that we can teach our children. We can play video games or we can create them, we can browse Facebook, Instagram etc or we can create places and communities that serve a purpose using these tools. There is a place for technological consumption but creation trumps consumption any day! Teach your children the difference.

Self Worth

Self worth cannot be calculated by the number of likes, shares and retweets. It is important for our kids to learn that self-worth comes from feeling worthy to those around us in combination with having a sense of achievement. Be mindful where your child is looking for and receiving accolades - if it is online then they will continue to rely on finding it there or if it is from you they will happily focus more in your direction.

What To Look Out For?

There is no research to even predict what this iChildhood will look like when the children of today are adults. What we do know is that if children are addicted to their screens they need help. One symptom may be sleep deprivation. None of us, and particularly children operate at our optimal levels and we become irritable, get sick, and are unable to cope when sleep deprived. Make sure children are off devices an hour to an hour and a half before bedtime and that devices are not in the room where they sleep. If the screen is taking over from the usual time spent doing other activities then alarm bells should be ringing. One idea is to set designated periods of time where everyone agrees not to use devices and this can help reinstate your kids' interest in things outside of their screens. Lead by example. It's no good telling a child not to use a tablet if you are engaged with yours. If parents have their eyes on a screen most of the time, kids learn that non-stop viewing is acceptable behaviour.

To conclude...

The more time a child spends on a screen the less parent-child interaction they get and this is perhaps the biggest issue of all. Introduce your kids to your childhood by reliving with them the activities you used to do! Screen free parenting is in your blood!

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