

Generation Wired

BY: EMILY LISTFIELD

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They text (and text and text). They have hundreds of “friends” they’ve never actually met. They game for hours. How to keep your kids safe and healthy in a hyper-connected world.

The other night as I was getting ready for bed, I turned off my phone and put it on the dresser. My 17-year-old daughter stared at me in disbelief. “But, Mom,” she exclaimed, “it’s so far away!”

For today’s youth, technology isn’t just a handy way to keep in touch or organize your calendar; it’s as integral as eating and breathing—and seems to come just as naturally. Between smartphones, iPods, video games, and the Internet, being wired is a way of life. The average teen sends more than 50 texts a day; younger children spend over 10 hours a week playing video games; and the amount of time all kids spend online daily has tripled in the past 10 years.

Aged-Based Guidelines for Kids' Internet Use

We are just beginning to assess how this nonstop connectivity is affecting our kids’ social and intellectual development. It is increasingly clear that it is changing the nature of children’s relationships to each other, to their families, and to the world around them. The latest research suggests it may even be rewiring their brains.

Technology: Friend or Frenemy?

In a world where sexting is on the nightly news, plagiarism is just a Wikipedia click away, and people have hundreds of online friends they’ve never met, helping your kids make smart choices has never been more crucial. But there are few rules of the road, as any parent who has watched his or her child fall down the Facebook hole for hours can tell you. In part this is because technology is changing so rapidly that it can be hard to keep up. Just a few years ago, a 10-year-old with a cell phone could do little with it beyond placing a call. Now, handing her one is giving her the ability to text, go online, and send and receive photos. Are kids ready for that? Are you?



Quiz: What Kind of Internet Parent Are You?

The notion that parents need to get involved in their children’s digital lives as actively as they do in academic or sports activities is still new. “The digital landscape is a positive place for kids,” says Dr. Gwenn O’Keeffe, lead author of the American Academy of Pediatrics 2011 report on the impact of social media on children, adolescents, and families. “It promotes a lot of healthy habits like socialization and a sense of connectedness to the greater world and to causes.” But, she says, children need guidance. Here are some of the thorniest issues and how parents can navigate them.

Do You Know How Many Facebook Friends Your Kids Have?

Fifty-one percent of American teens log on to a social network site more than once a day and 22 percent log on more than 10 times a day, according to a recent poll by Common Sense Media. You have to be 13 to join Facebook, but

children should learn before then not to share personal information. “Pre-teenagers are very rule focused, so you can tell them, ‘Don’t do this,’ and they’re going to follow it,” Dr. O’Keeffe says. Unfortunately, even the smartest kids can forget what they have been taught when they enter their teen years and the desire to be popular overcomes common sense. Facebook can be like a high school cafeteria on steroids. For some kids, it is a positive experience, strengthening friendships and communication. Others, though, may feel left out, obsessively comparing themselves to peers and seeing the fun others are having—or at least posting about. Social media sites like Facebook, as well as texting, can also lead to cyber-bullying; it is easier to target someone for abuse when you do not have to face them. If your child is avoiding his phone or seems depressed after going online, these could be warning signs. In the not-so-distant past, if your kid seemed lethargic, you might have asked if she had a stomachache. Now it also pays to inquire if anything upsetting happened recently online.

When Was the Last Time Your Kid Used the Phone to Actually Talk?

One of the biggest behavioral changes Generation Wired is experiencing is a preference for texting over talking. Kids 11 to 14 spend, on average, 73 minutes a day texting; for older teens, it is closer to two hours. If that sounds like an addiction, in some instances it may be. “When you get an unexpected text, the dopamine cells in the brain fire up,” says Dr. Nora Volkow, director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse. Dopamine, which plays a role in many addictive behaviors, is a neurotransmitter associated with feelings of pleasure.

Sherry Turkle, director of MIT’s Initiative on Technology and Self and author of *Alone Together*, has spent years studying the psychological effects of this rampant texting on teens. “Kids have told me that they almost don’t know what they are feeling until they put it in a text.” One danger is that children may never learn how to be content spending time on their own, which is crucial for healthy psychological development. “Technology encourages this fantasy that adolescents grow up with that they will never have to be alone, that they will never have to separate from parents and peers. But if you don’t learn to be alone, you will only know how to be lonely.” Parents who constantly text their children compound the problem.

Though kids treat their cell phones like appendages, getting them to talk on the phone can be nearly impossible. Experts worry that this fundamental change in how kids communicate is endangering the development of an important set of skills they will need later on: how to converse, read cues from vocal intonations, and even negotiate. “There’s a big difference between an apology that involves looking in somebody’s eyes and seeing that they’re hurt, and typing ‘I’m sorry’ and hitting send,” Turkle points out. Parents need to insist that their children actually talk to them rather than just text. Turkle also favors setting up non-texting zones, including the kitchen and dining room. And, she advises: “No texting in the car on the way to school. That was always one of the most important times for parents to talk to children. Don’t give it up.”

The minute you hand a child a cell phone, you are also opening up the entire online world to them, including sexting. Dr. O’Keeffe recommends that you talk about the dangers from day one. “If you don’t feel ready to have that conversation, hold off giving them a phone. Ten years old is the minimum age a kid should have a cell phone unless there’s a medical issue, in which case you should get them a watered-down model that can basically just make calls.”

How Many Hours Does Your Child Spend Gaming?

When kids play video games, that little pleasure chemical dopamine also kicks in. The intermittent reinforcement that games provide—you win a little, you want to play more—is similar to gambling, and for some kids, just as addictive. Ninety-two percent of kids ages 8 to 18 play video games, and 8.5 percent can be classified as addicted, meaning their play interferes with the rest of their lives. According to Douglas Gentile of Iowa State University, lead author of a 2011 study on video game addiction, 12 percent of boys and 3 percent of girls who play will get addicted.

Parents are right to worry about the violent content of some games, but they should be just as concerned about the amount of time kids spend playing even benign offerings. “Increased game play is related to poorer school performance as well as higher rates of obesity,” Gentile says. “For every hour children are spending on games, they are not doing homework, exercising, or exploring.”

There is no clear-cut way to predict which kids will become hooked, but those who have poor impulse control or are socially awkward and have difficulty fitting in at school are at higher risk. Watch for these telltale signs of addiction: a drop in grades, a change in sleep patterns, and increased anxiety. Gentile recommends that parents limit video game play to one hour per day and monitor the content. Moreover, you should pick out games with your kids rather than letting them choose their own. Though the ratings on video games may not tell you everything you need to know, they can help you make decisions about whether content is age-appropriate.

Should Teachers Use Twitter in the Classroom?

There is near-universal agreement that schools must play a role in getting kids to be cyber-smart, but teachers have struggled as much as parents to catch up. A 2011 survey by the National Cyber Security Alliance found that only 51 percent of K–12 teachers felt that their districts were doing an adequate job of preparing students for online safety, security, and ethics. Only 15 percent had taught lessons involving online hate speech, and just 26 percent had addressed cyber-bullying. Most teachers have little or no training in these areas. Still, a growing number are adapting their methods to better reach kids used to constant digital stimulation. “We find that you have to switch activity or delivery method every 10 minutes to keep kids focused,” says Philadelphia elementary school teacher Sharon Mora, who recently won a Teacher of the Year award for her innovative approach to computer science. She is at the forefront of educators who believe that embracing technology rather than merely policing it will enhance learning. She has been active, for example, in using programs like PhotoBooth to help kids create interactive school reports. Other teachers have experimented with allowing students to use social media to participate in class discussions. “If you can use Twitter to maximize the likelihood that these kids will be proficient in a subject matter, why not?” Dr. Volkow says. “These changes have been so dramatic that we should be thinking of how to take advantage of them to improve education.”

How Exactly Is All This Affecting Young Brains?

A 2010 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that students 8 to 18 spend more than 7.5 hours a day engaged with computers, cell phones, TV, music, or video games. Forty percent of kids in middle school and high school say that when they’re on the computer, most of the time they’re also plugged into other media. The effects this multitasking has on still-forming brains can be positive and negative. “The prefrontal cortex, which is essential for social behavior, planning, reasoning, and impulse control, is not fully developed until the early 20s,” says Jordan Grafman of the Kessler Foundation Research Center. “Its development is largely dependent on what activities you do.”

Studies have shown that multitasking can lead to faster response time, improved peripheral vision, and a greater ability to sift through information quickly. But it also results in a diminished ability to focus on one thing for long. “You get better at the physical and visual motor parameters of what you’re doing, but not the deeper, thoughtful aspects,” Grafman says.

How will the generation coming of age now—less accustomed to sustained concentration—be affected? No one’s sure. Dr. O’Keeffe recently spoke to a group of college students. “They said they feel really bombarded, they’re not sure they’re learning effectively, and they’re not sure how to turn it all off. We need to learn from what they’re saying and help our current teenagers as well as younger kids learn to disconnect.” For parents, that might entail modeling a bit of self-discipline, like refraining from making calls while you drive or sneaking off during family gatherings to check your

email. But the payoff—real conversations in real time—just may surprise you, and your kids. Who knows? They may even like it. Of course, you may need to check their Facebook page to find out.

Technology: Friend or Frenemy?

Parents are conflicted about their children's use of technology, according to an exclusive PARADE poll of 1,000 moms and dads. As they raise the first generation born into 24/7 connectivity, they're trying to set ground rules for negotiating unfamiliar terrain.

- ▶ **79%** say they communicate more often with their kids, thanks to cell phones.
- ▶ **66%** say that they and their kids feel safer knowing they can always reach each other.
- ▶ **46%** are very or somewhat concerned that being constantly plugged in has lowered their kids' attention spans.
- ▶ **83%** are very or somewhat concerned about their children's privacy and security online.
- ▶ **92%** of parents think they hold the most responsibility for protecting their kids from the Internet.
- ▶ **90%** are relying primarily on their own judgment to guide them.
- ▶ **60%** of parents think their children's education has been enhanced by the Internet
- ▶ **76%** of parents know their children's favorite websites
- ▶ **67%** of parents think that texting on cell phones hurts their children's performance at school
- ▶ In **59%** of households surveyed, both parents share the responsibility of setting limits and rules about Internet usage (In 30%, the mother has the primary responsibility, in 11% it's the father.)
- ▶ **35%** wish there were more information available about setting limits and rules for Internet use for their kids
- ▶ **30%** of parents read their children's e-mail at least once a week
- ▶ **31%** never read their children's e-mail

Berland is president of the polling and research firm Penn Schoen Berland.

* THE PARADE POLL WAS CONDUCTED BY PENN SCHOEN BERLAND LLC WITH A NATIONAL ONLINE PANEL OF PARENTS WHO HAVE AT LEAST ONE CHILD UNDER AGE 18 LIVING AT HOME. SURVEYS WERE COMPLETED BY 1,000 RESPONDENTS. MARGIN OF ERROR +/- 3%