

Church Calls Media Fast to Combat Prince of the Power of the Air

At age 2, most children are just learning to use the toilet, form complete sentences and scribble with crayons. Yet in today's technology-saturated world, an increasing number are already navigating their parents' smartphones, tablets and computers.

"My children love our phones," says Dan Dangerfield, the father of two preschoolers, ages 2 and 4. "Our 2-year-old knows how to open the phone, play music and open up the games he likes to play."

Dangerfield says electronic gadgets are convenient diversions on long car trips and in waiting rooms. However, he and his wife, Sara, are careful to steer the children toward other activities at home.

"They're not allowed to play games on our phones at home," says Dangerfield, children's pastor at Life Church Assembly of God in Williston, N.D. "I try to model that as well. I don't sit on the couch and play games on my iPad. Rules are important, but modeling them as adults is just as important."

Dangerfield recognizes the battle is just beginning. Many kids today own portable devices with online connections, from gaming systems and iPods to smart phones.

"A lot of upper elementary kids have as much Internet access as adults," Dangerfield says. "It's now in their hands all the time, which makes it difficult for parents to monitor."

Dangerfield estimates nearly a quarter of those who attend children's services at Life Church carry such devices.

"I had one little girl texting me during service," Dangerfield says. "In the middle of our Bible story, she sent me a message that said, 'That was funny!' On the one hand, I'm glad she's engaged. But I also worry about who else she's texting."

Donna Rice Hughes, president of the Internet safety advocacy group Enough Is Enough, says there is reason for concern.

"The majority of kids are online now from a very young age," she says. "If they don't have a laptop or desktop, they have a cell phone with Internet. As a result, many kids have easy access to all kinds of pornography and other material that is inappropriate. And sexual predators have easy and anonymous access to kids."

In a study last year by the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire, 7 percent of 10-year-olds and 15 percent of 14-year-olds said they had appeared in, created or received nude or nearly nude images that had been transmitted electronically.

A 2010 Kaiser Family Foundation study of youth ages 8 to 18 found a lack of parental guidance when it comes to media use. Only half of the children and teens surveyed said their parents had established rules regarding their online activities.

"A lot of parents assume if they do what the experts have advised, such as having the computer out in the main room and monitoring their kids' mobile devices, that's enough," says Scott Berkey, national director of the Children's Ministries Agency for the Assemblies of God.

"Today it's more important than ever to spend time talking with your kids about the dangers of the Internet—establishing boundaries and helping them understand that what they do in the digital world can have real-world consequences."

Berkey says technology can be beneficial when used safely and

responsibly. For example, his 8-year-old daughter uses an iPod Touch to stay connected with family members through text messages and video conversations. However, Berkey says he and his wife, Sarah, maintain passwords, control downloads, monitor the screen, determine who can send and receive messages, and set strict time limits on the device's use.

"There are a lot of good things that can come with the increase in technology," Berkey says. "But parents need to guard their children's minds and teach them to honor God in everything they do."

Jeff Haase, children's pastor at Christ's Place Church (AG) in Lincoln, Neb., says when parents come to him for advice concerning behavioral problems in their children, he asks about their media habits.

"There is a lot that kids can experience and see, but not all of it is healthy—and some of it can have a negative impact on their emotional and spiritual well-being," Haase says.

Haase, who has five children between the ages of 4 and 14, says he and his wife, Mary Beth, limit their media consumption.

"We call it screen time, whether they're playing games on an iPad or watching television," he says. "Sometimes we say, 'Enough screen time. Go read a book.' I'm old-school that way, but I want my kids to develop habits other than something plugged in."

Teri Loper, who has four children between the ages of 6 and 15, has not hooked up her television to receive programming in years. Yet she says the pull of Internet devices can be harder to resist.

"My husband and I have smartphones," says Loper, who attends First Assembly of God in Griffin, Ga., along with her husband, Dan. "The attachment can become chronic. I find I'm constantly

looking at a screen instead of talking to the person who is in the same room with me.”

Though the Lopers’ children are restricted to closely monitored computers, the family talks frequently about healthy media habits.

“Kids are inundated with technology, and we can’t ultimately control every decision they make,” Loper says. “When they face a choice, it matters what we’ve taught them and whether God has their hearts.”

Life Church in Williston recently participated in a weeklong media fast. Pastors challenged congregants to drape a blanket over the television, log off social media and use computers only for work and homework. Suggested alternate activities included playing board games, going for walks and spending extra time in prayer and Bible reading.

“I’m excited to see the move of God that happens as a result of this,” Dangerfield says. “There are kids and adults who can’t even sit at the dinner table without playing on a device. I’m concerned about what that is doing to our families.”

For guidelines to help limit, monitor and safeguard kids’ Internet use, see [this site](#), a site operated by Enough Is Enough.