

Is Your Family #Hooked on Digital Media?

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How to prevent the allure of digital media from overtaking you or your loved ones

I admit it: I love technology. It's the air I breathe. I tweet. I post to Facebook (you can find me there often—but not right now; keep reading!). I keep my Android smartphone with me at all times and live on my “big” computer for hours every day. I have multiple monitors. I have multiple email accounts, which all forward to one another to ensure I always get my messages, which are also synched to my phone. I own a Kindle. I own an iPad.

So—I get it. I understand the pull, the excitement, the fun of the digital forms of technology. And I am a true believer in harnessing their positives.

But I'm also a counselor and an addiction specialist, and some of what I see in digital media is deeply alarming. Kids age 8 through 18 spend almost 7-1/2 hours every day awash in media, according to a Kaiser Family Foundation study. Factoring in their ability to multitask (listening to music while browsing Facebook, for example), their media exposure rises to almost 11 hours a day—every day. Teens spend as much time (or more) with their media as parents do at work. Add in school and sleep, and it's amazing how little time is left for a family to *be* a family.

This technology is powerful stuff. It's easy to get hooked on it. And that's exactly why, if you aren't careful, you'll find out that what you start out controlling has a way in the end

of controlling you.

Since I know this to be true, I can't overlook technology's pull in my own life, nor can I overlook it in my kids' lives. As a parent, I need to be aware of the influence I have on my kids through my own use of technology. What am I saying to them about what I consider important, valuable, and worth my time and effort? When I give my kids technology to use for one purpose, how can I prevent it being used for something completely different, something I can't approve of?

Unless a parent wants to become surgically attached to their teenager, it's very difficult to know—let alone control—what and whom their kids have access to. They have the power to connect in a multitude of ways, all from the comfort of *your* home.

The Parent Trap

You might think teens are leading this technology charge. They aren't. Parents are.

"It is not kids who have brought the widespread use of technology into the home; it is us [the parents]," concludes a 2011 Barna Group study titled *The Family and Technology Report*. Parents in the study used their cellphones even more regularly than their kids did. They were also more apt to use a desktop computer and equally apt to use a laptop or notebook.

Parents, we are the ones who bring all these devices and technology into the lives of our families—and then decry the resulting lack of relationship we have with one another. It's no wonder our kids consider us hypocrites.

We tell them to get off Facebook, but we spend hours at night handling email. We set rules about texting at the dinner table, but we leave the TV on during the meal. We track and limit the time they spend on the computer, but we leave the

television running even when no one is watching it.

When I grew up, parents held the keys to access—literally. Before I was street legal, if I wanted to see my friends, a parent had to drive me. And there were all sorts of conditions for when I could see them.

Access to my friends was limited, and I could have it only when I'd fulfilled duties like homework and household chores. I couldn't even talk on the phone for long because there was just one line.

Now we have the oh-so-common cellphone, and parents no longer have such tight control over access to friends. Some 72 percent of teenagers have a cellphone, according to a study on teens and mobile phones by the Pew Internet and American Life Project. But teens do a lot more with their phones than just talk. The study found that:

- 83 percent take pictures
- 64 percent share those pictures
- 60 percent play music
- 46 percent play games
- 27 percent go online
- 23 percent access social networks.

Moreover, 88 percent use their phones for texting. I live in email; most of us parents do. Not so for younger people. Texting is their new email. For them, it's easier and more convenient than talking. Teens say they will actually avoid answering their cellphones to train people (including their parents!) to text them instead.

Your teenager may not be able to physically leave the house, but he or she can be connected to friends on the phone, by texting, on Facebook and over the Internet.

So if you're in the throes of adolescent parenting right now, you'll definitely want to consider all the ways technology is

interacting with your kids. Here are some exercises to help you gauge their media usage compared with their other interests. Use these to determine:

1. How much time your kids spend with forms of media. Estimate how much time your child spends with each of these in the average week: television, Internet, social networking, DVDs, cellphone, game systems, iPod or MP3 player. Total and compare this amount of time with how long you observe your child spending with schoolwork. The Kaiser study showed that the more media that kids used, the lower their academic grades.

2. How much time your kids spend with you. Compare the amount of time your kids spend interacting with media each week with how long they spend interacting with you. Please note: *Interacting* doesn't mean "in the same room." If you spend an hour with your child while you're watching TV and he is texting or posting on Facebook, you are merely spending time *near* each other, not *with* each other. Do not count this sort of time "together."

3. How each device works and how it can be used. Do you know how each of your devices operates? Do you know how each of your child's devices operates? How much time have you invested in learning what it does and how it works? If the amount of time is less than the time it took you to buy it, wrap it and give it, then consider becoming more familiar with it yourself.

4. What the consequences are and how you can change them. Look first at your technology use and your children's, then ask yourself these three questions: What are three negative consequences you've experienced? What are three positive consequences you've experienced? What are three changes you believe would turn some of those negatives into positives?

Recover Your Digital Domain

In a family unit, each person's use of technology intersects

and affects the others. So how do you know if your family has crossed over that line from use to obsession, from controller to being controlled? Perhaps the answer lies in calling for a family tech detox, a voluntary reduction in your use of technology.

Detox is a shortened version of the word *detoxification*, a common medical term that means to remove harmful substances that have built up in the body. It means willingly giving up something that you've come to rely on. The more things you're hooked into, the harder this will be and the more anxiety it will produce.

However, when conducted in a thoughtful, prepared manner, a tech detox can help your entire family release some of the negative buildup of your technology use and give you the break you need to make better choices going forward. Here's how I recommend approaching this:

Plan your progress. Include the entire family in the planning process. Be prepared to move to the positive side of compromise and not concede to your 12-year-old who can't imagine life without texting for a week. Note how, when and how long those in your family use technology, including you and any other adults.

Start small with a digital break. To start small, ask every family member to self-designate a reduction in use and jointly come up with an activity to reduce that affects the entire family. For example, one family member may limit texting to one hour per day. Another may limit computer games to one hour per day. Another may agree to restrict work emails to one hour per day. Then the entire family may agree to a no-tech zone during dinner. Allow each family member to offer his or her contribution to the detox, and work together to come up with an acceptable joint restriction.

Don't just reduce or remove; replace. Help each family member come up with not only a reduction or a removal but also a replacement activity. Ideally, these should include family time and activities instead of reverting to self-isolating choices.

Clarify your goals. Jointly clarify individual goals and family goals. Try to articulate the agreed-upon goals as pithy, memorable phrases so you can encourage one another with why you're doing this in the first place. Attach a list of the goals to the refrigerator so everyone can see them.

Be clear on the detox rules, and stick to them. Because you are the one setting this in motion, you're going to come under intense scrutiny, and any cheating on your part could be used as an excuse to cheat by others. Make sure the rules are clearly understood and agreed upon by all.

Determine the consequences ahead of time. Because there are multiple people involved, you'll want to have agreement on what the consequences will be and who will enforce them. Allow other family members to make suggestions first and hold your own opinion until last; you may be surprised at how reasonable others can be. If there is a breach in the rules, bring everyone back together to deal with it.

Take advantage of what you've learned. Because the tech detox will often be front and center in the minds of your family, you have a built-in conversation starter. Touch base with each person during dinner or at another joint family time to gather feedback and share insights. Plan to come together at the end of your family tech detox for a family debrief.

Take the next step. As part of your family detox debrief, encourage each family member to move from knowledge to application. Ask each one to think of ways to take what was learned and put it into practice with each person's use of technology. This discussion need not end when the family detox

does. Use this experience in the future when another technology is introduced.

I hope I've helped you become cognizant of how amazingly in-sync so many of our kids are with technology. We have to be aware, as parents, that when it comes to technology, our children are mirrors, reflecting our own values, concerns and priorities. Their significance, value and worth are not measured by the gadgets they own, their quantity of online friends, how often they're retweeted or how quickly someone returns their texts.

And, Mom and Dad, neither are ours.

If we tie our own personal happiness and ability to function to technology rather than to God, then we elevate technology to idol status, and our children ultimately mirror what they see in us. Here's what God, through the apostle Paul, has to say about this age-old pitfall of misplaced worship:

"My dear friends, flee from idolatry. I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say" (1 Cor. 10:14-15, NIV).

Because we are able to live our lives in separate little compartments, it's tempting to think that God sees or cares about how we act in only some of those boxes. It can be easy to delude ourselves into believing we get to choose which boxes are secret and which are accountable to God.

That, however, is not the truth. Proverbs 5:21 says, "For your ways are in full view of the Lord and he examines all your paths."

Paths, boxes, zones, spaces, compartments: They're all words pointing to the same personal choices. And through all of them, God sees and examines what you and I—and our children—do with technology.

This is made clear in Hebrews 4:13: “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”

Simply put, we are accountable to God—both for our own actions and how they affect our children. So let’s be sensible, as Paul admonishes. In your family, keep technology in its proper place. And acknowledge God in His.

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