

What's a Parent To Do?

by Janet Carter

The technology question is among my top five FAQs, if not number one. As well it should be, as it is a question without an easy answer. This is a general guideline, and even within my own guideline, there is room for discussion. I publish it below in hopes of starting the discussion in your home. Your discussion and your decisions will have significant impact on your children and the next generation.

1. Remember that nothing is all good or all bad and like it or not, technology is in your child's future. We cannot turn back the clocks, and, like driving a car, your children need to learn to use it safely.

2. General rule of thumb: little to none for the very young. Everything I read suggests that it causes our brain waves to go from beta to alpha (active to passive), which is NOT what we want for developing brains. (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/cris-rowan/technology-children-negative-impact_b_3343245.html?utm_hp_ref=tw) In a culture so intent on education, early and often, the use of iPads on cribs and potty chairs is, ironic at best and absurd at worst. As a daily activity, absolutely not, if for no other reason than you will find you and your children will grow quickly dependent on the electronic babysitter. Create better habits for yourself and them. But, if watching Elmo on an iPad while on a long trip keeps an 18 month old from actively thinking (and screaming) GET ME OUT OF THIS CAR, and keeps the adults with said child from losing their minds along the way, then I would say that desperate times call for desperate measures.

3. For elementary children, to the extent that you can, limit, limit, limit screen time, including TV. Again, the same brain wave effects as above. We want the minds of our children actively engaged, and despite the educational claims of today's electronic games and programming, the best education is the tried and true: books and play. If you allow screen time, you need to be very clear about the limits and if they are violated, so is the privilege. No exceptions.

4. Computers are being employed in public and private schools, and in our area, children in middle school are issued a laptop for the school year, just like a textbook. Children should be unequivocally informed that the computer (or iPad, or phone) does NOT belong to them. It is the property of the adult that pays for it. They are to use it within very strict parameters and anything outside of those parameters is not tolerated and will result in loss of use. Period.

Case in point: I talked with a mom who discovered that her child had used the school computer to create a separate personal account, which was a violation of the house rules for computer use. She was surprised and

disappointed at her child's violation of trust, given that this was (and is) a good student and had in the past given her no reason to doubt compliance to the rules. The transgression proved innocent enough - but the innocence of the lapse is not the point. This is an example of a good child making a childish decision, but for us as adults, the mistake is a wake-up call to the ease of availability the internet provides and just how quickly a child can get into trouble.

5. As children get older, unless you and they live on a remote self-sustaining farm, apart from any form of internet accessibility, they will become more and more involved with technology and social media. As such, parents need to be vigilant and set limits and constraints that are to be strictly followed. All screens should be used in a family area and NO ONE should be allowed to be on a computer or any similar device without an adult present and nearby. No exception, even if that makes life tough for the parents. Employ any parental safeguards available.

Remember that these are power tools in the hands of children - children who do not know nearly as much as they think they know. Without question most kids are technically savvier than their parents, but savvy is not the same thing as mature. Pornography is rampant, as are sexual predators, and children of any age need our protection and our persistence. This is not a lesson to learn the hard way.

6. If your kids play video games - set time limits and stick to them. 30 minutes means 30 minutes - and if you return in 35 minutes and the game is not shut down - the privilege is revoked and screen time is lost for a week (or more). Make your children responsible for their time. If they are old enough to play the game, they are old enough to watch the clock. With any privilege, including video games, comes responsibility. The same goes for the TV.

7. NO, NO, NO screens of any kind in a child's bedroom. Ever. Cell phones of anyone under the age of 18 and living at home should be turned in to a parent every night, even if they have to wake up the parent to do so. Parents should feel no guilt and make no apologies for this rule, as I would suspect that parents are the ones footing the bill for the privilege.

Again, nothing is all good. Nothing is all bad. If you are parents and have never questioned, researched, and discussed the pros and cons of technology and its impact on your family, there is no time like now! Make well informed choices, as technology is not only in your child's future, but their future may depend on those decisions.

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Please note the "Period." "No Exceptions." comments above.
If you can't follow-through on these absolutes, start working on it now.