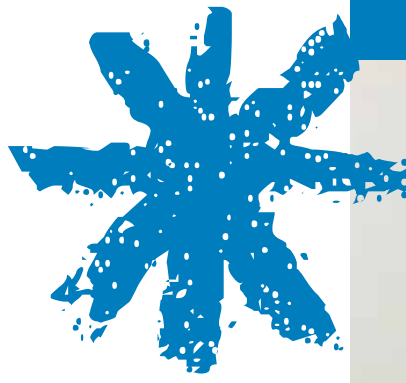


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What rules should you have around digital devices?

By Michael Grose

Young people's digital technology needs to be managed and monitored by parents. That means we need to have some rules and guidelines in place.

Only a few short years ago the biggest question making the rounds of parents about tweens and teens was if their young person should have a mobile device. Now it's a matter of when, not if they get a mobile phone. Increasingly, young people are beginning secondary school as experienced digital users with many coming to secondary school on the first day with a tablet in their schoolbag and a mobile phone in their pocket.

One thing is certain, technology is an issue you'll struggle with for the rest of your parenting life. We've created the technology and unleashed it on our kids and now we seem to be scrambling like mad to keep up.

Adding to this complexity is that fact that technology keeps changing rapidly. We just come to grips with one device or app when a new one comes along that we have to learn about.

Technology is here to stay. It's no point being doom and gloom as digital technology has so many advantages. For instance, most parents report that they feel safer when teenagers have their own mobile phones because of the GPS features, that allow them to know the whereabouts of their young people. Teenagers also report that their mobile provides an important communication safety net for them as the driver for greater independence takes them further from home.

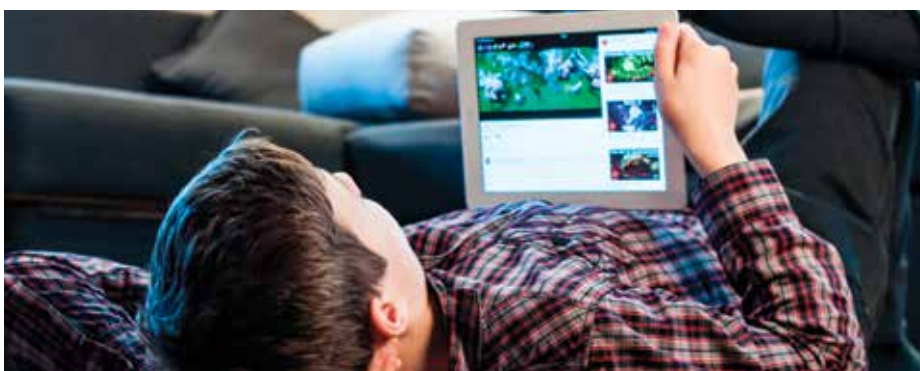
You'd have to be living under a rock not to realise that digital technology also presents new challenges such as cyber-bullying, gaming, worries about

social media, and young people's exposure to inappropriate images. On top of this digital technology gives young people access to a virtual world that is totally seductive particularly for those with poor impulse control. Also the nature of technology means that young people can spend a lot of their time heads bent and staring into a screen, which is not healthy in the long term.

Young people's digital technology use needs to be managed and monitored by parents. That means having some rules and guidelines in place. Every family makes up their own rules to suit their circumstances but here are some suggestions that will help you put some order into the digital devices that come into your home.

1. Know what the rules and expectations are at school

This a great starting point for families. Every school is different – some allow mobile phones to be kept in student lockers or backpacks, while others allow limited mobile phone usage in-between classes or even during class time to aid with assignments. Make sure that you and your child know what the rules are at school. Importantly, support the school and align your expectations with those of the school.



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2. Specify hours for digital use

Determine the time your young person can start using tablets and mobile phones and when they need to be shut down at night. It's smart management for the whole family to work within those guidelines so it becomes the way you do things in your family. This age group is incredibly susceptible to being pressured by peers to be online 24/7 that I suspect there'll be some young people who appreciate an acceptable out from their digital device.

3. Consider a digital device contract

Mobile phone "contracts" were popular with parents a few years back and I still think they are a smart way to go. Set out your tablet and digital phone usage guidelines, and print them an agreement that you and your young person can both sign. If there are any disputes, then you both have the expectations in writing. This notion maybe a little formal for many people's tastes but it removes the grey areas around expectations that many young people are likely to exploit.

4. Lay out consequences from the start

Put known consequences in place if these usage rules are broken such as removal of the tablet or phone for a short time. These should be reasonable rather than excessive and include some input from your young person, which should make it more likely to cop should they need to be implemented.



Special note: I'm thrilled to announce that my latest book *Spoonfed Generation: How to raise independent children* is out. It's available at parentingideas.com.au

5. Talk about respectful relationships, safety and pornography

You can't let your young person loose on digital technology without having multiple conversations about keeping safe, respectful behaviour and pornography. Each of these topics is a separate issue on its own but each is impacted by the virtual, boundary-free nature of digital technology with massive ramifications for the quality young people's relationships and well-being.

6. Be prepared to learn

Be ready to learn about social media, different apps and games that young people may be playing. But also be mindful of boundaries. A recent Australian survey found that young people view TV-watching as a way of connecting to their family and social media to as a way of connecting to their friends.

7. Change rules if need be

Many families will have a young person who thinks that rules are made to be broken so they always push boundaries, limits and parent patience. Parents, on the other hand, should believe that rules are made to be changed. Be prepared to change your rules based on your young person's behaviour, maturity, sleep patterns, incompletion of homework, bullying or other issues that will invariably crop up and make them realise that the rules you set just aren't working.

8. Keep digital technology out of bedrooms

If there was one rule that you should stay firm on, then this is the one. Many young people are in sleep deficit as it is without bringing digital devices into the frame. They may say they want to charge it in their room. Keep the charger in a public place. They may even want to use their mobile or tablet to wake up in the morning. I applaud them taking on this task but get them an alarm clock instead.

9. Have a digital detox one day a week

The only way that this idea will work is if you join them in making one day a week a digital technology free day. They will probably not like it, and neither will you, but the point of having one day off is to prove that they can live without their digital device and to engage them in different forms of communication and entertainment.

Digital technology is now an integral part of our lives, but it's not the only option we have to be entertained, informed and to communicate with. Before we help our young people, it's best to look at our own digital habits to make sure we are providing them with what they need – that is, the provision of balanced role models who know when to use and when not to use technology. They are more likely to walk our walk than follow our talk. I hope for you that's not a scary proposition.

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