Guidelines for Teens and Technology Use

Technology is an important form of communication for teens in today's world. It allows them to stay connected to their family and friends and helps them stay organized. While it is important that teens have access to technology, it is also critical that they know how to use technology in a responsible and safe manner. Most parents of today's teens did not grow up using technology and social media. Thus, parents may have difficulty understanding and appreciating their child's use of technology. This lack of understanding may cause increased conflict between parents and teens regarding the amount of cell phone, iPad, videogames, and internet usage. Recognizing the difference between "normal" technology use and "internet addiction" has become increasingly difficult for parents. In addition, today's teens also know more about accessing the internet than their parents, thus making it difficult for parents to monitor and/or block internet use.

There is growing concern that technology use among teens is creating a generation that is lacking in basic social skills. In addition the adolescent years are characterized as a period of high impulsivity and at times poor judgment and limited problem-solving skills. Instead of using an "all-or-none" philosophy on technology use, we propose utilizing social media to enhance communication and social skills in a responsible manner. Social media is rapidly becoming the primary and most efficient form of communication. Therefore it is essential that parents are aware of the types of technology their teens are using and how they are using it. Sitting down with your teen and outlining expectations for use is important and lets the teen know that you care and are monitoring use (providing the structure that teens need).

When providing teens with technological devices, it is important to teach appropriate social skills and boundaries with regards to usage. These skills have been broken down into three categories:

1. Mindfulness (Self-Awareness)-Mindfulness involves self-awareness and understanding how messages and actions via social media may be interpreted by others. This skill involves slowing down and making decisions regarding what/when to post and sharing or uploading pictures and photographs/videos. Understanding the consequences of posts and responses, particularly how others will view the data, will aid in making better decisions. A teen's impulsivity can lead to poor decisions, which may increase chaos and drama in relationships. Utilizing mindfulness fosters critical thinking skills and increases self-awareness.

2. Language and Social Skills Etiquette – Tone and being aware of grammar when sending texts are key to developing proper communication skills. Help your teen understand that some message recipients may not understand social media language (i.e. LOL meaning “Laugh Out Loud”). Careful consideration of your audience will help alleviate misunderstandings and possible embarrassment and/or frustration. Using abbreviated social media language with a peer may be acceptable but to remember the recipient may not have the same social media intelligence... Grandma may think LOL is Lots of Love!!! These skills require more careful responses and will assist with impulse control and awareness.

3. Professionalism and Courtesy-When communicating using technology, it is challenging to interpret the recipient's nonverbal reactions. Parents can encourage their teens to think about other's feelings when writing and/or sending information. For example, sometimes teens send texts in ALL CAPS. Depending on the audience, this could be interpreted as an "angry" message. Understanding the message's style, tone, timing, and content is critical as it respects the person(s) you are sending the message to.
Parents should educate themselves on the applications their teens are using including Snapchat, Twitter, and Facebook among others. We know of parents who have created their own accounts on these applications and have become familiar with what their teens are using so that they can discuss with their teens their concerns. It would be much more difficult to talk about limit-setting around technology use when you don’t fully understand how the applications work. For example, some parents will become “friends” with their teens on Facebook so that they can monitor their teen’s on-line presence. Parents can designate device-free zones in the home and periods of the day that are devoted to electronic free time (assisting with time management). It is critical that adults model proper usage of electronics as well as follow the boundaries set in the home. Having unlimited access to technology can create problems, especially if the teen has other responsibilities outside of the school.

Remember: Technology use is a wonderful tool of communication for teens. However, it is a privilege and requires responsible use. As teens turn to using technology in every aspect of their lives, parents have the responsibility as well to set limits around use. With structure in place and open communication with regards to how and when technology should be used, parents can help their teens learn how to enhance their verbal and non-verbal social skills!

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