



April 2024 News and Notes

Fighting the Beast of Technology

By Robin Joy Berenson, PhD, LMFT

At the start of his presentation, Mark Edwards, LMFT, explained that human beings are not very good at moderating their impulses. At times we act like “a kid in a candy store.” In this context, technology is the candy store. Its many platforms and services seek to satisfy and exploit several human tendencies: A desire for *more*; a need to *know* (especially adolescents); and the need to *connect*.

Another common trait is to consider the “response cost” of anything we do. The lower the effort required of an action, the more likely we are to take it. Social media interactions lower the response cost of communicating. For example, how do you turn down an invitation? Do you phone or text? To call would require a higher response cost. Most of us would prefer to text. Tech programs, such as Facebook and Instagram, represent low-response cost.

Given these facts, risk factors make some adolescents particularly vulnerable to negative or unhealthy consequences; these include those who are reluctant to speak with their parents or other trusted adult about the events in their lives, and individuals who are depressed, anxious or have other mental health issues as well as limited access to mental health services.

Know Your Child!

The single most important variable parents should consider regarding how to set limits on media use is the child him or herself. It is imperative for parents to know their children and how they respond to stimuli. How prone are they to impulsivity, for example, short-versus long-term goals or their ability to resist urges? Are they prone to compulsivity, engaging in repetitive behaviors that interfere with life tasks? These are the hallmarks of the problematic use of tech, and should alert parents to their children’s greater need for guidance around the use of devices.

It is easy to say, “Social media is bad,” but reliable data is not strong enough to make that assertion. For one thing, the data on tech media use is anecdotal and based on self-report. Studies are done without control groups, tend to focus on extremes, and draw conclusions via extrapolation.

When we talk about “screen time,” it’s important to remember it also includes time online doing homework, visiting with grandma on FaceTime, and other positive uses.

Another important fact is that some youth benefit from social media and the connections to be made through them. These include individuals with high levels of social skills, those who are neuro-atypical, or sexual minorities. At the same time, individuals with ADHD, who are prone to impulsivity are vulnerable to the effects of the decreased attention span they promote. Children who are depressed can fall into a feedback loop that leads them deeper into depression.

How to address pornography?

Edwards offers some key advice for parents around the subject of online pornography. Research indicates that youth’s exposure to online porn begins much earlier than most parents suspect. As a result, Edwards recommends that parents:

Talk with their child about pornography beginning much earlier than they might think, before age 12. Assume they have already had some exposure.

Leave shame out of the conversation. Reassure children you are not angry with them.

Because adolescents are curious and often are simply seeking information, let them know that pornography is not a way to learn about sex, but often exaggerated and distorted.

For more information, Edwards referred attendees to **WWW.InternetMatters.org**

How to Set Effective Limits?

Edwards provided a “media agreement” that families can use to generate discussion around technology use and to set healthy limits.

Media Agreement

“Unless I have paid for a device with my own money or it was a gift, I understand that the device belongs to the family member(s) who bought it.”

“I will not create accounts or give out any private information — such as my full name, date of birth, address, phone number, or photos of myself — without my family’s permission.”

“If anyone makes me feel pressured or uncomfortable or acts inappropriately toward me online, I’ll stop talking to that person and will tell a family member or other trusted adult about it.”

“I will help my family set media time limits that make sense, and then I will follow them.”

“I will be mindful of how much time I spend in front of screens, and I will continue to enjoy the other activities — and people — in my life.”

“If using media or being online is making me unhappy or it’s hard to stop, I will take a break and talk to a family member.”

It goes without saying that parents’ own use of media should serve as a model for their children. Edwards recommends parents pay attention to their own responsiveness, and set their own limits, for example, around “Doomscrolling.” Many households practice “tech-free” spaces at family mealtimes. Another popular idea is a policy of 24/6: putting away devices one day a week for a “tech Shabbat.”

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