Limiting Your Child's Technology Use: How Much Is Too Much?

By Jennifer Bashant, Ph.D.

Our world has changed so much, technologically speaking, over the past 25 years. Advancements are happening rapidly, and new technology is catching on and taking off more and more quickly as the years progress. Technology plays a major role in the lives of most of our kids, and we, as parents, must decide what limits we will place on their use of technology. The technological advancements that we are experiencing have had a tremendously positive impact, including the ability for each of us to carry around a computer, a television, a radio, a camera and the internet in our pockets. However, many of us are noticing changes in our children as a result of technology use, and not always positive changes.

I have spoken with many parents who describe that their children spend hours on technology when permitted to do so…almost in an addictive manner. Parents have engaged in many battles over setting technology limits, sometimes only to decide that it is not worth the behavioral meltdown that will ensue if they enforce limits. When most of us were kids, we played outside after school with the neighborhood kids, or with our siblings, until mom rang the dinner bell. Now, it can feel like pulling teeth to get our children to go outside and play! I think most of us know in our hearts that this is not healthy for them, but it feels like such an uphill battle, and many of us are not sure where to draw the line and how to move forward.

I am also hearing from many teachers that they are noticing differences in students today as compared to ten years ago. Teachers report that students have a more difficult time maintaining focus and attention, especially on challenging tasks. Once attention is broken from school work, it takes many more minutes to regain focus, and progress toward completing the work is much slower and more laborious. Students are likely to take longer to complete school work, and feel much more stressed as they do so. This is mainly because they are so distracted by the urge to check their phones (every 15 minutes, on average), and by the anxiety associated with a fear of missing out on something on social media.

Anxiety caused by a phone? This seems pretty extreme…so, I asked my teens if this is something they have experienced. Two out of three of them said that they

do feel anxious if they do not have their phones with them. Wow, I wouldn't have expected that. I can see we have some work to do in this area.

So how is technology affecting children psychologically, physically and neurologically? The most recent studies show that the use of entertainment technology (video games, iPad, smartphone, television) have some sobering effects on our kids. Here are some of the highlights:

- Teenagers are almost always attempting to multitask, even though they know that multitasking is not effective.
- The loss of one's phone causes teenagers to experience anxiety that is visible and presents as agitation.
- The average adolescent finds it challenging to study for 15 minutes at a time. When attempting to do so, they will spend at least one third of that time distracted from studying.
- Phone-related anxiety (fear of missing out) is a strong predictor of poor school performance and of not getting adequate sleep. Roughly half of all teenagers surveyed checked their phones during the night. According to the National Sleep Foundation, 80% of all teens say that they rarely or never sleep well. I'm sure you are aware of all of the negative effects of inadequate sleep (depression, anxiety, illness, accidents), but that is a topic for another day!
- The constant stimulation from technology has led to shorter attention spans, and the instant rewards from video games often results in kids giving up if they do not get the desired result quickly.

So what can we do about this?

According to Dr. Larry Rosen, Professor at California State University and co-author of "The Distracted Mind: Ancient Brains in a High-Tech World," there are steps that you can take to decrease the negative impact of technology on your child:

1. **Explain to your child that their brain needs some time to reset**. The recommendations are different depending on age:
   - Children under 12 should take a 30 minute break from technology every 30 minutes.

- Teens 12 and older should spend no longer than 90 minutes on technology without a break. The brain needs 10 to 15 minutes to reset, and this can be done by going outside to be in nature, listening to or playing music, meditating, exercising or taking a shower.

2. **Gradually increase time away from tech during study sessions**.
   Begin by having your child turn off all notifications and close out all apps. He can keep his phone next to him, upside down. Have him set an alarm for 15 minutes, and begin studying. When the alarm rings, he can check the phone, reset the alarm for another 15 minutes and begin working again. Gradually increase the work interval by 5 minutes at a time.

3. **Help your child understand how important sleep is**. Here are some guidelines for technology use before bed.
   - The National Sleep Foundation recommends no technology one hour before bed.
   - The Mayo Clinic recommends using a blue light filter, and holding the phone at least 14 inches from the face.
   - Other activities that will help promote sleep are: reading a book, watching TV or listening to music.

4. **Minimize notifications since these are distracting and cause the child to lose focus.**

5. **Create tech-free zones in your home.**
   A great place to start is by having the dinner table be a tech-free zone. You may decide to add other zones, like the car, the bedroom or a restaurant. You can ease into this by allowing your child to have a one minute break mid-way through dinner (or car ride) to check the phone. This will reduce the anxiety about missing something important on social media.

Technology is here to stay, so we need to find ways to incorporate it in our childrens' lives, but not allow it to take over. These five guidelines are a great place to start – I will be working on this in my house as well!

SOURCE: Rosen, Larry D. (October 2017). The Distracted Student Mind – enhancing its focus and attention. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 99(2), 8-14.