**Teens and Technology: 6 Strategies to Curb the Compulsion**

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Rylaan GimbyNovember 8, 2018



*My parents are so stupid.  
I can’t believe they are making me meet with you.  
This f..king sucks.  
They think I am addicted to video games.  
She’s on her phone all the time!*

So begin many of my initial meetings with families.  Parental and caregiver concerns over their child’s relationship with technology is a very common theme in my practice working with children, youth and families.

Technology is an important aspect of 21st century life.  There is no escaping it. Technology brings many gifts: connections, information, entertainment, instant gratification. Like any relationship, our relationship with technology can fluctuate between a rewarding, beneficial one and a more intense and problematic one.  It is interesting to note that a historic/Shakespearean understanding of the word *addiction* likens it to passion.  Where is the line between passion and problem?

For many teens, their relationship with technology (whether video games or social media) is a very important one.  Children and teens need guidance in developing healthy relationships.  This includes with friends, with intimate relationships and with technology.  We as parents and caregivers have an extremely challenging job as we need to provide this guidance, set appropriate limits and experiment with giving freedoms, all within a reality that is most often very different from our own experience growing up.

As a father of two (14 and 12 years old) and a therapist working with children and teens, I have learned a lot about technology.  I try to live out the following suggestions I make to families with my own kids.

1. Model the relationship you want to encourage.

There is truth to the cliché – our actions speak louder than our words.  What message does our own relationship with technology send our children?  I find it interesting (and disturbing) that, as a therapist, I make my living focusing on issues of relationships and communication – yet how often do I find myself in a battle for attention as my children, partner, friends, etc., compete with my iPhone and computer?

Personal attention to values such as family and relationships helps keep my relationship with technology more at bay.  But it takes work.  We learn about relationships through our relationships at home.  I need to constantly ask myself: What are my children learning from me?

2. Be aware and involved with what your children/teens are engaged in.

The world today is a much different world than when I grew up.  Gone are the days of hanging out with friends who were lucky enough to own a Vic 20, or better yet an Atari!  Today, it is commonplace for children to have a smart phone, laptop, gaming system, TV – often in their rooms.  Anything you want is but a click away – 24/7.  Talk to your children and see how they are spending their time – what sites they are visiting, what games they are playing, who they are communicating with, what social media platforms they are using, how much and how often.

I could write an entire additional article about complexities of helping kids navigate the deep waters of cyberbullying, texting/sexting, and other risky or dangerous online behaviours.  The bottom line is ***communication is key***.

3. Talk to your children about porn.

Porn is one of the most common uses of the Internet.  The hard reality is that your children almost certainly have viewed or are viewing porn.  [Statistics](http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/CV169.pdf) indicate that only 3% of boys and 17% of girls describe *never* having viewed porn.

The porn of today is much different than that of my youth in its sheer volume, availability, graphic (and often violent) content and shift into the mainstream.  Internet porn is shaping this generation.  Although it might be difficult and awkward, we need to be talking about porn, sex, relationships and technology.  For more information about the realities of internet porn including resources and tools visit [Reboot Nation](http://www.rebootnation.org/).

4. Set appropriate limits and begin early.

Kids are very much influenced by both the here and now and the pleasure principle.  Moderation is something that many of us struggle with, whether we are a child, teen or adult.  The earlier expectations around technology are in place, the more they become the norm.

Increased screen usage has been associated with problems such as sleep difficulties, and increased risk for mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety and weight gain.  indicate that the average Canadian child spends 7.5 hours per day in front of a screen (smart phone, computer, gaming system, TV, etc.).  It is interesting to compare this with the [recommendations](http://www.cps.ca/documents/position/physical-activity-guidelines#TABLE%202)) from the Canadian Paediatric Society for no screen time for children under the age of two and 1-2 hours a day for older children and teens.  I often find using these statistics an interesting conversation starter with children/teens and families.  While these guidelines may not be realistic for some, they offer a conversation starting point.

When exploring expectations, it is important to not just explore the volume of time involved, but what is being engaged, when and where.  For the record, as a father and a therapist, I strongly recommend technology stay out of the bedrooms at night.  Another idea we have been experimenting with in my family with is total, family-wide “technology fasts” – no personal/recreational tech time (outside of homework or regular work hours) for a day or even week.

5. Actively explore the relationship with technology.

All relationships serve a purpose.  What purpose or need does technology fulfill for *you* as an adult?  For your child?  Cam Adair in his compelling Ted Talk [Escaping Videogame Addiction](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHmC2D0_Hdg) discusses the problems that video games created in his life.  He encourages parents to consider the needs gaming (and, I would add, social media) fulfills for many children, youth and adults including:

* Offers a temporary escape
* Creates a sense of connection
* Offers a challenge
* Provides a means of measurable growth

It is very difficult to expect someone to change their relationship with something without finding alternative means of fulfilling their need.  When exploring the relationship with technology, it is advisable to explore first their *appreciations*:

* What are you into (games played, social media, sites visited, etc.)?
* What do you like best about this?
* What would you like me to understand about this?

After getting a sense of their appreciations, begin to explore *potential downsides*:

* Are there things about this relationship (with games, social media) you don’t like as much?

After exploring the relationship, state your *observations and concerns*.

* I’ve noticed \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ lately.
* I’m concerned about …

Using the word *addiction* is generally not helpful. It carries a lot of baggage.  When used with children and teens, at best you will be met with an eye roll.  At worst, you will shut down the conversation.  All too often we get caught up in labeling.  Rather than use a label (which is a form of judgement) that will more than likely be met with resistance, use curiosity to explore your concerns.

Seek help.

We all need help once in awhile.  This is especially true with relationships – whether these are with our children and youth, technology or all of the above.  Having an outside perspective provide some guidance on this subject can be helpful for all involved.

Relationships are complicated.  Our kids need our guidance to develop healthy relationships in all areas of their lives, including technology. There are no easy answers when it comes to relationship building.  However, an intentional, open presence and learning from mistakes offer a good starting point.

[John Koop Harder](http://www.johnkoopharder.com/) is a therapist, trainer and father of 2 boys.  When not working or spending time with his family, he works at developing a healthy relationship with Netflix.

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