Monitoring media: How can students ride the wave of the future without drowning in a sea of distractions?

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Every high school freshman in district RE-1 of Weld County, Colo., receives a present on the first day of school: a personal laptop computer. For three years now, the district has handled upgrades, breakdowns and objections from parents unwilling to take in the potentially disruptive houseguest. Director of support services Keith Ouweneel holds seminars to show parents how the system is designed to record the students' online activity, block social sites like Facebook and shut down at midnight.

But there are always the few who refuse to see technology as anything but a distraction from academics, much to Ouweneel's dismay.

"Those kids are at a competitive disadvantage if their parents never come around," said Ouweneel, who keeps his computer labs open after school so that the students without laptops can catch up on assignments. "We tell them, 'You can't be a farmer or police officer without computer skills.'"

While it is hard to find tech-free households like the ones in Ouweneel's district, the Pew Research Center's "Internet & American Life Project" began in 2006 to see a decrease in the number of parents of online teens who said the Internet had been a good thing for their children - dropping to 59 percent in 2006 from 67 percent in 2004.

"It's not always easy when parents don't recall childhood with the

Internet," said Amanda Lenhart, a senior research specialist at Pew, a nonprofit research organization. "They may say, 'Why isn't my child reading as many books?' It's hard to step back and see that he or she is reading online. They're still engaging in writing and text and literature, but just in a different way."

Since the 2006 Pew study, the wildfire of instant and constant communication has spread through social networking sites, text messaging and online games. The Nielsen consumer report for June 2010 showed that the number of households with HDTV nearly tripled from the start of 2008. And Pew research reports that, at the start of the last school year, half of teens were sending more than 50 text messages a day - and one-third of them were sending more than 100 per day. Add to this the ever-increasing number of tweens and teens with cell phones, and it's easy to see why parents have become more apprehensive, discovering that more technology often means more portals to distraction rather than gateways to academic and professional success.

"Parents are really realizing that children are disconnected from the family because they are constantly connected to their devices," said Dr. Don Shifrin, a member of the council on communications in media for the American Academy of Pediatrics. "It's up to the parent to ask 'How can we rebalance?' The toughest word in parenting is balance."

The AAP tells us what a balanced technology diet should look like: no more than two hours of "screen time" per day beyond what is needed for schoolwork. Of course, academic and leisurely activities often mix on the computer, where students can click between Microsoft Word, Facebook, Google and iTunes all within the same minute. Pediatricians suggest parents should supervise media multitasking when one- or two-hour assignments are turning into whole nights spent in front of a computer screen.

In a recent study by Iowa State University psychologists, children who exceeded the two-hour screen-time limit were more likely to develop attention problems. The average child in the study spent about 4.3 hours a day in front of a screen.

Shifrin said cell phones are just as guilty as TVs and computers for detracting from studying and family time. He advises parents of distracted teens to ban cell phones during study time to re-create the same climate of concentration they have in the classroom.

But as new media technologies blossom, even educators are hesitant to draw a hard line between those used for academics and those used for social purposes. Sites once viewed as distractions are now enriching the learning experience.

Mike Gilbert, superintendent of the White Oak Independent School District in East Texas, said his students often use Twitter in place of a thesaurus. From a teacher's desk in Longview, Texas, a student can learn a new word from a kid in New York.

"What we used to call cheating is now called networking," Gilbert said. Speaking from 30 years of experience as an educator, Gilbert said that the benefits of technology in the classroom are great - and the potential problems are easy to stop.

The teachers in Gilbert's district are trained to spot when "networking" turns into disruptive or delinquent behavior. He said the teacher's eye that once caught note passing and Playboy smuggling now looks out for texting and inappropriate Web browsing.

"We haven't invented any new sins," Gilbert said. "We've just invented new ways of doing it."

Many pediatricians and educators disagree - and say that when it comes to distracting students, technology has created a whole new beast, one that is silent and ever-present.

"There's a big difference between passing notes and texting," Ouweneel said. "The audience can be a lot bigger and be in any location. The teachers have to establish ground rules to manage their classrooms." He reemphasizes the importance of management and supervision to parents when he distributes laptops each fall.

Shifrin reminds parents that they are in ultimate control of their child's media use. He said he has had to tell parents to stop paying cell phone bills after a child physically refuses to release the device from his grip.

But he cannot give the same advice to every family. Some adolescents find solace from real-life bullying in their social interactions online. Others may exceed the recommended screen time, but still find time to study and maintain a healthy and connected lifestyle.

"One size does not fit all," Shifrin said. "It's up to every parent to recognize if things are getting out of balance."

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