

Gadget givers urged to consider ramifications

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Electronic gifts should come with efforts to help kids be responsible users, experts say.

(HealthDay)—Gifts of electronic gadgets, like smartphones and laptops, no doubt bring glee to the teens who receive them. But people thinking of gifting such devices to a kid might want to consider the broader ramifications.

"With teens and these types of gifts, we're really talking about their ability to connect with the larger world," said Dr. Jonathan Pletcher, an adolescent medicine specialist at Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh.

"These gifts come with a responsibility to talk with [kids](#) about the rules of engagement, and you have to be willing to have those talks."

"This is not a gift you can just give and walk away," he said. "It's like a

new bike. You have to be willing to put in the time."

Take cellphones, now ubiquitous in teens' and younger kids' lives. According to the [Pew Research Center](#), three-quarters of teens have a cellphone, and most use those phones to text one another.

When that texting takes place can be problematic.

"If you're reading a text, you're not looking at the road," said Dr. Barbara Gains, director of trauma and [injury prevention](#) at Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh. In addition, she said, "there have been reports of pedestrian injuries where kids were so busy [texting](#) that they've walked out in front of cars."

What's being texted can cause problems, too.

More than one-quarter of all teens have sent a naked picture of themselves to someone else, a practice known as "sexting," according to a report published online July 2 in the [Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine](#). And another study, published last December in *Pediatrics*, noted that text messaging has become a popular way for [bullies](#) to harass people.

One thing parents and other gift-givers probably don't need to be worried about, though, is any permanent [eye damage](#) from youths staring at a tiny cellphone screen.

"If you do anything for a significant length of time, there will be fatigue," said Dr. Karen Griffith, an optometrist in Petaluma, Calif., "but they won't make a permanent change to their vision" with extensive cellphone use.

As for computers, both Pletcher and Gaines expressed concern that kids

who spend too much time on a computer might be doing so at the expense of physical activity. In fact, a study from the June issue of the journal *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise* found that cardiorespiratory fitness decreased as kids' computer screen time increased.

Eye fatigue can also be an issue when looking at computer screens, said Griffith, who recommended practicing what she called the 20-20-20 rule: "If you're at the computer for 20 minutes, take a 20-second break and look 20-feet away."

Then there's the concern about content.

"The Internet is an amazing thing, but it doesn't take more than a few clicks to get somewhere you don't want your teen to be," Gaines said. Her advice is twofold: "Keep computers in public places because kids are getting exposed to things that we, as parents, never even thought about" and, in addition, "talk to your kids about what kinds of things should and shouldn't be posted."

Concerns about content carry over to video games, too.

"Every family has different standards as to what's acceptable, but playing video games has really become a way for kids to have a play date, even though they're in their own homes," Pletcher said.

Video games "can be a good way to blow off steam," he said, "but like everything else, they require monitoring."

One recent study offers support for steering kids away from more violent content. The research, presented at a meeting of the Radiological Society of North America, found that violent video games could temporarily alter brain function, though the researchers said it wasn't clear just what the changes might mean, if anything.

All told, however, those concerned about kids' health and safety want to remind adults buying gifts for kids that it's important to consider more than whether a gift has sharp edges or tiny movable parts.

"Electronics are here—it's just the way things are—and parents really have to be an active part of their use and be engaged," Pletcher noted. And, he said, that ought to include talking to eager gift-givers to make sure any electronic presents are parent-approved.

More information: The Pew Research Center has more on [teens and text messaging](#).

A companion article details [one family's solution](#) to use of electronics.

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