

# Electronic Christmas gifts bear more responsibility for parents and kids

January 9 2014, by Evie Polsley

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Smartphones, laptops, tablets and video games were happily crossed off the wish lists of many young children and teens this Christmas. But for parents, giving children electronic devices has to be about more than just saving Christmas, it has to be about making sure kids are safe when they start getting online.

"One of the issues with [kids](#) and electronics is making sure they understand the responsibility that comes with them. Parents need to ask themselves, 'Is my child really ready for this?' They need to sit down with their kids and have an open discussion about limits and even learn how to use the gift together," said Theodote Pontikes, MD, pediatric psychiatrist at Loyola University Health System and assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Neurosciences at Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine.

Studies have shown that increased screen time can lead to physical ailments such as obesity and also hinder [children](#) in their social and emotional development. Pontikes said it's important to set limits for how long children can be in front of a screen.

"Limiting screen time can be difficult for [parents](#) since homework and other school assignments require kids to be on the computer and online. What kids need to know is that screen time is [screen time](#) whether that's a computer, phone, TV or video game," Pontikes said.

She suggested parents have a discussion with their kids to set limits

together, but also help them understand why limits are needed. She said parents should talk about fiscal responsibility and be open about predators and cyberbullying.

"Give real examples of what can happen if they aren't careful and let them know you are on the same side. Make sure they understand if they ever feel uncomfortable or scared that they can come to you," Pontikes said. "Also, be sure to block sites that are not appropriate for minors and talk about why your child shouldn't be there. Make sure they know it's your job as a parent to keep them safe."

The importance of sharing and being open is extremely important when it comes to minors and being online, Pontikes said. She suggested no phones, computers or tablets in the bedroom and make sure Internet use is only in a common area of the house such as the kitchen or family room.

"You don't need to follow your child on Twitter or friend them on Facebook, but make sure you're communicating face-to-face. A relationship has to be about more than social media and texting. Make sure you are having intentional face-to-face time with your kids and encourage them to have more personal interactions with their friends," Pontikes said. "Keeping in touch with existing friends through social media is great, especially when they are far away, but it should never be used to establish relationships."

According to Pontikes, parents should keep an eye on their children's behavior and not disregard any changes in behavior, which are a common warning sign that a child might be in danger online. Here are a few:

- Sudden changes in behaviors, such as losing interest in activities that they enjoyed before

- Subtle changes, such as being more reserved or isolated
- Habit changes, such as not sleeping, not eating or having nightmares
- Sudden change in the way they dress
- Not performing well or suddenly not wanting to go to school

"The best thing a parent can do for their children is to be involved in their life. Get involved at their school, be at the games, go to the recitals. One day a week do something as a family that sparks conversation. Be there, be supportive," Pontikes said.

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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