

Family technology rules: What kids expect of parents

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A new study from University of Washington human centered design and engineering researchers is among the first to survey kids about technology rules they would set for their parents. Credit: crazybananas, flickr

Put your phone away when I'm talking to you. Don't text while you're

driving—not even at red lights. Stop posting photos of me without my permission.

These are some of the rules for Internet and smartphone use that kids would set for their parents, according to a new study by researchers at the University of Washington and University of Michigan.

The researchers surveyed 249 families with [children](#) between the ages of 10 and 17 about their household's most important technology rules and expectations, as well as what made those rules easier or harder to follow.

The [paper](#)—which is among the first to explore children's expectations for parents' technology use—was presented in March at the Association for Computing Machinery's conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing in San Francisco. The surveys revealed kids' feelings about fairness and "oversharing," the most effective types of technology rules and families' most common approaches.

"Managing kids' technology use was once much easier for parents—they switched off the television when a show was over or kept an eye on kids as they used the family computer in the living room," said lead author Alexis Hiniker, a UW doctoral student in Human Centered Design and Engineering. "But now that so many family members have phones with them at all times, it's become harder and harder to set those boundaries."

When researchers asked kids what technology rules they wished their parents would follow—a less common line of inquiry—the answers fell into seven general categories:

- Be present—Children felt there should be no technology at all in certain situations, such as when a child is trying to talk to a parent

- Child autonomy—Parents should allow children to make their own decisions about technology use without interference
- Moderate use—Parents should use technology in moderation and in balance with other activities
- Supervise children—Parents should establish and enforce technology-related rules for children's own protection
- Not while driving—Parents should not text while driving or sitting at a traffic light
- No hypocrisy—Parents should practice what they preach, such as staying off the Internet at mealtimes
- No oversharing—Parents shouldn't share information online about their children without explicit permission

"Twice as many children as parents expressed concerns about family members oversharing personal information about them on Facebook and other [social media](#) without permission," said co-author Sarita Schoenebeck, assistant professor in the University of Michigan's School of Information. "Many children said they found that content embarrassing and felt frustrated when their parents continued to do it."

The study also examined which types of household rules were more or less difficult to enforce. Families reported that rules prohibiting certain technology or social media uses entirely—such as no using Snapchat or banning a particular video game—were easier to follow and enforce than rules that aim to prevent technology use in certain situations—such as no phones at church or no texting with friends after a certain time.

"We were surprised to find that when mom and dad say 'you can't be on Instagram' it's easier for kids to accept and stick to that rule than when they say 'you can be on Instagram but you have to put it away at dinner,'" said Hiniker. "As a teenager, I think I would have been happier in a world where I got to be on Instagram at least some of the time, but that really seemed to be a struggle for families."

The most common expectation cited by children revolved around "being present" in certain social settings, such as when a family member was talking or during meals or when they were involved in certain activities. Parents, on the other hand, tended to prioritize privacy rules to prevent children from putting themselves at risk by disclosing personal information online.

Most of the nearly 500 different technology rules reported by families fell into one of a dozen categories, which included:

- No technology at certain times
- No technology until certain obligations are fulfilled, like homework or chores
- Fixed time limits on how long kids can engage with technology
- Cost restrictions
- Expectations to balance technology use with other activities, like playing outside
- Parent audits that grant them the ability to check kids' phones at any time and access social media accounts
- Banning a particular site, game, activity or device
- Rules about online behavior, such as no bullying or bad language or sharing sexual content

While parents tended not to be concerned about different rules for parents and children, many kids saw that as hypocritical. Children also found it easier to follow household technology rules when families had developed them collectively and when parents lived by them as well.

The fact that both children and parents reported so much difficulty with rules that require [family members](#) to simply put their phones down in certain circumstances points to missed opportunities for app and device designers to recognize those consumer needs, the researchers said.

Technical fixes to help users find more balance might include everything from a "family time" button that disables notifications for 30 minutes to news feeds that provide opportunities to digest content in smaller chunks to video streaming that doesn't automatically start playing a new episode once the last one stops.

The research suggests that if [parents](#) find that a particular app or social media site is too difficult for their kids to disengage from, the simpler solution is to make it off-limits.

"If app and device designers were more open to fostering healthy technology habits, they probably would make their current customers happier," said co-author Julie Kientz, UW associate professor of Human Centered Design and Engineering. "And they might bring in more families who've decided the rule is not to use it at all."

Provided by University of Washington

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