Technology and children—a parent's survival guide

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Mirman says technology can affect parent-child relationships. Credit: University of Alabama at Birmingham

Technology has changed the way children develop and interact with others, and while it seems to change every day, many parents are forced

to keep up or get left behind.

Jessica Mirman, Ph.D., an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology in the University of Alabama at Birmingham College of Arts and Sciences, says that families should practice healthy habits when it comes to technology.

"Parents can be pretty sophisticated with technology when it comes to helping their children develop," she said.

Play it safe

"Parents need to be aware of what kinds of devices are in their homes and vehicles," she said.

Whether it is about accidentally swallowing button batteries, the tiny batteries often found in musical greeting cards, games, Christmas ornaments and cameras, or the risks of texting and driving, Mirman suggested that parental vigilance can save lives.

"For example, button batteries are small, shiny, and very appealing to infants and toddlers who may try to ingest them," she said. "Parents need to keep these and other batteries out of reach and keep devices secure with openings kept shut."

The types of technology risks can change with age. According to the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration, in 2015 alone, 3,477 people were killed, and 391,000 were injured in motor vehicle crashes involving distracted drivers. During daylight hours, approximately 660,000 drivers are using cellphones while driving. That creates enormous potential for deaths and injuries on U.S. roads.

"We always worry about when teens, and parents too, are glued to their

phones while driving," Mirman said. "There is also teen driver safety research that says when parents are calling, teens feel that they are expected to answer, even while driving. Parents need to remember to practice what they preach and model healthy technology habits at home and in the vehicle."

What's trending?

Social media is another way technology changes how people develop, according to Mirman. She says social media is a good tool to keep people connected; but there are guidelines and boundaries parents need to set, starting again, with practicing what they preach.

"Parents should practice moderation and respect for others on social media," Mirman said. "Kids are very observant, and they will pick up on what parents do and often mimic those behaviors."

She says children and teenagers are quick to point out any hypocrisy in parents.

Widespread and improved mobile technology means teens can access social media more easily. According to a Pew survey conducted during 2014 and 2015, 94 percent of teens who go online using a mobile device do so daily.

Mirman says parents who monitor their children's social media usage need to start early to develop a foundation of trust with their teens. Parents cannot be around all the time, and teenagers will need to understand why they need to follow the rules, even when Mom and Dad are not watching.

"If an older child or teen really wants to get their hands on something online, they will likely find a way to do it," Mirman said. "That is why

parents need to be clear about their reasoning for why the rules are in place and not just be an enforcer of the rules."

Screen time

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, children younger than 18 months should avoid the use of screen media. Between ages 18 months and 24 months, some screen-time can be introduced, with parental supervision. Between the ages of 2 and 5 years, a maximum of one hour a day is recommended. For children above the age of 6, consistent time limits should be established.

Marcela Frazier, O.D., an associate professor in the UAB Department of Ophthalmology, says the amount of screen time a child has can have a negative impact on their eyesight.

"The more time children spend on devices, the less time they spend outdoors, and spending time outdoors could slow down the progression of nearsightedness, which is becoming more and more prevalent in children," Frazier said. "Prolonged exposure to the screens of devices can cause eye fatigue, eye irritation and headaches due to the increased demand on the visual system and the tendency to not blink while using them."

Frazier says adults usually report symptoms like eyestrain, dryness, headaches and eye irritation after prolonged use of near devices; however, children may experience these issues and not be able to communicate them accurately. Parents may notice some signs of [eye irritation](link) and fatigue related to screen-time in children manifested as excessive blinking, squinting, watery eyes, red eyes and some eye-rubbing.

The flip side

Mirman says much research has been done involving children and technology, but what happens when the parents are addicted to tech?

"If parents are distracted, they can't pay attention to their children," Mirman said. "Kids notice this quickly."

She says, by being distracted with technology, parents can make their children feel rejected or unimportant. A more fluid boundary between home and work can add to that distraction.

Finding a remedy

Mirman says technology can be good, if used in moderation. Many kids can use age-appropriate video games as positive stimulants, and can use them as a way of positive social interaction with online multiplayer games. This can be especially helpful for socially marginalized children and teens.

"A lot of kids can make positive connections with others through multiplayer games or social media that they may not necessarily make in person," she said.

Mirman also says there are a variety of apps that can help with literacy skills.

"Especially for children with developmental disabilities, technology can be very helpful at home and in the classroom," she said.

She says it is important for families to create a positive culture around the phones and devices, and practice what she calls "phone hygiene."

"Developing healthy habits is important not just for you but for the well-being of the entire family," she said.

Provided by University of Alabama at Birmingham