

Don't use technology as a bargaining chip with your kids

October 27 2017, by Joanne Orlando



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Do you take away your teenager's phone to manage their behaviour?
Maybe when they arrive home late from a party or receive a bad report card?

Confiscating, time-limiting or permitting additional access to technology has become a popular parenting strategy. [Surveys show](#) that 65% of American parents with teenagers confiscate phones or remove internet privileges as a form of punishment.

It's no longer simply a tool of distraction – technology access has become a means of behavioural control. But my recent research suggests that this approach might not be the best idea.

I've spoken with 50 Australian families with 118 [children](#) aged 1-18 about this issue. The data will be published in 2018. Among my sample, a family with two children owns on average six to eight devices. Some children also had devices from a very young age – the youngest was a one-year-old who received a tablet for her first birthday. The youngest mobile [phone](#) owner was six years old.

My qualitative investigation suggests that using technology as a bargaining chip can have adverse effects. It may impact the trust you build with your child and how they use technology.

The effect on younger children

For children 12 years and younger, I saw that parents often use technology as a reward for good behaviour. For example, allowing a two-year-old time on a tablet for using the potty "successfully".

While it's important to recognise a child's achievements, kids can begin to associate technology with being "good" and making their parents proud.

As one eight-year-old explained while sitting on the couch with an iPad either side of him, "I'm a really good boy, that's why I have two iPads!"

This strategy also places emphasis on "use" as opposed to "quality use".

Quality technology use is commonly understood as use that emphasises creativity and problem-solving. It's important not to encourage kids to think about screen time in terms of gratification alone. Instead, it should enhance learning, help develop one's sense of self, or facilitate positive connections.

The effect on teenagers

In my study, parents with teens often removed or limited technology use as a punishment. For example, taking a phone from a 13-year-old because he was rude.

In separate discussions, parents and teens talked about the backlash to such actions. While parents often interpreted their protests as the punishment "working", teenagers in my study explained it differently.

If their phone is taken away, they often withdrew from their parents. Instead of focusing on what they'd done wrong, they fixated on not having a phone and finding someone else's to use in the mean time.

On top of this, teenagers characterised it as a privacy issue. One girl explained,

"I don't know what my mum does with my phone when she has it. She probably searches through it!"

Worryingly, some teens interpreted their punishment in ways that could compromise the important messages that parents give children about safety on the internet.

Research shows that healthy family communication is crucial in reducing

[risky online behaviours](#) such as cyberbullying, contact with a potential predator, or exposure to sexually explicit material.

In response to her phone being confiscated, for example, one 15-year-old girl expressed what many teenagers told me:

"I don't tell my parents much now about what happens to me because I don't want my phone taken off me."

Three key points for parents

Our relationship with technology is complicated, so how should it be treated by parents?

Technology shouldn't be used to fix all problems

Children told me that "the punishment needs to fit the crime!"

Using technology to encourage appropriate behaviour is not the answer unless it is in response to a technology-related incident. Say, a teenager bullying someone online.

If the incident has nothing to do with internet use, use a strategy that will help them understand and improve on the actual behaviour of concern.

Be a positive technology role model

Being a positive technology role model for children means encouraging quality technology use.

For example, setting aside some phone-free time each day so you can be "in the moment" with your child. If you watch online videos with them,

make the clips useful, like learning how to design a new garden. Positive interactions can also be demonstrated, such as playing online chess with a friend.

When the punishment doesn't work

My research suggests that there's a point when using technology to manage behaviour simply doesn't work anymore.

It can get too difficult to remove the smartphone each time your child needs to do their homework, for example. It could even cause animosity or unnecessary aggravation.

It's important to develop a range of strategies that guide child behaviour. These do not always have to be in response to bad behaviour and they do not always need to be extreme. Instead, they could be used to nudge and guide your child towards comprehending their own actions.

We need to shift the focus away from parenting that relies on threats and rewards, to one that nurtures meaningful parent-child and child-technology relationships.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Don't use technology as a bargaining chip with your kids (2017, October 27) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-10-dont-technology-bargaining-chip-kids.html>

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