Teens and screens: 7 ways tried-and-true parenting approaches can help navigate family conflict

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Conflict is a normal and functional part of the parent-adolescent relationship, contributing to the development of social, emotional and

problem-solving skills.

However, when conflicts become stuck, rigid and persistent, they can hinder healthy emotional experiences.

In today's digital age, where screens and digital devices have become an integral part of daily life, parent-adolescent conflicts surrounding digital experiences have become increasingly common.

Over 70% of parents with children under the age of 12 express concern about their child's screen time, and majority of parents report fighting with their children over digital matters, with more than one-third reporting such conflicts on a daily basis.

It is important to better understand how and why these conflicts may be unfolding, and what families can do to foster healthy relationships with each other and digital technologies.

Parenting and adolescent perspectives

During normal development, parent-adolescent conflict often unfolds due to clashes between teenagers' yearning for independence and parents' concerns for their safety.

Adolescents embrace digital technologies as tools for self-expression, identity exploration and social interaction. The digital landscape provides platforms to assert their independence, individuality and connect with peers on their own terms.

At the same time, parents are uncertain about children's digital experiences that didn't exist in their own childhoods.

Content, social connections

Conflicts can include concerns around screen time, videogaming, online safety, privacy and how internet content will affect youth development, health and habits (related to peer networks, sexuality, ideologies, substance use or exposure to advertising and commerce).

With social media, parents worry about age-appropriate content and cyberbullying, while adolescents value social media for social connections. Privacy concerns contribute to conflicts as parents monitor online activities for safety, which adolescents may find intrusive, leading to secrecy and resistance.

Given how media amplifies research highlighting potential harm to youth's personal safety and healthy development, parents may worry whether these technologies or digtial habits may cause some lasting harm to their child's social and emotional development.

Challenge of establishing boundaries, limits

Parenting in the digital age has been fraught with uncertainty. Nonetheless, the same evidence-supported parenting practices that worked for guiding youth over several previous generations remain applicable and effective for navigating digital issues.

For parents, the goal may be clear: to raise children who are self-regulated and capable of responsible self-management, while simultaneously nurturing quality relationships with their kids and aiding in the development of mature communication skills.

Navigating conflicts and disagreements about screens can provide a valuable opportunity to achieve these goals.

Tips on productive conversations

1. Seek understanding & embrace open communication: Sometimes, issues stem from misunderstandings and a lack of validation. Parents and children can work together by seeking to understand each other's perspectives and encourage open dialogue. Parents can start by taking a genuine interest in learning about their kids' digital interests and experiences.

Ask open-ended questions to facilitate discussions and promote active [listening to one another's thoughts and feelings about digital technologies without judgment or interruption](). This approach can help youth feel heard and valued, alleviating the sometimes entrenched positions that parent and child can hold.

2. Be informed & stay current: Exploring the digital world together, understanding preferred platforms and content and potential risks can foster open discussions about online safety, privacy and responsible digital citizenship. Parents not only gain valuable insights, but also send a powerful message that they are engaged and committed to listening to their child's thoughts and well-being.

3. Set clear boundaries, together: Some limits and expectations [are needed to guide responsible digital experiences](). Collaboratively establishing boundaries and rules enables setting expectations that meet everyone's wants and needs.

With these expectations clear, subsequent negotiation and compromise should be smoother when and if disagreements arise. While parents maintain a pivotal role in setting limits, involving youth in the decision-making process can be highly beneficial. Importantly, when children have a say in setting limits, [they are more likely to abide by them](). This approach also helps youth develop a sense of responsibility, self-control

and problem-solving skills.

4. Not abstinence, but reinforcement: Although abstinence from digital technologies might seem like a good idea, a more balanced approach is more effective. Outright denial of access can lead to conflicts and secrecy. To encourage positive behavior, parents can adopt a strategy of reinforcement to leverage children's strong desires for any activity, digital or otherwise, through reward as well as negative consequences for ignoring agreed-upon boundaries: for example, breaking curfew may result in a reduction in allotted digital time.

Reward means positive consequences: initiating or completing chores without reminders could earn additional digital time.

If a parent grants their child two hours of screen time on Saturday mornings, they can reward positive behaviors throughout the week incrementally.

This direct, quantifiable and contingent approach to consequences empowers a child's sense of control over their access.

5. Promote critical thinking: As with any behavior of concern, it is important for youth to think critically about their digital habits.

Discussing the content they consume is a good way to teach youth to distinguish between positive and negative influences, question the credibility of online sources and make informed choices.

6. Lead by example: One way to cultivate healthy digital habits is for parents to model the behavior they wish to see in their child. Parents would also benefit from considering their own digital experiences and maintaining healthy digital habits. It may be helpful for parents to reveal their own digital struggles and management techniques in ways that are

appropriate to children's and youth's maturity and the parent-child relationship.

7. Revisit and adjust: Screen time and digital guidelines need periodic adjustments as [children](link) grow, gain more responsibility and digital needs and preferences change.

Through keeping an eye towards the basic goals of maintaining a healthy relationship and developing youth social and emotional competence, parents and youth can successfully traverse the digital landscape together.

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