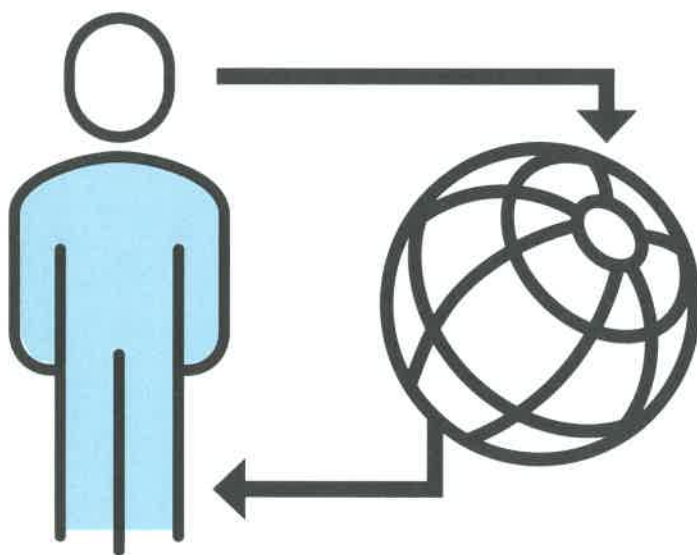




SETTING UP BOUNDARIES

Set your minds on things above,
not on earthly things.

COLOSSIANS 3:2

Internet technology is here to stay. In so many ways, the Internet and digital media have become integrated into our everyday lives. But as we've seen, this technology presents many unique challenges for Christian parents and their children. As parents, we need to think carefully about the best ways to equip our children to use this technology responsibly, but we must also prayerfully consider how we will act to protect our kids from the dangers and pitfalls of technology. All of this will require serious effort.

Many parents falsely assume that setting up simple boundaries and parameters for online activity is an adequate solution.

Of course boundaries are a necessary and helpful step, but the real issue lies deeper. Our real concern as parents is to make sure that—in addition to monitoring the use of technology in our home—we are constantly monitoring the hearts of our children. This is necessary because, ultimately, the technology isn't the problem. Instead, it is our use of things like smartphones and computers that reveals the sinful desires in our hearts.

If we are to raise our children to use technology in a responsible way, then this will certainly include setting up appropriate boundaries; it will also require us to teach our children how to root out idols (1 John 5:18-21). This is about more than protecting them from evil; it is about teaching them to pursue what is good (Rom. 12:9).

One of the best ways to keep your kids from living behind a screen is to make sure your family is actively enjoying life together.

SHOULD MY KID HAVE A SMARTPHONE?

Pornography is the greatest danger to children with unrestricted Internet access. And make no mistake, the porn industry is targeting your child. Porn is more trafficked on the Internet than Netflix, Amazon, and Twitter combined.⁶ The industry is constantly in search of new consumers, and it has no issue exploiting young children. For this reason, allowing your child unrestricted access to the Internet is a recipe for disaster (especially via a smartphone with a private browsing history).

Our children are incredibly vulnerable. Making a decision about smartphones isn't the same as deciding whether or not to allow your child to watch television. In fact, the danger presented by television pales in comparison to the immense danger of unfettered Internet access. Pornography is highly addictive, very dangerous, and widely available online for free. Pornography preys on our God-given sexual desires, permanently embeds explicit images into our brains, and conditions us with unhealthy sexual expectations. And beyond the danger of pornography itself, secret ("private") use of the Internet also exposes our children to the danger of online predators or the pressures of an adolescent culture that encourages things like sexting.

Because the danger is so great, we do not recommend that you allow young children to own a smartphone that has easy access to the

Internet, even if you are committed to using programs that block inappropriate sites. It is simply too easy for those programs to be circumvented, and it isn't worth potentially exposing your child to these risks in the name of digital freedom.

As your children get older and they demonstrate increased levels of maturity and responsibility, you can gradually begin giving them more and more freedom. At some point, you might consider allowing them to own a smartphone for the first time. In this case, make every effort to prepare them to use it responsibly. Install accountability software on the phone and have the accountability reports sent to you. Understand that being cautious with technology isn't about trying to shelter our kids—it is about protecting them from unnecessary danger.⁷

A DIFFERENT APPROACH

Too often we assume that taking a different approach to things like technology will cause our kids to miss out on fun things other kids are doing. In this case, the opposite is true. We believe that taking a holistic approach to raising our children actually offers them a better and more enjoyable childhood. By monitoring the amount of time our kids spend behind a screen, we free them up to enjoy and pursue things that are even better for them.

One of the best ways to keep your kids from living behind a screen is to make sure your family is actively enjoying life together. Get outside and enjoy nature. Teach your

kids to ride bikes, play catch, and jump in the leaves. Go camping. Make a habit of taking walks together as a family. Take your kids to the neighborhood playground. Whatever your family likes to do, go do it together and focus on engaging with one another. There are countless benefits to this approach—improved social skills (like taking turns), increased attention span, and reduced stress just to name a few.⁸

Another way to combat an unhealthy digital dependence is to encourage more time with friends. We have previously discussed the tremendous benefits of community. Making time for your younger kids to play with other children and teaching your older children to build relationships without the distraction of handheld technology is a great way for them to learn to value people as people. Human interaction is being diminished in our digital age, but knowing and enjoying other people is not only an important life skill—it is part of the reason that God made us.

It is also critical for us to model this as parents. Our children learn their habits from us. Make sure you are engaged in conversations at the dinner table and not just checking your phone. Create time in your family's rhythms to enjoy and spend time with one another. Invite others into your home and model the kind of hospitality and conversation you want your kids to emulate. And as much as possible, be sure that the parents also abide by the "house rules" for using technology. Your faithfulness and consistency shows your kids what really matters.

The goal of Christ-centered parenting is always to instruct our children in the ways of the Lord while they are in our homes so that

when they are on their own, they will know how to live. Even though we have encouraged parents to monitor the ways technology is used in the home, we also believe that parents must train their kids to use technology responsibly. Train your child to use technology well by using it well yourself. Don't allow it to dominate your life or draw you into sin. At the same time, do not teach your kids to live in fear of it either. Technology is a gift that can enhance their lives. Take the lead in teaching them how to use it.

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO SETTING BOUNDARIES

Technology exposes our idolatry. Combating the misuse or overuse of technology is important, but parents must always remember that a child's behavior is nothing more than a reflection of his or her heart. And just like yours, those hearts are full of idols. But as you work toward these deeper issues, setting up appropriate boundaries can be very helpful. Here are some helpful ways to do just that:

ALLOW YOUR CHILD TO DEMONSTRATE RESPONSIBILITY IN LESS CONSEQUENTIAL WAYS BEFORE GIVING THEM TOO MUCH FREEDOM.

For younger children, this could be as simple as setting a time limit on the use of a tablet or game console and allowing them to enforce the limit themselves. For older kids, it might be permission to establish social media accounts that you have the ability to monitor.

MAKE SURE THE LINES OF COMMUNICATION ARE OPEN. Create an environment that encourages your kids

As much as possible, be sure that the parents also abide by the “house rules” for using technology. Your faithfulness and consistency shows your kids what really matters.

to come to you and to be honest with you about issues they face. If you know they have misused technology or been exposed to inappropriate content, give them the opportunity to speak about it honestly. Show them grace and help them overcome the temptation to lie or be deceitful.

SET MUTUALLY AGREED UPON LIMITS. As you determine these boundaries, allow your child to have input, and take those feelings into consideration. Explain the purpose of the limits. Help them see the positives in limiting screen time, and let them know you’re on their side.

FOR YOUNGER KIDS, TAKE A HANDS-ON APPROACH. Set definitive time limits for technology use and stick to them. Know what they are watching and playing, and have the necessary filters in place. Everything should go through your eyes first.

FOR OLDER KIDS, TAKE FULL ADVANTAGE OF TECHNOLOGY-MONITORING SOFTWARE. You don’t have time to police every activity. Set up software that will allow you to see who they are talking to online, and let them know that you will have access to who they call and text on all devices. Emphasize that you are on their side and these measures are in place for their protection, not their punishment.

FINALLY, DON’T PUT TOO MUCH FAITH IN YOUR BOUNDARIES. It’s easy to ride on cruise control thinking, “We have

filters, so we’re good.” But the truth is, your kids, who are much more technologically savvy than you are, can find ways around filters and parental controls. More importantly, your children are sinners. Sin bleeds into every area of our lives and affects everything we do. If your child has access to technology, sin will lead to transgression and boundaries will be crossed.

This is a difficult burden. Our advice is to pray hard. Give grace as much as possible. Always let your kids know that they can come to you when they make mistakes. And always point them back to Jesus.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What boundaries do you currently have in place for yourself and your family when it comes to technology use?
2. How are you actively helping your child to use technology wisely?
3. How does your family enjoy life together away from screens?
4. What further steps will you take now to protect the minds and hearts of your family?
5. What one thing stood out to you from this article?