

Parenting in a Media Saturated World

In recent years, media has become an extremely powerful influence on our children. For example, phones aren't simply for making phone calls anymore. Children use cell phones for listening to music, sending texts, filming videos, sharing photos, and accessing the Internet. Our children use computers to do their homework, socialize, stream video, and create movies/songs. And they can communicate or connect 24/7 from just about any location.

All parents want their children to make great decisions so they can take advantage of the powerful technology that fills their lives. But in order to make good choices, children must know how the digital world works. The stakes are high because our children's technological abilities can eclipse their maturity and judgment. Unrestricted access to information and people can mean age-inappropriate contact/content or it can mean a wealth of information and experience. The difference between a great experience and an iffy one lies in the decisions children make. Just as children acquire the skills necessary to become safe swimmer or driver, they need to know how to live in the digital world responsibly and respectfully.

Suggestions for Parenting in a Digital World

- Teach children the skills they need to use technology wisely and well. It's hard to gate-keep in a world with no fences. Many parents feel as if they have lost control of the flow of information to their children who see too much...perhaps too soon. We cannot hear all the conversations or see all of what our children create and share with others. Since we cannot cover their eyes or shadow them everywhere, we need to teach them how to discern what they hear/see and how to behave responsibly.
- Help them self-reflect before they self-reveal. This doesn't come naturally to children -- and certainly not in a world where anyone can be a rock star on YouTube.
- Keep an open mind. We don't see the world the way our children do. We don't necessarily help our children when we judge their lives through the lens of a previous generation. It's important for us to understand that our children will spend the majority of their lives in a connected world...it's a journey we should facilitate and not fight!
- Don't be afraid. Parents can't afford to be technophobic. Oftentimes, our children adopt technologies faster than we do. That means they're often way out in front of us. For some adults, this may upset the parent/child relationship. As adults, we need to get in the game. Have your children show you how to do something if you don't know. Ask questions...show an interest!

- Share wisdom. Children don't always understand the implications of their actions. As mentors, we have to remember to extend our basic parenting wisdom to the digital world. We teach children to use their words, play nicely with others, and respect their teachers – now we have to extend that to a vast, invisible world.
- Pass along your values. One of the most important jobs of parenting is instilling in our children the values we cherish. However, in a world where actions are often separated from consequences, where children can be anonymous, and where they aren't face-to-face with the people they communicate our children can lose their way. As parents, we have to be able to translate our values into the digital world and help children understand the implications of their actions.
- Seek balance. It's hard to know how much freedom to give our children. We want them to explore, enjoy, communicate, and create. We also want to be sure they are protected or they know how to protect themselves. If our children are going to thrive with digital media, we must balance the negative with the positive, privacy with protection. As our children grow, they need more independence and privacy. But parents have to be sure children know how to be safe and responsible before letting them loose. Our children need to see both the possibilities and the perils...so they can act responsibly and learn from all their experiences.

For additional information about raising media savvy children, check out the following website:

http://www.acmecoalition.org/files/ACME_children.pdf

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