7 tips to help our children use technology well

My six-year-old son and I were about to sit down to watch a nature programme on the TV together. "Mummy," he said, "don't bring your phone with you. You have to watch it properly with me." That was me told, but he had a good point. I needed to take that opportunity to connect with him and not check my emails, reply to texts, or browse my newsfeed on Facebook.

Wanting our parents' attention is nothing new. I can remember as a child getting frustrated when mine were cooking, tidying or off playing golf. My brother and I would get annoyed with my dad when, on his only two-week holiday with us, he would have us searching for a payphone so that he could call the office to check he wasn't missing out on anything important. Back then children didn't have technology to compete with and neither did their parents.

Parents today are in uncharted territory. The digital age has changed the landscape, and the challenge is to find a way to equip our children to build great connections, make wise choices and develop resiliency in dealing with harmful or inappropriate content and contact.

Dealing with the issue of our child's screen time and online behaviour doesn't have to be daunting. In fact, it is likely to involve many of the approaches that we use in other areas of parenting.

Here are seven tips on helping our children use technology positively and safely.

1. Take a balanced view

There can be two temptations as a parent when it comes to technology: one is to see it as negative and ban it completely, and the second is to ignore the dangers and bury your head in the sand. Neither approach will equip your child effectively. Like most things in life, technology can be used for good or for bad. As a parent, you can help your child to be aware of the difference. With you as their guide they can learn to overcome any challenges and make good choices in the way they interact online.

2. Get involved

Technology is constantly changing, so it is a good idea to keep yourself up to date with what your child is using and how it works – become familiar with the social networks, apps and games that they use. Be curious and ask your child or other young people to explain anything you don't understand or are unsure about.

Spend time with your child using technology – whether playing a game, creating something together or helping find information. Get to know what they are doing online and the friends that they are making.

3. Create tech-free times

It is important to have quality time as a family where you are interacting without the distractions of devices. Set aside times in the week when you can all relate face-to-face and without screens – perhaps during a family night or over a meal together.

4. Agree limits

Boundaries help your child to feel safe and secure, and this applies as much to online behaviour as to anything else. When your child is younger they will need greater limits, but these can be renegotiated as they become older and more independent. Think about limits with regard to areas such as time allowed on screens, appropriate content, budget, behaviour online, sharing private information, and access to certain sites or games. Consider forming a Family Internet Agreement and discuss consequences for breaking any limits.

It is also worth creating a united front with other adults involved in your child's life.

5. Equip children to make good choices

It is important to train your child to respond well when you are not there looking over their shoulder. Talk through various scenarios with them and help them to protect their privacy and reputation online.

Help them to understand that the behaviour and values you want to see from them in other areas of life also apply online. For example, if kindness is something that you expect, emphasise the importance of being kind with people on social networks.

6. Develop your child's resilience

Developing resilience online is about helping your child to deal well with any challenges and to bounce back from any mistakes they make. The best way to do this is to create an environment in which they feel free to talk to you about anything they encounter online and where they can learn from any mistakes.

7. And finally ...

Let your child know that you will love them whatever and that no problem – online or off – is too big for you to overcome together.

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