

## How Technology is Changing Relationships: Connections That Bring You Closer



**USING THE LATEST TECHNOLOGY** can be a double-edged sword for relationships. It helps all of us stay more connected, but has the potential to isolate us more.

Today's children were born into a digital age, and they've developed the ability to move seamlessly between online and offline environments. Their online worlds are part of their real lives, but it's important to ensure that time on the computer is balanced by offline relationships and activities.

## GOOD NEWS

### 🕒 **Good connections online often mean good connections offline.**

The vast majority of chatting on social networking sites occurs between young people who already know each other rather than with strangers. It is a form of “hanging out,” no more inherently debilitating or dangerous than hanging out at the corner soda fountain of yesteryear or the mall of today. In fact, the heaviest users of online social networks also tend to be the most socially active offline (Lenhart & Madden, 2007).

### 🕒 **Introverted kids gain social confidence and support online.**

Introverted teens and those who are especially sensitive to other’s (real or imagined) non-verbal signs of rejection find online communication less intimidating. For these kids, research shows online social networks have aided social confidence and social support (Ellison et al, 2006; Valkenburg et al, 2006). Creative self-expression through posting music, graphics, videos, poetry and blogs on social networking sites can level the social playing field, help like-minded individuals get to know each other better and deepen genuine friendships offline.

### 🕒 **Wired kids are better-prepared for today’s professions.**

In a connected world, fluidity between online and offline communications will serve kids well in future careers in which teams of people work together remotely.

### 🕒 **Exposure to diversity is easier.**

Communicating with peers around the world from different cultures used to be limited to pen-pals who waited weeks for letters. Now people can communicate in real-time and learn about each other’s lives with video, audio, satellite maps and text. An entire classroom can maintain contact with a similar grade in another country, facilitated by the teacher or librarian.

## MIXED NEWS

### 🕒 **Baring the soul.**

People tend to disclose more personal communication when they can’t see each other, and when they believe they have a supportive audience. Kids today have a very different sense of privacy than prior generations because they were born into a culture of public exposure. They often don’t care who reads the juicy, emotional or meaningless ramblings in their blogs (like online diaries). They may even get a charge out of knowing others are reading their words – it makes them feel more important, validated and interesting when others comment about their revelations. It’s good to feel others’ support and interest, but kids face risks from predators who prey on exposed personal vulnerabilities. Even if posts are limited to online friends, too much disclosure can lead to harassment from peers.

### 🕒 **Reaching out for emotional support.**

Some children with emotional problems have been helped tremendously as a result of reaching out to others on blogs, social networks and self-help websites. But stigma remains around some mental, physical and sexual health issues. Shame, denial or societal prejudices can make it difficult for kids to turn to their families or real-life resources for help.

## BAD NEWS

### 🕒 **Using Internet communities to support pathology instead of healing.**

The flip side to online self-help is access to communities that encourage and enable dangerous or unhealthy behaviors. The Internet has become a haven for these kids, who can easily locate special websites dedicated to the encouragement of eating disorders, self-mutilation, and many other issues.

### 🕒 **Compulsive online use.**

Overuse of the Internet can create serious life imbalance for any child. Kids with attention deficit disorders may, ironically, find it easier to focus for long stretches of time on the constantly shifting stimuli provided by computer games and other online activities. Kids with obsessive-compulsive disorders are very vulnerable to overuse of the Internet. Kids with depression can use the Internet to withdraw completely from family. Online gaming is particularly seductive for overuse.

### 🕒 **Status-seeking objectification by ratings and rankings.**

For those with fragile self-esteem who measure their worth by who they know and how they rank, the Internet offers superficial value through artificial measures such as number of friends on online networks, hits on one's profile, website or video, photo ratings and "hot-or-not" rankings. Kids (and vulnerable adults) can over-rely on superficial connections to feel good about themselves.

"As parents, we need to learn about our child's cyber world and set up the expectation that we will be auditing it frequently. We have to be informed so we can guide them."

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## WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

1. For your child to be able to come to you with their emotional struggles, a genuine, non-judgmental stance is essential at home. Your willingness to provide help and support and the best professional resources instead of punishing them for an out-of-control issue they disclose is invaluable. Many kids shut down or seek help from potentially inappropriate places if they don't feel their parents are really there for them.
2. One of the best ways for parents to find out whether their child can relate well to others face-to-face is to spend quality time with their children. Eating together whenever possible, playing games together and checking in with highs and lows or questions of the day provide good opportunities. Notice changes in your child's mood and behavior and read our two-part download on "Communicating with Teens in Ways That Change Behavior."
3. If parents are worried that their kids may be losing their ability to read non-verbal cues, a fun and interesting test of ability to read the genuineness of smiles can be found at [www.bbc.co.uk/science/humanbody/mind/surveys/smiles/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/humanbody/mind/surveys/smiles/). Parents may be surprised at who is better at this!
4. Use online resources to identify and find help for compulsive computer overuse. One good source is "The Center for Internet Addiction" at <http://netaddiction.com/>
5. Nurture your kids with values that are unrelated to status and commodities. Give them kudos for their effort on a challenging task, generosity with friends, charitable contributions, and taking risks that require some messing up before mastery.

## REFERENCES

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