

Always-On Technology: Do You Have Tethered Kids? Establishing Balanced Family Communications Habits



PLUGGED-IN PARENTS

TODAY'S TECHNOLOGY PROVIDES families with more ways to keep in constant communication with each other. Parents and guardians can use technology to help ensure their children's safety and well-being. In some ways it's paying off – more teenagers say they want to spend time with their parents and value their input than they did a generation ago.

But there's a flip side to this good news. Modern technology makes it so easy to stay in constant contact with parents and peers that our kids are missing some important growth experiences. Technology makes us all more accessible, but it's important for all family members to strike a balance with their communication habits.

THE NEWEST 24/7 CONNECTIONS

Not only are online social networks here to stay, the latest version is mobile social networks, which inform users on their mobile phones (by text, e-mail or voice) every time anyone in any of their online social networks is posting new information. Lots of kids are pinged incessantly with these “newsfeeds” on their social network pages. So, when Justin breaks up with Jennifer, Casey gets a new haircut or Sonya downloads a new tune, kids receive every detail instantly.

Other mobile social networks allow users to report their location and have a text message (and photo) sent to the phones of everyone in their social network, letting them know their exact location. It also lets users announce their locations to any “friends of friends” or “crushes” within a 10-block radius with an automatic text message such as: “Danny is at Roy’s Pizzeria. You know him through Angelique.” The user may have never met these friends of friends before.

Mobile “GPS” (global positioning devices) are installed in many phones and cars and linked with a subscription locator service. Parents and guardians can track their children’s whereabouts and get an e-mail or text message when they arrive at a pre-determined destination or leave a boundary that you have designated. Some parents and guardians are excited about the possibility of monitoring their children more closely, while some kids and even adults are using these systems for malicious or illegal purposes.

CAUSES FOR CONCERN

- Ⓛ **Difficult to Establish Identity.** It’s more difficult for kids to establish their own stable identities with a chorus of commentary from peers, parents or guardians surrounding every move they make. They begin to rely on others to know what they think, feel, believe and want to do next.
- Ⓛ **Reduced Opportunity to Build Confidence.** Being tethered to parents and guardians by phone, even when out on their own, reduces opportunities for adolescents to take healthy risks. Those risks build confidence, assertiveness and resilience.
- Ⓛ **Missed Decision-Making Opportunities.** Kids are missing some problem-solving and decision-making opportunities that help them correct their own courses of action through trial and error as they learn to take responsibility for their choices.
- Ⓛ **Potential to Limit Diversity.** It’s easy to communicate only with like-minded people who are linked into online and mobile cliques. This trend could diminish opportunities and flexibility for dealing with diverse people and ideas.
- Ⓛ **Development of Helicopter Parents.** Universities are seeing unprecedented numbers of “helicopter parents” of freshmen, who are accustomed to helping their kids navigate every decision and run interference for them. Some parents even check out a prospective roommate’s social network profile and deem the roommate inappropriate for their children before they’ve ever met!

TIPS FOR PARENTS AND GUARDIANS

How much communication is too much? And what type of communication is the most effective? Depending on your family norms and what you are comfortable with, the degree of communication will vary.

- ▶ Talk about family communications preferences and norms first.
- ▶ Set some parameters for total amount of time allowed for chatting and texting with friends and family each month.
- ▶ Discuss when, how and for what purposes the mobile phone is to be used. Set some guidelines and boundaries for yourselves and your kids to follow. Parents can be good role models for this. (How often do you check your e-mail?)
- ▶ Determine who will be responsible for paying cell phone charges. Discuss what the consequences will be if phone and online limits are exceeded. Being in charge of their own phone bill can do wonders for a teen's responsibility!
- ▶ Discuss personal safety and courtesy-related calls such as calling on arrival at events away from home, or to let parents know when kids are running late.
- ▶ Review which situations and decisions are urgent rather than intervening in decisions your child may be old enough to make on his or her own without your immediate assistance.
- ▶ If you're wondering if you and your child are too tethered, and you live under the same roof, do an experiment for a week. Have every family member track face-to-face family time vs. combined (recreational) minutes on the Internet and phone. If your time with technology far exceeds face-to-face time, brainstorm ways to reverse this! Prioritize dinners together, family cultural and recreational outings and games.
- ▶ For kids going off to college, have a routine time – such as right after dinner on Wednesday – from once a day, to once a week, to check in by phone. Resist the urge to constantly rescue or make all their decisions for them as they try their wings in college – even if they sometimes fail or get (temporarily) hurt by some of their choices. This is how they grow! Teach them the values, critical thinking and decision-making tools that allow them to discern well for themselves before they leave home. Then be their strong background support instead of their tethered parent.
- ▶ Call, e-mail, IM or text message? These days, kids usually prefer to communicate with friends via text messages, instant messages and posts to each other's social networking websites. They reserve e-mail and, increasingly, the mobile phone for communicating with parents and guardians. Separating communication tools helps kids preserve a feeling of having (digital) spaces to call their own.