

Session Notes



Left to Their Own Devices?

Being a parent is one of life's greatest joys, but it also brings with it big challenges. One particular challenge is how to effectively parent your children in a digital age.

You may have some sympathy with the parent who wrote to us at Care for the Family and said, "It just gets harder and harder – I wish the smart phone had never been invented!"

From the day our children take their first few steps in the world, one of our tasks as parents is to teach them life skills, particularly those that will keep them safe. Just as we keep them safe in the physical world, we also have a vital role in keeping our children safe in the online world.

Care for the Family,
Tovey House, Cleppa Park,
Newport, NP10 8BA.
029 2081 0800
cff.org.uk

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Screen time and social media

Technology has some huge advantages and can enhance family life, however the online world also brings challenges. Two common challenges are knowing how much screen time is good for our children and helping them to use social media in a positive way.

- When children spend large amounts of time on screens and become inactive, it can have negative effects, such as disrupting their sleep patterns or contributing to obesity.
- Social media can give children opportunities for creativeness and self-expression but it can also be detrimental to their self-worth or mental wellbeing if, for example, they encounter negative comments or if they don't feel as popular as their peers.
- Changes in hormones and significant brain development during the teenage years can mean that teenagers may find it difficult to make sensible decisions about how they use the internet.



***It's such a relief to know it's not all my fault
... but not all his fault either!***

Mother of 15-year-old when she first heard about brain development during the teenage years.

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Gaming



Online computer games are very popular and can be played on a range of devices including computers, phones and games consoles. Most of these devices give the user the opportunity to play and communicate with others online. This can be an excellent way to develop teamwork skills and connect with friends, but there are also some risks.

Risks

- The people children meet through games might not be who they say they are.
- Children may become victims of bullying, or even become bullies themselves. It can be hard to understand the impact of cruel words when you can't see someone face-to-face.
- Children may run up huge bills when buying gaming add-ons.
- It can be hard for children to self-regulate the time they spend online and it may mean they find it difficult to keep to scheduled meal times and bedtime.
- Some games are not age-appropriate for all children as they contain scary, violent or sexually explicit content.

What parents can do

- Take time to explore games with your child. Playing with them will help you to better understand their gaming world and equip you to help them navigate it safely.
- Suggest games to your child that are suitable for their age and check the PEGI age rating on games before purchasing.

- Talk to your child about who they are playing with and encourage them only to connect with friends or family. Be aware of who your children are talking to and make sure they know not to share personal information with, or meet up with, anyone they have met online.
- Help them understand the value of money so they can make informed choices.
- Agree together some guidelines for when they're playing online, including time limits and who they are allowed to connect with.
- Use the settings of your child's gaming devices to set up parental controls. These can limit the money your children spend, who they chat to and how long they spend on the game.

Online risks

Though the internet has many benefits, there are three areas which we need to be aware of:

Contact – Who children speak to online

Conduct – How children behave and what they share online

Content – What children see online

Being aware of the risks can help you think about how you can support your child if an issue arises.



Pornography

Children and young people are able to access pornography fairly easily, whether by accident or because they are looking for it.

Risks

- Young people may see porn as the best way to learn about sex and relationships.
- Pornography gives unrealistic views about relationships.
- Pornography may portray sex without consent, respect or commitment.
- Pornography often includes abuse and violence; leading children and young people to think this is the norm in a sexual relationship.
- Regular pornography use can lead to dependency and addiction.
- There is growing evidence that suggests that regular use of pornography can cause erectile dysfunction.
- Because actors used in pornography often have digitally enhanced 'perfect' looking bodies, viewing porn can lead to a low view of your own body.



Watching porn to learn about relationships is like learning to drive by watching a James Bond car race.

Ian Henderson

What parents can do

- Use your internet provider's filters to block harmful content at home.
- Talk to your child about what healthy relationships look like.
- Keep the lines of communication open and explain your reasoning.
- Talk to your children about how to make wise choices when they are out of the home.

You may find it difficult to talk to your child about pornography, so here are some ideas which may help:

- It can be easier to broach difficult subjects with teenagers when there's no eye contact, so talk to them when you're giving them a lift in the car.
- Talk about pornography in general terms rather than focusing on them personally. For example, "Do you think your school friends watch porn?"
- Look for possible discussion starters in day-to-day life. For example, when buying them their first smart phone, or if you hear of inappropriate behaviour in their class.
- Chat to your child via text messages if that is easier than always having face-to-face conversations. If you find some helpful websites or material you could send them links to the websites so they can view the advice in their own time.

Practical ideas for parents

Set time limits

Be intentional about regulating the time your child spends online. Having some age-appropriate agreed family guidelines for time on screens can be helpful.

You might want to:

- Decide what boundaries around screen time you'll have in place in your home. It's a good idea to involve them in deciding what these should be.
- Encourage them to turn notifications off on their social media apps so they're not a constant distraction.
- Think about what age you will allow them to have a smart phone and how much data they will have.
- Set yourselves a family challenge. Perhaps try going on family trips without your phones or have 'no phone zones' in your home – moments where you all agree to put your phones down. This might be during a mealtime or when watching a film together.



Be on the front foot regarding how much time they are on-screen. Just because 'Everyone else's parent' allows them to play on their Xbox till 1am on a school night; doesn't mean we have to do the same.

Katharine Hill

Be a good role model

Think about how you behave in the online world and how much time you spend online. What message does that send to your child?

Be positive

Create opportunities for digital activities that you can enjoy together as a family. For example, you could play online games together or have your own photo competition.

Create safety nets

There are a whole range of devices that can give your child access to the internet – TVs, phones, games consoles, laptops, tablets, etc. You can put appropriate boundaries in place with parental controls.

Do your homework

Talk to your child about their online world and what they enjoy doing. Find out the pros and cons of the sites they regularly use. Check your child knows how to use the privacy settings.

Make a family media agreement

This is a great way to start a conversation with your whole family about how you all use the internet. Allow your child to input on things like, appropriate time limits for use of devices, when you should have device-free time and what the consequences should be for breaking the agreement.

Putting boundaries in place to keep our children safe online

When we think about putting online limits in place, it can be helpful to look at parenting styles.

Experts say that there are three basic styles of parenting, which are outlined here. The way we were brought up, our temperament and our personality will often influence which style comes most naturally to us. It's good to aim for the 'Assertive' style of parenting.

Permissive

"Spend as long as you want online."

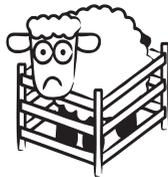
Parents have very relaxed ideas about behaviour and discipline and just want to be friends with their children. They can find it difficult to set boundaries or may not see the need. Children of permissive parents have plenty of opportunity to forge independence but they don't have the security that comes from guidance and boundaries.



Authoritarian

"Come off your phone now. Do as you're told and don't argue"

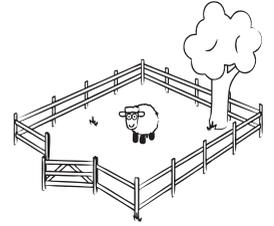
Parents have strict ideas about discipline and behaviour and are not open to discussion. Children of authoritarian parents can feel hemmed in and resentful because there is no room for independent thought, creativity or discovery. Children of these parents wouldn't be involved in setting up a family internet agreement – the boundaries and consequences would all be decided for them.



Assertive

"You can spend ten more minutes online and then you need to go to bed so that you're not too tired for school tomorrow."

Parents know that setting boundaries is important for their child's safety and sense of security but are willing to explain and discuss this with their children. They are 'firm, but fair', choosing their battles carefully and giving appropriate freedom within limits. Children of assertive parents feel safe, secure and confident.



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Our role as parents isn't to raise children or even teenagers but to raise adults.

Katharine Hill

Passing on wisdom and values

We can equip our children to deal with online challenges by passing on wisdom and values. They can then make good choices for themselves that will keep them safe and enable them to enjoy all the digital world has to offer.

- Talk to your child about their online life. If we don't talk to them they will get their information from somewhere else.
- Help them to think about who they talk to, how long they spend online, what information they share and what they might see.
- If your child knows you care and understand they are more likely to come to you if they need support.
- Let them know they can talk to you if there's ever a problem – and whatever the problem!
- Help build your child's self-esteem so they have the confidence to withstand peer pressure and say 'no' when needed. Helping your child to feel confident about themselves in everyday life will help them to be more resilient in the online world.
- Model the values you want your child to have.

Take time to talk and have a continuing conversation – little and often. We can use moments in everyday life like meal times, lifts to school or while watching TV.

Notes

See www.cff.org.uk/LTTOD for a list of helpful websites with further information on staying safe in the online world.



Left to Their Own Devices? Confident Parenting in a World of Screens

Katharine Hill

This book is for mums and dads who not only want to 'cope' with bringing up children in the world of digital technology but to be on the front foot – confidently parenting in a world of screens.

Feedback

At Care for the Family we love to hear how our resources are being used and how we can improve them. You can complete the form online at www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/LTTOD

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