



PARENT SENSE VICKI CURRAN, EdS, MA, LPC, NCC

Getting the kids to unplug

If you're like me, your kids have far surpassed you in the technology area. I watch in amazement as my kids create Google slide presentations, research facts for a report or communicate with their teachers through Google classroom. It's definitely impressive.

However, in exchange, our children are spending less time outdoors, less time in social settings and more time interacting with their screens. Unfortunately, research shows that this reliance on technology makes children unable to concentrate or focus without flashy interaction or immediate feedback and it makes them unable to hold their own in face-to-face relationships.

Truthfully, our brains were never designed for the amount of stimuli we receive. Being constantly plugged in raises anxiety levels and inhibits social interaction. Play dates have become parallel play on the Xbox or electronic group chats. Creativity and physical fitness are decreasing while lack of focus and lower memory retention are increasing.

Also a casualty resulting from high volumes of texting and interacting with a screen is the lack of understanding nonverbal cues, tone of voice and how to handle awkward pauses in conversation.

Research has shown that kids who have no access to electronic devices for five days are better at picking up on emotions and nonverbal cues than their "plugged in" counterparts.

While making eye contact, reading facial cues and maintaining a conversation in person may not seem important right now, what about when our children need to hold their own in an interview someday?

Technology also inhibits delayed gratification skills.

Remember the days when we wanted to send away for something? We would see a product on television or in a magazine and then mail in the order form. Perhaps before we could do that, we might even have to — gasp! — save up our money for the item — and for the shipping and handling! It was usually a

good six to eight weeks of waiting with anticipation for the mail to come until our "treasure" arrived.

Because technology allows for immediate — even instant — responses, our kids no longer have the patience or resilience to wait for a response or reaction, much less to wait for something ordered on Amazon.

As parents, we must remember that our kids are watching us. Perhaps we all have to unplug.

Start small. Leave phones in a designated charging station at home so there's no temptation to keep peeking at emails or texts while interacting with each other.

Have "screen-free zones", keeping TVs, computers,

phones or video games out of bedrooms.

"Detox" will be hard for everyone. Maintenance will be even harder. I'm sure we are all guilty of relying on electronics while waiting for a table at a restaurant or while trying to catch a few more minutes of sleep in the morning. However, when we set the screens down, we open ourselves up to game nights and conversations with our children that otherwise might not happen.

Next time the phone "pings," let's resist the urge to abandon what we're doing. Let's give our children permission to be fully engaged in whatever they are doing, knowing everything else can wait. If nothing else, they will

be more intentional about how they're living and have the opportunity to do more things that actually matter to them.

Technology does make our lives easier and gives our children tremendous opportunities to learn and to connect with the world around them — literally. But with each advantage comes a potential cost. When we understand those costs, we can minimize them and keep the use of technology positive.

For more information or a list of local licensed professionals, contact Coas Community Counseling Resources at 732-612-3148.

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