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insights



What rules should you have around digital devices?

By Michael Grose

Children's digital technology needs to be managed and monitored by parents. That means we need to have some rules and guidelines in place.

I'm often asked about rules and guidelines for children in the early and primary school years about digital devices such as tablets and mobile phones. This is new ground for most people whose own parents didn't have to worry about digital technology. How to persuade kids to leave the television and play outside was the extent of the screen worries of the previous generations of parents.

One thing is certain, technology is an issue you'll struggle with for the rest of your parenting life. We've created the technology and unleashed

it on our kids and now we seem to be scrambling like mad to keep up. Adding to this complexity is the fact that technology keeps changing rapidly. We just come to grips one device when a new one comes along that we have to learn about.

Digital technology, with all its advantages is here to stay. It connects us to each other in ways we couldn't imagine even a decade ago. It enables us to communicate to our kids when we don't know where they are. It creates new interests and cultivates creativity.

You'd have to be living under a rock to not realise that digital technology also presents new challenges such as cyber-bullying, worries about social

media and children's exposure to inappropriate images. Digital devices give kids access to a virtual world that is totally seductive particularly for those with poor impulse control. Also the nature of technology means that children can spend a lot of their time heads bent and staring into a screen, which is not healthy in the long-term.

Children's digital technology needs to be managed and monitored by parents. That means we need to have some rules and guidelines in place. Each family makes up their own rules to suit their circumstances but the following suggestions will help you put some order into the digital devices that come into your home.

1. Hold off as long as you can

The age when a child first gets a mobile phone is getting younger. Now most young people seem to have a mobile phone when they start secondary school. I'm currently working with parents who are struggling to hold off on their child's mobile phone until secondary school but it's a continuous battle as cries of 'everyone else has a phone' is ringing in their ears. If you took all these message from kids seriously you'd think that they were all born holding a mobile device and they've had an Instagram account since they were two.



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Kids pester power works in a way that you tend to feel guilty that you are somehow denying your child a basic right or access to something vital to survival such as fresh air. Best to develop an easily repeatable mantra such as "That's great. But every family is different and we do things our way." They may whine when you say it but stick to your own way of parenting, which is not always easy. Alternatively, take the compromise route of allowing a child to borrow your phone, or having a family phone that all kids can use.

2. Be prepared to learn

Giving a digital device to a child has more parent strings attached to it than say, giving a box of Lego or most other items of play. With most toys you can leave them to their own devices to play by themselves, which is the basic point really. It's not so simple with a digital device. Be prepared to learn some new games and stay up-to-date with social media trends. Snapchat anyone?

3. Put rules in place first

This is an interesting one. If you give your child a device, then later place restrictions on when its overused or used poorly then there's every chance that you'll be seen as the bad guy/gal. Better to put restrictions on in the first place and loosen them later, or better still reward their responsible use with greater freedom. Timing is everything.



Special note: I'm thrilled to announce that my latest book *Spoonfed Generation: How to raise independent children* is out. It's available at parentingideas.com.au

4. Change rules if need be

Most families seem to have a child who thinks that rules are made to be broken so they always push boundaries, limits and parent patience. Parents, on the other hand, should work from the notion that rules are made to be changed. Be prepared to change your rules based on your child's behaviour, maturity, sleep patterns, incompleteness of homework, bullying or other issues that will invariably crop up and cause you to realise that the rules you set just aren't working.

5. Keep digital technology out of bedrooms

If there was one rule that you should stay firm on, then this is the one. Many of our children are in sleep deficit as it is, without bringing digital devices into the frame. They may say they want to charge it in their room. If so, keep the charger in a public place. They may even want to use their mobile or tablet to wake up in the morning. I applaud them for taking on this task but insist they use an alarm clock instead.

6. Have a digital detox one day a week

The only way that this idea will work is if you join them in making one day a week a digital technology free day. They will probably not like it, and neither will you, but the point of having one day off is to prove that they can live without their digital device and to engage them in different forms of communication and entertainment.



Digital technology is now an integral part of our lives, but it's not the only option we have to be entertained, informed and to communicate with others. Before we help our children, it's best to look at own digital habits to make sure we are providing them with what they need – that is, the provision of balanced role models who know when to use and when not to use technology. They are more likely to walk our walk than follow our talk. I hope for you that's not a scary proposition.

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