

KEEPING FAMILIES CONNECTED IN A WIRED WORLD



Unplug and connect

Are you having trouble getting your kids off of their devices, or do you think devices are getting in the way of your family's relationships?

Children and youth now use technologies that did not exist when you were younger. These devices have added greatly to our quality of life. At the same time, they can get in the way of physical activity or true social and emotional ties with others. When this happens, it can have a negative impact on relationships, mental and physical health.

Our brains are wired for face-to-face, social contact. Our personal relationships have a big impact on our well-being. They help us bounce back from setbacks and are critical for healthy minds and bodies.

Using technology more and more may cause us to connect less and less with each other. We may also connect less with our children. Mental health professionals are becoming concerned, because they are seeing more and more youth with emotional and behavioural problems. Strong bonds between parents, children and youth are more important than ever.



Did you know:

- Technology can draw your attention away from people around you. It has become so advanced (and addictive) that many people prefer to interact with a device than with their spouse, friends, or children. Go to any public place and you will find many people more focused on their device than the people they are with.
- Technology can make bullying, harassment and exploitation easier. Nasty comments, rumours and regrettable photos spread like viruses, and don't stop at your front door. And because online communication isn't face to face, people are more likely to write things they would never say in person.
- Technology can make it easier for children and youth to connect more with peers than parents. Of course it's important for children and youth to have friends. And friends do become even more important through the teen years. But friends can't always provide the love, emotional support and guidance that parents can. For healthy development, children and youth must have strong bonds with parents, guardians and role models. When this bond is strong, children and youth turn to their parents for help in difficult times. Friends may not always be there when the going gets tough. But parents will. And parents are often in the best position to help.
- Technology eats up our time so that we have less time to do healthy things like spending time with friends and family, playing with our kids, being outside, exercising, reading, volunteering or sharing our hobbies and interests with our children.



How do I know if my child or youth is using too much technology?

Answering 'yes' to any of these questions may mean your child is becoming too attached to technology:

- does your child or teen prefer to spend time in front of a screen than with family?
- do you have trouble getting your child away from the screen, device or game to spend time with family?
- does your child spend more than two hours a day in front of a screen (for example, computer, video game or phone)? Homework doesn't count.



Please note, children 2-4 years old should have no more than one hour of screen time each day. Children under 2 shouldn't have any.

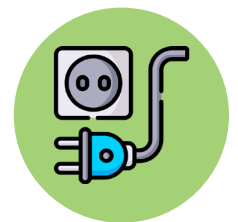
How do I know if I am using too much technology?

Parents can also be affected by technology. Think about how much time you spend in front of a screen. Answering 'yes' to any of these questions might mean that you are depending too much on your device.

- can you spend time with your children, without using a device to entertain them?
- can you give your child your full attention, without checking or doing things on your device?
- when your children are upset, are you able to comfort them without using technology?

How to pull the plug

There are many things that parents can do to 'unplug' themselves and their children. This can help families to connect with each other.



1. Spend quality time together

Spend tech-free time alone with your child. Aim for some time together every day. This gets harder as youth get older and schedules get busier, but do your best. This will give you a chance to talk and listen.

For example:

- read together
- go for a walk
- play a board game
- cook, bake or clean up together
- teach your child a new skill
- volunteer together
- go out for a treat
- play outside

2. Have non-technology activities

- Make sure everyone spends time outside in green space. Studies show that being in nature has a positive impact on our minds and bodies. In fact, some believe that many of us suffer from 'nature deficit disorder'.
- Create chances for creative, free play. Video games and TV don't often allow children to use their imaginations. Make sure your children have time for free play outside every day. Indoors, make sure your children have toys that let them use their imaginations, like building blocks, dress up clothes

and props and arts and crafts.

- Participate in family activities like:
 - reading together
 - board games, cards, puzzles
 - cooking or baking
 - active outdoor games, playing catch
 - cycling, swimming

3. Set limits on technology

- Think carefully before bringing new technology into your child's life. Think ahead about how old your child should be before having a phone or gaming device. It's easier to put off getting one than it is to take a device away. Consider phone options carefully as well (for example, unlimited texting may not be needed.)
- Set limits on 'tech time' when your children are young. This sets a pattern of parents making rules for technology use. Give your child a certain amount of time each day for screen time (amount of time will depend on your child's age). They will have to plan on how they use the time, and when time's up for the day, it's up. As your children become teens, you can be more flexible, but still have some 'guidelines'.
- Babies and children aged 2 shouldn't have any screen time at all. A child's brain develops quickly during these first years, and young children learn best by interacting with people, not screens (Canadian Paediatric Society). Listening to recorded music is just fine, though!
- Limit recreational screen time for older children and teens to one or two hours each day. (Canadian Paediatric Society). Recreational screen time means playing video games, using social media or watching videos. Children and youth who spend more than two hours a day on 'screen time' are twice as likely to be overweight or obese than youth who spend one hour or less each day in front of a screen. (Shields M. Overweight and obesity among children and youth. Health Reports 2006; 17(3): 27-42.)
- Set 'no tech' areas in your home. Keep technology (like computers, TVs, and video game consoles) out of your children's bedrooms. Having devices and screens in the bedroom is very tempting and makes it easy for your kids to stay up too late.
- Set 'no tech' times.



4. Set a good example

- Show your children how to balance technology use with other activities. Try to limit your own screen time to when your children are in bed, out of the house or involved in an activity of their own. When you're with your children, make sure you are 'present'.

This means:

- focusing on what you're doing together
- looking at your children when they speak
- listening carefully
- not letting your device draw your attention away

If you absolutely must respond to a message or email when you're with your children, take a short break in another room, and come back as soon as possible

- Use technology with your kids. Play age appropriate computer and video games with them. Be mindful of the impact that violent video games can have, especially on children.
- Research topics of interest together, or use Skype or FaceTime to chat with far way family and friends.
- Keep computers in high traffic areas. This makes it easier to keep an eye on how children and teens use the computer.
- Encourage children and teens to be creative. For example, creating websites, graphic designs, art, stories or short films allows children and youth to be 'active' users, exercising their imaginations and developing other skills.

5. Talk about social media

- Set up your own accounts to learn more about how these media work.
- Let your children know that you want and need to know about their Tumblr, SnapChat, TikTok, Instagram or other social media use. Social media use can evolve quickly. Just when parents are becoming familiar with Facebook, youth are moving on. Most youth now see Facebook as social media for parents.
- Discuss the risks of posting or uploading photos or sharing personal information on social media. If you feel your child or youth is putting themselves at risk on social media or other technology, you may need to put limits on the cell phone plan and limit computer and Internet access.
- Ask your child to 'friend' you on social media and regularly check in. But be respectful—you don't need to 'like' or comment on everything. Youth are very sensitive to being embarrassed by their parents on social media. If you don't like something you see, or need to talk about something, do it face to face. No matter how many rules and limits you set, there is no substitute for open, honest communication.



6. Set ground rules for smart phones

Because such devices are so new, we are still figuring out the ground rules on how, when and where to let our kids use them. Consider the age and level of maturity of your child or teen when setting rules. It's always better to come to an agreement by discussing things, rather than imposing rules. And although you want your child to be safe, please do your best to respect privacy. It won't be helpful to comment on every 'conversation' they have. Save discussion for important safety issues.

Some things to consider:

- It may be a good idea to start out by keeping the phone in the kitchen overnight for charging. It's easier to lighten up on a rule, than to crack down later if there are problems.

- Taking devices away if your children or youth have been bullied ends up punishing the victim. Youth are then less likely to tell parents when bullying happens.



Some things to discuss when your youth gets a cell phone:

- sharing the device passwords with parents: will this be something you require?
- your expectations about responding to calls or texts from parents or family members
- what will happen if your teen breaks the rules?
- will you have limits on when your teen can receive calls? For example, no calls after a certain time?
- can the phone stay overnight in your youth's room? (perhaps start out with the phone charging overnight in the kitchen)
- who pays for lost or damaged phones?
- the limits and risks of texting (for example, it can be easier to say things you wouldn't normally say in person; it is easier to misinterpret someone's meaning)
- courtesy and etiquette (for example, turning the phone off in certain situations)
- risks to personal privacy, risk of sharing photos
- texting and driving (and texting and walking-especially crossing streets!)
- rules around talking to strangers online

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