Technology
and your family

Technology

For some of us that can be a really scary word. It conjures up images of long phone calls on tech support with a stranger on the other end of the phone walking us through troubleshooting the latest must-have gadget that promised to make our life easier. We think about paper jams at the office and "404 Not Found" error codes… what do those even mean anyway? At its worst, technology brings up thoughts of cyber bullying. Pornography. Access to strangers. Lions. Tigers. And bears. Oh my.

If you're a kid, technology is an exciting word. It means communicating with your friends. Anytime. Anywhere. It means downloading the latest games. Taking pictures. Emojis. And being connected to the world around you in ways that were never possible before. Technology means freedom. It means fun. And they can't wait to get their hands on it.

Technology freaks you out. But your kids are eager and ready to jump in. So, what can you do? We've got it. Stick your head in the hand and hope it all goes away. Yes, that's it.

No! Our highest calling as parents is to engage. If you are a parent that is reading this we celebrate your desire to do just that. We want to help you. So, if you are ready… read on.

How is technology affecting us?

Overexposure to technology is associated with:
attention deficit
impaired learning
increased impulsivity
decreased ability to self-regulate

Overuse of technology is associated with:
child depression
anxiety
bipolar disorder - problematic child behavior

71% of teens have done something to hide their online activity from their parents.

9 out of 10 boys and 6 out of 10 girls are exposed to pornography online before the age of 18.

What good is technology?

Sounds scary, doesn't it? In reality, there are many benefits to healthy use of technology. With each new iteration of technology there is a promise of more meaningful ways to connect with others, new ways of being entertained, of interacting with the world around us, access to information that helps us learn and new ways to help keep our loved ones safe and secure. These are all good things. In fact, you might say that healthy use of technology is marked by its ability to help us enhance our real lives. Technology can make our lives better. However, if this is true then unhealthy use of technology would necessarily detract from our real lives and cause us to become isolated. Technology has the potential to make our lives worse. Its all about how we engage with it.

Quick Fix versus Long Term Game

We often look for easy answers to questions. Tell us what to do and we'll do it, right? When it comes to technology though what is often required is intentional, consistent, ongoing dialogue to help our children develop a healthy relationship with technology. In the next section we will attempt to answer some of the most commonly asked questions about technology. Be prepared for answers that will require you to be actively engaged with your kids and up-to-date on what they are doing to help them navigate this new world.

At what age should I give my child a phone?

Instead of looking at your child's age, we would suggest that you consider a few other factors. Specifically, you may consider whether they need a phone, whether they are responsible enough to have a phone and if they would benefit from having easier access to their friends.

Do they need a phone?
If your child is playing after school sports, walking home from school, going to the movies with friends on the weekend or if they need to be in

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touch for any other reasons a cell phone may be a good idea.   Although they may ask for the latest iPhone, you may consider that your child's first phone does need to be a smart phone. Their are many inexpensive phones that would give your child the ability to make calls
and send texts that would address the need to be connected. This could allow you to have the convenience and peace of mind knowing that your child is simply a call or text away without giving them full access to the world of information they may not yet be mature enough to handle.

Are they responsible?
This one is pretty easy. If your child is constantly losing things like their backpack, homework or toys then it might stand to reason that they
could lose their very expensive phone too! Additionally, if they have a
habit of not taking especially good care of their things… well, you get the idea.

Are they missing out on any important social interactions?
Whether we like to admit it or not, the way kids communicate with each other has changed. Kids plan the weekend activities via text, they talk about what happened at school via text, they send pictures to each other via text, they do everything via text. In fact, a recent study found that young people between the ages of 18 and 24 send and receive an average of just over 128 text messages per day. That is an average of 3,853 per month!

So, when you child says that they are not getting invited to things, that they are missing out on what's happening with their friends at school and that they are feeling left out their may be some truth to their concerns. We're not suggesting that you need to get your child a phone or their future social life is doomed… but this is factor you may want to consider.

What is an appropriate amount of screen time?

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) guidelines previously suggested that zero hours of screen time for kids under age 2 and two hours between the ages of 2 and 18 was most appropriate. For a long time, this was the gold standard. But as technology has evolved, newer guidelines have been updated to incorporate the changing technological landscape and to address findings in more recent studies as well. Among the most important changes is the idea that not all screen-time is created equal. For example, on any give day your child may participate in any of the following:

Watching TV, reading, and listening to music
Playing games and browsing the Internet
Video-chatting and using social media
Using devices to make digital art or music

We all understand that using a computer to make digital art is inherently more beneficial than watching TV and so greater emphasis on the way that screen-time is being used should be taken in to consideration.

You might also ask how screen time (or lack of screen time) affects your child's behavior. For example, if after spending an hour watching TV your child is more irritable, tired or temperamental you may consider having them spend less time watching TV. Here are a few questions that will help you make the best decision for your child:

> The best predictor of your child's future relationship with technology is what they see you doing.

Are they using high quality, age appropriate media?
Is their behavior appropriately positive?
Is their screen time balanced with plenty of healthy screen free time?

If the answer to these questions is *yes* then you are likely on the right track.

Most importantly though, be sure to model appropriate use of technology. Have healthy boundaries for yourself. At the end of the day, regardless of what rules you put in place… the best predictor of your child's future relationship with technology is what they see you doing. So, if you have agreed upon tech-free times, locations, etc. be sure an honor those rules as well. If your technology use is getting in the way of authentic relationships with the people in your life, some changes are in order. Don't just say it. Live it.

How can I monitor screen time and what my kids are doing on their devices?

For starters, always have access to your child's phone. No need to be secretive about it. Know their passcode and check their phone often. Recently, a parent suggested that they couldn't check their child's phone because they changed the passcode. Their child wanted privacy. You wouldn't allow them to change the lock on their bedroom door, would you? You are the parent. More than likely, you pay for the device. You might even say that *its your phone*. You simply allow your child to use it. So have courage. Have conversations up front about the kind of access you want to the device. You can do it. We promise.

If you are concerned about what your kids may see online their are some steps you can take to help protect them. First, consider contacting your internet service provider to see what protections they can offer on your home network. Second, research and implement how to setup parental controls on the device itself. And finally, you may want to consider a monitoring service that will allow you to have further control and oversight of your child's device. Their are many good options and any internet search will yield some great information. We checked out a number of these services and would suggest that you give these few a look:

FamiLoop — https://www.familoop.com
Netsanity — https://netsanity.net
Disney Circle — https://meetcircle.com

It is important to remember that these tools are simply conversation starters. If these services make you aware of some troubling use, go talk to your child about it. Remember, no one solution is perfect. The best protection your child has online is you.

Additionally, be curious about what they are doing. Use the device together with your child. If they are playing a game, sit down and play with them. If they want to download a new app, download the app and use it with them. Be prepared to have lots of conversations.

If you are not sure how to start those conversations, here are a few tips to help you get started.

Conversation Starters

Always remember to ask open-ended questions. In other words, 'have you seen anything bad online?' does not lend itself to a conversation. The answer is either yes or no. Ask questions that will spark a real dialogue. We've found these questions to be extraordinarily helpful:

What have you seen recently that was really interesting?
What's the craziest things you've seen your friends doing?
What is something that has surprised you?
Can you show me how? Let your kids be the expert!

You will be amazed at what your kids will share with you. Remember, they are just as curious about what's out there as you are. Its a great big world out there. Don't send them off alone to figure it out. Commit to go on the journey with them.

Encounter. Formation. Expression.

One of the things we talk about at Port City Community is the idea of Encounter, Formation, Expression. The basic concept is that what we encounter in life will help to form what we think and believe. What we think and believe will inevitably show up and be expressed in what we say and do. As parents, part of our job is to help our kids maneuver in a world that is ever changing and build a solid foundation in Christ. When i comes to technology, we need to remember that what they encounter is forming who they are. We can't protect them from having bad encounters, but we can help them think through how these encounters are forming their identity. The only way we're going to know about some of the things they encounter is to have a real relationship with them and ask them questions. When the door seems to be shut, we need to keep knocking so we can let our kids know that we love them and want what is best for them'