

Living in the World of iPhone, Wii and My Space: Tools of Addiction or Modern Means of Connection?

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Technology is a powerful tool for pleasure, productivity and enhancing connections with others. However, excessive or improper use of it can lead to abuse or unhealthy dependence.

BENEFITS:

- Way of building relationships and sense of community with friends/family
- Finding out what friends are doing/saying, getting news of social gatherings
- Being in on gossip
- Using the safety of the Internet to take greater risks in showing oneself
- For those who feel they are "different," way to connect with others
- Can bring families into more contact and facilitate communication

DANGERS:

- Feelings hurt by social inclusion/exclusion: Top Friends lists
- Dissemination of information deemed private or hurtful
- Cyber bullying
- Immediate access to hundreds of people
- Innocence and desire for acceptance leaving teens vulnerable to predators
- Emotional numbing
- Loss of opportunity to develop coping skills personally, socially & emotionally
- Neural patterning

As a parent, how do I:

1. Encourage my child to enjoy and benefit from the technology without falling prey to the hurtful aspects of it?
2. Distinguish between use, abuse, dependency of the Internet, Video Games, Social Networking Sites, Cell Phones, TV and other Electronic Communication and Entertainment Devices? And support use and prevent abuse?

Means of Connection

Healthy Enjoyment and Use includes:

- **Enhances my well-being:** Playing video games or going on Facebook adds to how I already feel good about myself and my life
- **Focus/Mono-Tasking:** When I'm not doing it, I can immerse myself in and focus on other activities (dinner with the family, homework, time with friends, etc.)
- **Self-Regulation:** I can do it for an agreed-upon period of time and stop when I'm supposed to, although sometimes I may need help from parents in helping me shift gears
- **Balance:** I have a balance in my life that includes good friends, activities I enjoy and taking responsibility for schoolwork, chores, etc.
- **Appropriate Risk-Taking:** I do things online that may be edgy but not abusive toward or exploitive of others
- **Connection:** I find connection and build relationships in that world that enrich my life rather than increase my loneliness and isolation
- **Productivity:** I use the technology to assist me in making plans and getting things done in ways that ease the pressure and stress in my life rather than add to it. In essence, my maturity is reflected in how I use my cell phone rather than the fact that I have it.

Tool of Addiction

Unhealthy Level of Dependence Usually Includes 2-3 or more of the following:

- **Loss of Control:** unable to adhere to limits
- **Can't Stop:** I can't stop myself from doing it even when I know I must
- **Preoccupied:** I am constantly thinking about that activity and when I can do it next
- **Neglects other Areas in Life:** Family, friends, school, sleep, hobbies
- **Denies Problems that are Obviously Related ...**
- **Withdrawal:** Irritability, negative moods, pouting, angry... when without
- **Tolerance:** Progressively wanting and needing more
- **Binging:** I do that activity as much as I can and neglect school work, sports, and face-to-face time with friends
- **Excessive Risk-Taking:** I use the anonymity of that world to try out behaviors that are unhealthy and I wouldn't dare to do face-to-face
- **Hunger for Acceptance** justifies harmful behaviors (i.e., participating in chat rooms that are unhealthy - eating disorders, promoting suicide, etc.)
- **"Life is Bad" Starting Point:** I'm bored, frustrated so I need an escape

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS OF TEENS

1. Parents and their children have differing priorities during the teen years, as follows:

TEENS MOST VALUE

Independence and Control
Privacy and Personal Territory
Peer Relationships and Feelings
Pleasure and Fun
Experimentation
Experiencing the Present
Freedom and Privilege
Acceptance

PARENTS MOST VALUE

vs. compliance and compromise
vs. family sharing and togetherness
vs. parent's, siblings' feelings
vs. work
vs. sensibility and caution
vs. planning for the future
vs. limits and responsibility
vs. achievement

"The World of Wii" introduces some new twists on these age-old conflicts:

- Teens have more ability to control privacy vis a vis parents via cell phones and social networks
- At the same time, "Everything is Public" and privacy is hard to maintain vis a vis friends
- Teens can develop and maintain much broader networks of "friends"
- Teens' ability to experiment is exponentially greater online
- Immediate gratification is just a "click" away
- Cell phones and online communities provide the means but not necessarily the maturity for being more independent
- Multi-tasking is now considered the norm - "down time" is "boring"

UPSHOT:

Teens have always needed parents to provide structure, help support, guide, contain, and set limits during the turbulent years of adolescence. The amazing possibilities yet worrisome dangers of technology and the online world make parents' role of providing structure, setting limits and helping ensure their child's safety that much more important!

IN ESSENCE, DON'T BE AFRAID TO BE THE PARENT!

What parenting strategies work best in the "The World of Wii"?

OVERALL APPROACH

Create a road map and structure in your daily life that provides clear guidelines about use of the Internet, cell phones, video games, social networking sites, etc. with incentives for following those guidelines and consequences for not doing so.

In general, three approaches we've seen parents successfully adopt are:

1. Strict controls and oversight

Parents limit access: little/no use of technology or firm limits on media content (G/PG/PG-13 rated movies, video games); weekends only; no My Space; Parents model living with clear cut limits and boundaries

2. Balanced Approach: Parents set norms with teen input

Access a balancing act with quantified limits that include some use during the week (i.e. 1 hour per night after homework); 250-500 text messages a month; computer in public space: Parents model balancing/enjoying use of computers, TV, cell, etc.

3. Parents provide much freedom with minimal oversight and high level of trust

Parents trust teen to self-regulate and adjust accordingly if choices negatively impact health, school productivity, time with friends and family. Computer in bedroom. Multi-tasking: teen watches TV, listens to music, is on IM while doing homework. Parents model ability to make good choices without external limits.

STRATEGIES

Most Effective

Modeling
Verbal Assertiveness
Letting Go
Structure, Incentives
and Consequences
Playfulness; Joking
Praise With Limits
Positive Attention
Cuing, Helpful Reminders
If You Can't Beat 'Em, Join 'Em

Least Effective

Reasoning
Threats, Yelling, Acting Powerful
Advising
Lectures, Bringing Up Past Failures
Guilt-Tripping
Harsh Punishments
Backing Down
Criticisms or Put-downs
Nagging
Atoning

10 TIPS FOR PARENTS

1. Don't be scared to venture into the "World of Wii"

You can learn your way around. Really!

2. Determine where you stand and set clear expectations regarding

- What is allowed and what isn't: (i.e. no weekday use until homework finished)
- What is private: (who you talk with online is not private; what you say is)
- Rights and privileges (i.e. Having a cell phone is a privilege)
- How much is OK and what is excessive (# of hours per day/per week)
- How you will hold them accountable and monitor their activity (POS)

3. Provide structure that supports a life in balance and sets clear limits

- Establish clear rules and conditions for usage
- Include incentives for good behavior as well as consequences for bad
- Get their input on the structure and show understanding for their desires/needs
- Components include: homework, chores, family time, fun, down time, creativity that is not computer or video game-based, face-to-face time with friends
- Say "no" with sympathetic firmness to requests that are not acceptable; "I'm not comfortable is valid reason for saying "no"

4. Reinforce the positives

- Applaud what's good about it: it's fun; it's a way of building friendships, etc.
- Play the Wii, PS3, learn how to text, go on Skype with them with grandparents

5. Identify use that is excessive/unhealthy

- Use the guidelines above to help distinguish between use and dependence
- If there is disagreement, have them chart their usage for a week
- If they insist they are not dependent have them go without for a week

6. Apply tools you have to help ensure their safety and let you sleep at night

- Computer out of the bedroom
- Knowing with whom they are talking online or on their cells
- Insist they set "privacy controls" to limit access; look at their settings
- Google your child's name to see what information is available publicly
- Review cell phone calls/text messages; use monitoring software - even if they get around them, knowing you are monitoring will be inhibiting factor

7. Examine your own behaviors to see what you are modeling to them

- Are you on email constantly or taking phone calls during meals?
- Are you spaced out in front of computer or TV after tiring day?
- Does a part of you relish them being "addicted" because you get down time?

8. Get Networked Yourself

- Talk with other parents to find out how they are handling these issues
- Use online resources to get information and advice

www.connectsafely.org

www.wiredkids.org (for kids)

www.wiredsafety.org

www.stopcyberbullying.org

www.isafe.org

www.netsmartz411.org

www.ikeepSAFE.org

www.nsteens.org (for teens)

9. Additional Rules We Recommend Implementing:

- Never give out screen name or cell number online
- Don't ever express negative feelings through email/IM/My Space - words alone without seeing/hearing the person can lead to huge misunderstandings
- Have your child show you their My Space page/Facebook profile
- Tell us, tell friends, tell someone if you are the victim of cyber bullying - we will not punish/shame you for telling even if you've been breaking our rules!

10. Your involvement may meet with resistance, but it communicates to your child that you care and that he/she matters. Never forget that!

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