



youth service bureau

Learning to Disconnect

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In recent months there has been a lot of attention around the issue of social media and devices – not just about how kids and teens are addicted, but how their *parents* are also addicted.

New research has found that 54% of kids think their parents check their devices too often, and 32% say they feel “unimportant” when their parents get distracted by their phones. Kids use words like “mad,” “frustrated,” and “angry” when describing how they feel when their parents are on their devices and ignoring them. Kids feel “exhausted” when trying to get their parents attention.

We often think of just kids and teens not being able to put their devices down, but it’s happening with parents too. If you aren’t guilty of doing this yourself, I’m sure you’ve seen it happen to someone else. Parents who are on their devices when out at dinner, moms at the park who are texting or checking email while their kids play, dads who are surfing the Internet while at their kid’s baseball game... it’s everywhere, and it’s clearly becoming an issue for kids and teens who so desperately want to connect.

We get it, though. As a parent, you need time to yourself. For many parents, checking email, browsing Facebook, pinning on Pinterest, or just texting with friends, can be a welcome getaway. **But when it comes to devices, there CAN be a balance between your needs and your kids needs.**

Here are some things we suggest:

1) Watch your child’s cues, and make sure basic needs are being addressed.

Recently there was a news story about a restaurant owner who yelled at a child for screaming at the table because the child was complaining about being hungry. Many were quick to blame the parent, who was seen texting on her phone and “ignoring” her own hungry child. Whatever your opinion is about this situation, it’s clear that the child’s needs were not being addressed.

Having a device is a privilege, not a need. If your child is complaining that they are hungry and you’re busy checking your email, you’re sending a message that your wants are greater than her needs. Making sure your child’s basic needs are being addressed before turning to your devices is a great way to start finding that balance with technology. Or, simply saying, “I need two more minutes to finish this email, and then we’ll get you your snack,” can be a great way to acknowledge your child. Just make sure to follow-through on that promise!

What if your kids are old enough to feed themselves? What if they should be able to meet their own basic needs? Teens still need their parents, especially when it comes to emotional and social development. Taking time away from devices to engage your teen in conversation is so important for their development.

2) Communicate rules and expectations for everyone

Kids need limits and structure, especially when it comes to social media and devices. Limiting screen time is important for mental, emotional, social, and even physical health. But when you expect your kids to follow certain rules that you don't even follow yourself, it sends mixed messages.

Work with your kids to develop a set of limitations and rules EVERYONE can follow – yes, even the parents. No devices in the bedroom and at the table are good places to start.

As a parent, it may be tempting to say, “Well, I have to take this call – it’s for work,” or, “The kids won’t notice if I’m gone for ten minutes to check my email.” However, this sets the expectation that rules can be broken, and we know that kids DO notice when parents spend more time on their devices than being present in the moment.

Another suggestion: find out what is most distracting to you. Email? Texting? Social media? Maybe you need to schedule specific time during the day to check your social media accounts, or maybe you need to put your phone on silent so you’re not distracted by incoming messages. Once you identify your particular weaknesses, it will be easier to develop limits for yourself.

3) Model appropriate behavior

Kids at all ages learn through observation. They learn how to act and what to do by imitating the behaviors around them. I saw a good example of this recently. I was standing near a family with three young kids. The two older kids had their cell phones out and were texting while their parents talked. The youngest child, who looked no older than three years old, was holding a plastic, fake cell phone but was clearly imitating her older siblings – “texting” and talking into the phone with an occasional glance at the others to make sure she was doing it the “correct” way. When we see things like this happen, it’s pretty clear where kids pick up this kind of behavior!

As a parent (or older sibling), it is so important to model the kind of behavior we want to see. Many parents say, “Do as I say, not as I do.” But what kind of message does this send our kids? Instead, we should try our best to behave and act in ways we want our kids to emulate – and apologize when we make mistakes.

One more thing: modeling good behavior can be more than just how much time you spend on your device – it can also be how you act and behave when online. Modeling good digital citizenship, teaching what it means to “think before you post,” and knowing when to turn off devices and take a break are all good examples of how parents can teach by showing, not just telling.

4) Finding a Balance

Finding a balance with social media and devices is so important, for everyone in the family. By following the previous rules, you’re already halfway there.

By setting rules, following them, and modeling the behavior you want to see, you’re already creating natural ways to balance your use. But finding that balance needs to be an active thing – you can’t just

expect it to happen. It will take time, and you're bound to mess up once and a while. Apologize when you do make mistakes and use that as an opportunity to have a conversation with your kids. They may appreciate that you can relate to them – that it IS difficult to turn off your devices. Make it a learning experience for everyone.

The very least thing you can do is to simply think twice about turning on your device when you're around your kids. Think about why you're doing it, and if it's necessary or if it can wait. It may seem like a small thing, but these small actions send a huge message to your kids.