Modelling healthy online behaviours to children

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Parents wanting to raise their children to practise healthy digital habits must model those behaviours themselves. Here are our top tips.

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One of the main ways children learn is by mimicking the behaviours of those they look up to, particularly their parents. Observational learning occurs when children pick up new skills and habits by watching, then copying autonomously rather than through formal teaching. Therefore, parents who want to raise their children to develop healthy and responsible digital habits must model healthy online behaviours themselves.

Talk early and often

Your children are growing up surrounded by technology. It will hugely influence their lives, both now and in the future, so it's important to incorporate it as a topic into your regular conversations and talk early and often about what healthy online behaviours look like (as well as modelling them yourself). Openly communicating with your children about the positive and negative aspects of digital technology will help them better understand the online world, and making these discussions part of everyday chat will help to normalise the topic so they will feel comfortable coming to you when they have questions or need help.

In addition to asking your children things like, "How was school today?" or "What did you have for lunch?", begin to incorporate questions about their online experiences, such as, "Have you seen any really funny memes recently?", "What have you been working on inside Roblox lately?" or "Has there been any drama on Snapchat this weekend?".

Family tech agreement

From the moment your children start to use technology, you should have a [family tech agreement](#) in place; however, for this agreement to be the most impactful, it is essential everyone adheres to it (including you!). Ensure all family members are involved when setting up your family tech agreement, enabling everyone to feel heard, included, and aware of the practices in place. The younger your children are, the more you can take the lead with setting up the rules you would like them to follow, as well as the consequences when they don't. As your children grow, however, you will need to make this an increasingly collaborative and agile process – your teen will certainly appreciate it!

Tech-free time

Balance is the key when it comes to modelling healthy online behaviours. Excessive screen time has been linked to both physical and mental health issues, and a recent [report](#) has shown that worldwide, people aged between 16 and 64 spend an average of four and a half to over ten hours a day on their screens. Because we are surrounded by technology, it's vital to increase your awareness of your time spent online and look to carve out some quality tech-free time every day (then teach your children to do the same).

To start, try doing a self-audit of your own digital habits to see where, when, and how you spend your time online. Remember that not all tech use is equal, so aim for quality over quantity. Consider positive ways to use tech with your children, such as listening to music or audiobooks, or playing an online game as a family.

Encourage all family members to switch off their screens during meals and at least an hour before bed. To help keep devices out of the bedrooms during sleep time, set up a family charging station in the kitchen or another common area of the house.

Digital distraction

Children are hardwired to seek meaningful connections, starting with those they are closest to – their family. When the important adults in their lives are digitally distracted, they disconnect from those around them, which can cause children extreme stress. Research has shown that [children](#) and [parents](#) are significantly less responsive to each other while engaging with some form of screen-based digital technology.

Try to avoid digital distractions while interacting with your children (including tech multitasking, such as scrolling through social media while watching a movie together). If you need to use your device while engaging in an activity with your child, such as taking a phone call or sending an important email for work, explain what you are doing and how long you think you will be. Turning off notifications or setting them to silent can also help if you can't resist checking whenever you see or hear an alert; however, if that's not enough, consider turning your phone off for a limited period of time or keeping it in a separate room.

Respectful interaction

Ensure you always communicate online with the same positivity and manners you would use when face-to-face. It's also equally important to seek consent when posting content about someone else online, including photos. Although it's natural for parents to want to [post](#) about their children on social platforms, many don't realise the potential impact doing so can have on their child's digital footprint. Ensure you always ask for their permission before posting about them online, and make sure they know to do the same when they start interacting on social media. Instigating this practice when your children are young will pay off significantly once they reach their teen years and can spread this positive digital citizenship practice among their peers.

Protecting privacy

Staying safe online is a large part of modelling healthy online behaviours, and an excellent place to start is by ensuring you have strong passwords and robust privacy settings for all devices, apps, and games your family uses. Explain to your children the importance of not sharing passwords with those outside the family and teach them to perform updates and check settings regularly.

A great way to get your children thinking about the protection of their personal data online is to set up their privacy setting together once they begin creating their first social media accounts. When doing so, ensure you discuss with them the type of personal information that is and isn't appropriate to share publicly, for example, their address, where they go to school, or when they are home alone.

Positive influence

Above all, using technology should be a positive experience, enhancing your life with convenience and connection rather than making it more stressful (the same applies to your children). If you find that certain content doesn't serve you well or that some apps or accounts are no longer beneficial, don't be afraid to delete or disconnect from them, even for a short while, to see if doing so makes a positive difference. Your children will notice and follow your example!

For further reading, see our guide on [setting up your home for online safety](#).