parenting ideas

insights

Parenting in the digital age

by Michael Grose

Recently I spoke at Trinity Grammar in Melbourne about the challenges of parenting in the digital age. It was a great night with a very enthusiastic crowd. I thought I'd share some key messages with the Parentingideas community.

If every generation of parents had it's own new or unique challenges then it's safe to say that the overriding challenge shared by the current generation of parents centres around technology – their children's use and their own use.

The communication technology now available to all of us is constantly being updated. Every innovation in technology presents a new set of challenges for parents. Yesterday's schoolyard bullying is today's cyber-bullying!

Frequently I hear parents talk about children's use of technology as if the technology is a problem. However technology is the context or background in which we must raise our kids to be safe, social and savvy. The bigger question we need to ask is: "What is good parenting in the digital age?"

Our job is to educate kids about technology – helping them be safe, smart and balanced users – so we need some guidelines to follow. Every parent needs to set their own guidelines suitable to their own situation. Here are some ideas to help:

1. Be a good role model
It's well established now that children will copy many of their parents' behaviours. Our behaviours and habits now extend to our use of communication technology, which is a good thing as we've got the chance to model smart, balanced technology habits. This means we need to be mindful of how often we have a mobile device in our hands when we are around kids. It means we need to take care that we don't

use technology as an emotional pacifier when we feel stressed or under pressure. Model face-to-face communication and healthy ways to manage your stress levels so kids can learn these techniques too.

2. Think about expectations and rules for your kids in the digital world

You wouldn't drop your kids off for the day in the middle of the city and say, "Have fun. Stay safe!" Yet we often do the equivalent to our kids with technology. Most digital devices are set up for adults so when you introduce a piece of technology think carefully about it's use and expectations before handing it over to your kids. Where possible and practical use restrictions under settings when you give a device to a child. And place your own restrictions around use and timing when kids use devices, rewarding responsible use with greater freedom.

3. Differentiate between uses

One use doesn't fit all. Digital technology has three purposes – communication, education and entertainment. Gender plays a part here with girls using digital technology more for communication and boys using digital devices more for entertainment. As a parent we need to be aware how our kids are using technology, which will influence how we respond to them. For instance, you should take a different approach to a child who spends all his time after school playing Minecraft to one who spends significant time online for educational purposes. Nuance your approach according to the children's technology use.

4. Create social media mantras and scripts to keep kids safe

Parents have always found ways to frame messages for children so that they rattle around inside their heads when parents aren't around. "Don't speak to strangers" still reverberates with me decades after my mother first drilled it in to me. She also gave me the scripts to use with strangers if ever I got lost, or found myself in trouble. So what scripting are you introducing to your child to keep them safe and also make them think about smart use while online? These include such mantras as "Is it worth posting?", "Take a deep breath before hitting the send or post button." "Do you want the principal to see this post?"

5. Create tech-free zones and times

Knowing when to cut off or leave technology is just as important as knowing when to use it appropriately. One way to teach appropriateness of technology use is to introduce tech-free zones and tech-free times into your family. For instance, dinner tables and mealtimes should be kept technology free to encourage in the moment face-to-face conversations. Bedrooms should be tech free particularly

at night to encourage children to get a good night's sleep.

6. The family that plays together learns together

Technology can bring us together or keep us apart. I recently saw a mother and her early teen son walking down a busy a street both with their faces in mobile devices, only glancing up occasionally from their screens to make sure they didn't bump into others. Although physically close, mentally they were worlds apart. On the other hand, a well-chosen game can easily connect parents with their kids. Choose games and activities that bring you together and provide opportunities to teach kids about sportsmanship and etiquette.

Media and digital devices are an integral part of our world today, presenting opportunities and challenges for parents and children. It's part of the parenting job to help kids access digital media safely and sensibly, which involves setting limits and boundaries; knowing how kids are using technology and encouraging them to consciously engage with technology while at the same time ensuring kids connect with others, learn and keep themselves entertained away from technology as well.

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Michael Grose, founder of Parenting Ideas, is one of Australia's leading parenting educators. He's the author of 10 books for parents including Thriving! and the best-selling Why First Borns Rule the World and Last Borns Want to Change It, and his latest release Spoonfed Generation: How to raise independent children.