

Technology and Middle School

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Technology has always been present in people's lives. Whenever knowledge is put into practical use to solve problems or invent useful tools, we rely on technology. With the industrial revolution, technology incorporated machines, while in the digital age technology includes devices which connect to the internet and can be used to access information to solve problems. While technology has always been used by adults, digital technology has now been exerting a powerful force in children's and adolescents' lives.

Everywhere one goes the scene is the same. Children, teenagers, and adults are looking down at their phones. One person commented that it looks as if they are playing cards in which each is looking at his own deck. But, no, no one is looking at another. Each young person is in an isolated world connected through the device. Children's recreational use of screens and smartphones is now the dominant activity in their lives. Each of us has our own experience with the smart phone and can cite examples of its use for good as well as for its dangers. As we consider the use by middle-school children, it becomes necessary to realize that this is a habit that, once developed, is difficult to break.

There are no rules for middle schoolers on how to behave in this new social media landscape, no guides for how to respond to the way others are behaving. "They were social media pioneers, but it was as if they were commanding their covered wagons without any maps or sextants."¹

Every writer considers certain questions essential for communication — who, what, where, when, how, and why. What is the impact of technology on middle-schoolers? In previous decades, movies and television were our concern both as parents and teachers. Who was in control, what was the content, where was it

being experienced, at what or how many hours? How was it affecting neurological development? Why was it being used in the first place? Parents were in control since they usually controlled what movies were seen or there was one television in the house and it was where parents could control its use. Over time that changed, additional televisions were added in other rooms, the ability to record programs for later use, the advent of VHS copies of movies all gave parents more freedom and more control. However, the bottom line was that it depended on where the machine was located.

In the past, I characterized television as a stranger who enters the house and competes with parents, bringing in different values and influences. When children were young, they imitated those around them unconsciously, but middle-schoolers imitate teenagers and chosen adults. The impact of television is mild compared to what the computer has brought into the home.

The questions shifted. Who is in control? Parents no longer have complete control over content although they can put limits on it. Middle-schoolers have more freedom in deciding what they want to access, as well as when and where. The smart phone, tablet or laptop can be carried to other places outside the home, and the smart phones can be used anywhere there is a *WIFI* connection. When middle-schoolers have their smart phones or computers in their bedrooms, they have control of their use away from their parents. They can justify its use for communication, information, and entertainment, but they do not have the capacity to understand how much is enough. Most of all, they do not consider the effects on their neurological development when the dangerous tendency of addiction set in.

Television was mostly passive viewing. What the computer and smart phone offer which television did not is interaction with others. Being able to connect with others either near or far away in a video game is very exciting, it stimulates competition and collaboration. Some video games provide what games have always

¹ Nancy Jo Sales, *American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenager*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), p. 371.

provided – working in teams or solo to reach a goal which can be used for social or anti-social purposes or to compete or win over others. The process includes strategizing the steps in the game and experiencing anticipation and excitement. The problem with video games for middle-schoolers is how we answer the key questions – What is the content? What is the purpose? Who is in control? When is it being played? How is it affecting neurological development?

While children have always been tempted to do what parents forbade, from hiding sexy magazines in their rooms, hiding them under the mattresses, to imitating the beauty, bodily gestures, and sexy poses of movie stars or body builders, parents today have little or no access to what is flooding the minds of their eleven and twelve-year-olds through digital devices. In addition, the world of *YouTube* opens up a secret candy store of information streaming into the mind of the child without any adult guidance, pouring in distorted images of pornography, violence, and commercialization. It also offers access to information on how to build, create, and make things in an accessible and timely way.

While middle-school boys tend to use technology for video gaming to enjoy the competitive and aggressive experience of power over others, girls tend to use technology for social media to connect with others, to satisfy their desire to be included, liked, appreciated, admired, become famous, or look like a celebrity.

The monster in the media is the prevalence of pornography, which has become a shadow overlaying the understanding and experience of sexuality. It has colored many boys' images of sexual relations, infused their comments in texting and the way they speak about girls and speak to them, and is influencing how they act with girls. Under the influence of these images and messages, boys consider their own and others' bodies as objects purely for their own satisfaction. Pornography has snuck in to the images of how girls regard their own bodies, how they dress and portray themselves on social media by modeling themselves after celebrities who are actually porn stars.

Kaiser Family Foundation research indicates that children 8-18 years old spend an astounding 5 ½ hours every day indulging in various entertainment screen technologies including video games, social networks, online videos, and TV. High school aged students spend an additional 2 ½ hours each day texting and talking on their phone – more time than attending school. We need to be concerned and attentive.

Middle-school children are likely targets of overuse of all this entertainment technology. At this crucial time in their development, they are affected in four areas: family life; social life; school; and their brain development. I will deal with technology in school in a separate chapter.

Family Life

Face-to-face communication and relationships are essential for healthy development.

Much of what is conveyed between parent and teen is nonverbal – through facial expressions, eye contact, hugs, and tone of voice. The human mind is specially attuned to these unspoken cues. They trigger dopamine, oxytocin, and other 'feel-good' brain chemicals that foster and maintain attachment, including the one between parents and teens.²

Attachment to parents is one of the most significant experiences in child development. Playing online games decreases total time with family. Using technology for homework and research is not the big issue. The issue is that children need parental involvement to develop executive function.

Kids with healthy parent attachment regulate their emotions better, score higher intellectually and academically, and have higher self-esteem than kids without a healthy bond. Attachment remains vital into the teen years.³

Parents are very busy and have less time to supervise their children. They are overwhelmed by companies persistently advertising that all the use of digital technology is normal and poses little risk of addiction. The reality is that children are wired, and parents themselves are caught up in constant use of the smartphone or internet. Science is beginning to describe the problems that the overuse of technology is causing in children's development.

On average, parents are on screens 6 ½ hours a day between television, computer, mobile phones, and other screen time. The result is that individuals in the family are going their own way with little time for communicating, problem solving, planning, or enjoying doing things together. They may be in the same room, but their minds are elsewhere.

² Richard Freed, *Wired Child: Reclaiming Childhood in a Digital Age* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 2015), p.170.

³ Freed, *Wired Child*, p. 20.

Lynn & Johnson in *Breaking the Trance*⁴ claim that parents are also in a trance which includes all the ideas and beliefs they have swallowed about what it means to be a good parent, including such thoughts as “This is the way it is now.” “My kids should like me.” “I can’t make my kids do anything they don’t want to.” Parents are now called to create a new set of “beliefs,” including their own commitment to relationships with people rather than with virtual ones. Facing the challenges technology presents, recognizing that strict parents can also be loving parents, and changing children’s behavior through clear boundaries and expectations, is the task of good parenting.

However, regular video game use works like a drug, causing dopamine, a powerful reward-based neurotransmitter, into the brain. Each time a boy plays an electronic game, he feels pleasure and wants to play it more. As time goes on he needs to play more often to get the same amount of pleasure. Meanwhile, nothing else he could do will give him that rush of pleasure, so why even try? He will defend the use of the video game with all of his middle-school self-righteousness.

Dr. Sax quotes Prof. Anderson’s recommendation that the parent play the video game or watch it being played.⁵ He suggests questions for the parent to ask, such as

1. Does the game involve some characters trying to harm others?
2. Does this happen frequently, more than once or twice in 30 minutes?
3. Is the harm done in a game rewarded in any way?
4. Is the harm portrayed as humorous?
5. Are nonviolent solutions absent or less “fun” than the violent ones?
6. Are realistic consequences of violence absent from the game?

A common family situation is finding the middle-schooler closed up in his or her room, lost in the haze of the screen. Parents don’t know what is being experienced, who the contacts are, how much time

should be allowed for this, or what this isolation is doing to family life.

What can parents do?

1. Know what your children are watching. Look at some of it with them. Put limits on what they can connect with.
2. Set times in the family when no one is on a screen. This includes family meals and family discussions.
3. Limit access to computers by having them in a common area where parents can see what is being accessed. Keep the smart phone out of the bedroom during sleep.
4. Work together with other parents in your school or neighborhood. Join parent action groups such as the “Wait Until 8th pledge” before letting children have smart phones. If parents need to have immediate contact with their children for safety reasons or other serious concerns, they can have a basic phone that calls and texts.
5. Guide middle-schoolers to participate in outdoor activities, reading, participating in family activities, following a hobby or particular interest that does not rely on screen use. Don’t wait until the children are in middle-school, begin earlier to support these interests.
6. Look at your own use of technology. Are you present with your child or are you also constantly distracted by the phone or screen?

Freed quotes Sherry Turkle who found in her research that, “Children often named the same three examples of being emotionally hurt and not wanting to show it when their parent was using a device rather than paying attention to them: at meals, during pickup either after school or after an extracurricular activity, or during sporting events.”⁶

Because texting makes it possible for children to contact their parents quickly and often, middle-schoolers may put off solving their problems by themselves. Instead, there is a constant flow between parent and child so that middle-schoolers can immediately share problems and get a quick fix. Parents often regard this constant interaction as a proof that their child loves

⁴ George T. Lynn and Cynthia C. Johnson, *Breaking the Trance: A Practical Guide for Parenting the Screen-Dependent Child* (Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press, 2016).

⁵ Leonard Sax, *The Collapse of Parenting* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

⁶ Quoted by Freed, *Wired Child*, p. 25. Sherry Turkle, *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), p. 267.

and relies on them. But this poses the question, how much should the middle-schooler face issues and try to figure out what to do without relying on their parents for solutions? How much help is too much? Middle-schoolers need time to reflect on what is happening, time to discuss situations, and opportunities to experience support. Reacting immediately often short-circuits conversations in which the youngster can figure out ways to reply to a situation. Is there something being lost here?

Melinda Gates, who has spent her career in technology, writes:

Still, as a mother who wants to make sure her children are safe and happy, I worry. And I think back to how I might have done things differently. Parents should decide for themselves what works for their family, but I probably would have waited longer before putting a computer in my children's pockets. Phones and apps aren't good or bad by themselves, but for adolescents who don't yet have the emotional tools to navigate life's complications and confusions, they can exacerbate the difficulties of growing up: learning how to be kind, coping with feelings of exclusion, taking advantage of freedom while exercising self-control. It's more important than ever to teach empathy from the very beginning, because our kids are going to need it.⁷

Family life forms the foundation of a child's life. What is missing cannot easily be made up.

Friends and Social Life

*"The social world of middle-school is incredibly important to a child's development and should be treated with respect."*⁸

The way the middle-schoolers think about themselves sets the foundation for what they will think in high school. Their views can be fixed and even stuck.

Peers are everything – what do they say, wear, listen to, watch, and eat? Because middle-schoolers are separating from their parents as a way to develop their own identity, the authority of their friends takes the place of their parents, at least for a while.

Middle-school students are developing their social networks. As they become aware of themselves within a social group, they are extremely vulnerable to what people say or think about them. They do not yet have the self-confidence to recognize that you can't please everyone. When a friend comments about them on social media, they take it literally and hard.

Part of the vulnerability of this age group is that they are all affected by what comes at them. They take comments which are casually or thoughtlessly made to be the truth. So much of what they are awakening to is the complexity of group behavior. They struggle to know what it takes to be liked, to be popular, to be accepted. If they hear that you have to do certain things to be popular, they will believe that and do their best to conform. Their sense of self is frail, just beginning to come to birth, and they need time, support, and human connections as they make their way along the path of development.

Networking or texting is the primary use of smart phones. Middle-school students are vulnerable to social connections, both longing to be accepted and feeling left out. The ways in which smartphones affect social popularity places a heavy burden on early adolescents. They use internet platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, etc. as a way of measuring how others see them. How many "likes" does their picture receive? Are they seeing photos of a party they were not invited to attend? They don't understand the consequences of what they say publicly, even though they are saying something hurtful about a classmate. They lack judgment about the consequences of their actions. Because their emotions are leading them, they respond erratically in social situations.

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⁷ On Parenting Perspective, Melinda Gates, August 24, Courtesy of the Gates Archive.

⁸ Michelle Icard, *Middle School Makeover: Improving the Way You and Your Child Experience the Middle School Years* (New York: Routledge, 2014).