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It sounds counterintuitive, but it's true. I've been researching youth culture and technology for decades, and I've encountered countless studies about young people spending too much time staring at their phones, tablets and every other type of screen imaginable. Even today's video game systems offer interactive and chatting components. All over the country teens and tweens are sitting in front of a TV screen, wearing a headset, and talking with people they've never even met face-to-face as they explore a virtual world together. This might scare parents on many levels, but one bi-product of all this screen communication is that the more young people spend communicating via texting and IM, the less they recognize real life face-to-face social cues.

For example, in 2014, UCLA did an eye-opening study (1) where they observed kids who were unplugged and media-free for 5 days at an outdoor camp. By the end of the 5 days, these kids were better able to understand emotions and nonverbal cues than kids who were plugged in to a normal media diet. What does this mean? It simply suggests that real-life face-to-face conversations are superior. Yes, even when we use emojis—the digital slang of the new Millennium—digital communication isn't as powerful as good ol' fashioned face-to-face.

Similarly, researchers witnessed this reality clearly in a bonding experiment (2) where people engaged in conversation with friends four different ways: in person, video chat, audio chat and instant messaging. As you can probably imagine, bonding was measured and differed "significantly across the conditions." The greatest bonding occurred during the in-person interaction, followed by video chat, audio chat and then IM, in that order.

Good ol' fashioned face-to-face communication always wins.

When today's young people focus on digital connections as their primary social connections, the results are always negative. Research shows that many young people are basing their own self worth and value through online affirmation. In other words, "Did they like my Instagram post? Why not?" The result is too much time trying to impress an online audience and a decline in intimate friendships (3). In other words, many young people today are substituting true friendships with online "friends."

This even has ramifications into the dating world. A new study from researchers at Stanford and Michigan State found that couples who met online are less likely to stay together longterm (4) than those who meet offline.

3 helpful ideas to keep technology from dominating our kids' lives:

So how can parents help teenagers swing the pendulum back towards real-life face-to-face connections? Here are 3 helpful ideas to keep technology from dominating our kids' lives:

1. Be proactive about connecting face-to-face

Look for every opportunity to set aside your technology and connect with your kids face-to-face:

- Eat messy foods together where fingers are too sticky to pull out a phone.
- Go on outdoor adventures with no signal or WiFi.
- Work on a project together using your hands.

Life is full of these settings, but sometimes we have to consciously seek out these venues with our kids, arenas where conversation flows naturally. Help them experience the benefits of face-to-face communication.

Sometimes it's difficult to get our kids to actually set aside their mobile devices. If that's the situation...

2. Don't be scared to enforce "no tech" times

It's okay to say, "No phones at the table." Our kids aren't going to die if we make them go without texting and Instagram for 30 minutes during dinner.

Better yet, try one evening a week without technology. In my brand new book 52 Ways to Connect with Your Smartphone Obsessed Kid, I suggest trying 'No-Tech-Tuesday.' This was something my kids resisted at first, but eventually cherished. Tuesday nights at our house meant no TV, no phone, no games... nothing (except what was required by homework). In our house that typically meant all of us in the living room around the fire reading and doing homework.

Note that I said "ALL" of us. That means...

3. Show Them

Parents need to model this. We can't tell our kids to put away their phones if we're getting texts from work during dinner. We need to demonstrate what this looks like. You can always tell your kids what you know, but you can only reproduce who you are.

Social media isn't evil. We just need to help our kids move from being tech-dependent to tech-enabled. Phones are really convenient tools when they help us communicate with people outside of the room, but become a hindrance when they interfere with our connection with people inside the room.

Are you ready to put down your phone and engage in meaningful face-to-face conversation with your kids?

JONATHAN McKEE is the author of over a dozen books including Get Your Teenager Talking and 52 Ways to Connect with Your Smartphone Obsessed Kid. He speaks to parents and leaders worldwide, all while providing free help for parents on TheSource4Parents.com

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