Dealing With Technology As A Parent

A very common theme among parents these days is concern over their children's use of technology. Typically, these concerns fall into two categories: video games and social media. Does technology pose a real risk for children, and if so, how can parents handle it to minimize the risk?

With video games, there are usually two categories of concern: process and content. Let's look at these separately:

Video Game Process: One thing we can all agree on is that the world is very different in 2014 than it was 40 years ago, or even 20 years ago. Children are flooded with information from the Internet and the media. A 7 year old child today probably "knows more" than a 10 year old in 1974. At the same time, children are exposed to all sorts of visual and auditory stimuli, from television, movies, etc. Its fast paced, its bright and its noisy. The result of all this is that it takes a lot to engage the attention of a child in 2014. Video games seem to serve that purpose, which is why they have such a huge audience.

Unfortunately, three things happen when children play video games. They sit relatively still for hours at a time, they stare at a computer screen or TV monitor for hours at time, and they tend to be isolated from the family.

While I would not suggest these three things are positive, we have to decide how to handle it being mindful of how destructive family conflict is to children and to their parents. So parents try to "pick their battles" and set reasonable limits on their children's time playing video games. It's possible to try a different approach. Instead of trying to limit children's time on video games, we can create competing opportunities. Our children typically love spending time with us, but not to sit around a talk over a cup of coffee. Parents can be creative in offering activities the engage their children, whether its going exploring in the woods together, or kicking around a soccer ball. This will not always work, but it will serve to limit time in a less conflictive and more positive way than trying to "set restrictions". The other thing parents can do is collaborate with their children. Have a conversation aimed at finding a "win-win" scenario, where you are satisfied that the amount of time is reasonable and your child doesn't feel "deprived". Start this conversation by asking your child what her vision is of how often she should play. If it's reasonable (and children often are stricter with themselves than we would be) go with it. If not, talk about your concerns, rather than saying "no".

There are three main concerns parents have pertaining to technology. The process of video game playing (sitting around and staring at a screen for hours with the resulting social isolation), the content of video games (very often violent and sometimes sexualized), and social media.

Process of Video Game Playing: If you're concerned about the amount of time your child is spending playing video games, here's two things to try:

1) Use it as an opportunity to create exciting and fun alternatives. This may be exploring together in the woods, kicking around a soccer ball, or watching a movie together. Instead of labelling the child's activity as "negative" and trying to restrict it, parents can see this as an opportunity to promote pro-social, positive family activities.

2) Have a collaborative discussion with your child, where you are committed to a goal of BOTH of you being happy with the outcome. Start by asking your child what her vision is for limits on playing games. You might be surprised at the response! If not, set out your concerns and ask your child to come up with an alternative. Keep working at it until there's a "win-win".

Content of Video Games: The violent content of video games can be horrific to parents. There is conflicting research on how destructive this is to children – on whether playing violent games correlates with violent behaviour. Criticizing the games can wind up being counter-productive. It can make the child feel badly ("why do I like something Mum and Dad think is so awful"?) and, especially with adolescents, might make playing the most violent games even more attractive. Of course, I would avoid buying games with offensive content, and you can use the competing interest principle here as well. Maybe buy/rent some games your child likes that are less violent or even (if you can find some) pro-social.

Be creative: Talk to other parents about what their children are playing. If a "cool" kid is into some game, it will be really attractive to your child. As with the process, you can enter into a collaborative discussion where you ask your child if he is concerned about the content and explain why you are. Finally, this is a great opportunity for role modelling. Be mindful of not watching violent media around your child, and be mindful that every hour of every day presents an opportunity for you to model respectful, gentle behaviour in the way you treat your child, your partner and people in general.

Social Media: There are obviously dangers present in social media, from predatory adults, from bullying peers, and from social pressure. In my opinion the answer is not to try to "ban" children from social media. Just as with drugs, and sex, and other issues, at the end of the day children are going to be confronted with social media and have to make their own decisions. We want to acknowledge they are in control of their own lives so we can keep an open dialogue. You may not have a choice of keeping your children completely off social media (they can always log on at a friend's house) but you can be a resource for them if they are confronted with something that is confusing or potentially destructive to them. Remember, you won't have that opportunity, and your child won't have that resource, if you take the approach of "banning" anything.

How Worried Should We Be?: In every generation, parents are upset about some new "advance" or social trend that young people are into, but the reality is "this too shall pass". I would remind myself that my child is probably going to be fine regardless (because I am his parent!) and I would use that reminder to ratchet down the intensity of the concern. Its possible your child will be a "couch potato" for a few years growing up and then never spend any time doing those things in her adult life. It's always helpful to come from a place of believing in yourself and believing in your children.