Proactive Parenting: December 2016
Human Connections & Digital Connectivity

It's a busy time of year for most folks, but particularly for parents trying to maintain the magic of the holidays amidst a constant media blitz, one that is not lost on their young charges. Digital devices have made exposure to commercialism virtually inescapable, compounding the challenge parents face. In the big picture, raising children to be caring, respectful, and productive adults involves enormous investments of time, effort, and love to build trusting, strong, and sustaining relationships. These bonds provide a kind of collateral, if you will, for the limit setting needed to promote reasonable behavior. So much of parenting involves other kinds of limit setting and gatekeeping, like the vigilance required to set boundaries on an explosive number of digital devices and content. Time and trust, love and limits, are good guideposts for parents navigating this media barrage, which can overwhelm their lives and their children's.

On the media page of HealthyChildren.org, the introductory section accurately describes the challenge parents face; "Everyday children are inundated by endless messages intended to educate, entertain, or influence their behavior. It takes commitment and effort on the part of parents to monitor and help interpret external influences on children." The Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics just issued a report entitled; "Media and Young Minds", containing new guidelines to assist pediatricians, providers, and parents around media consumption. There are clear benefits as well as real concerns about the exponential explosion of digital devices and screen time logged by children. Recommendations for preschoolers encourage parents to allow minimal digital connectivity only in the context of human connections, namely a caring, engaged adult who can interpret content and guide experiences. This is considered 'shared media use', and the statement is clear; "adult interaction with young children during media use is crucial". AAP's recommendations are in lock step with research from the Harvard Center on the Developing Child, which looked at key influences in building healthy brain architecture in young children; "Research indicates that key factors are caring and responsive relationships with adults, and safe and supportive environments." It is in the context of the "serve and return" engagement with nurturing adults that young children best learn and develop. But adults have a key role to play as kids grow from toddlers to teenagers, who potentially have direct and regular access to harmful and violent content. As kids get older watching and playing together continues to be valuable, but adult support can focus more on monitoring content, having regular discussions, sharing values and expectations, and enforcing limits. Gatekeeping becomes increasingly important and the grounding nature of parent-child connections loom large in protecting teenagers and helping them become smart digital citizens. The AAP report also calls attention to the essential healthy activities that are being displaced by excessive screen time, namely, sleep, exercise, play, reading aloud, and social interactions, both with adults

and peers. We've all have heard of distracted driving; now add distracted sleeping, playing, and communicating. The report stresses the need to carve out what professor and author Sheri Turkle, Ph.D of MIT calls 'sacred spaces'; family times protected from the distraction of devices and focused on mindful and meaningful parent and child interactions. Dr. Turkle studies devices and how our on-line personas are redefining human connection and communication. At a time when one study after another touts the importance of building children's emotional, social, and executive functioning skills, such as empathy, attention, and self-regulation, excessive digital time with fast-paced content stands in direct opposition to face-to-face, mindful social interactions. Dr. Turkle asks the provocative question; "As we expect more from technology, do we expect less from each other?

So how can we use technology to our benefit, without it controlling us, and our children? This is a complicated and difficult question, but the answer starts with putting human connections before digital connectivity. Groups like Commonsense Media suggest we start with "Device Free Dinners", where parents and children give each other their full attention, without digital distractions. A recent study of 1,700 parents by Commonsense Media found that, on average, adults spent nine hours a day looking at some kind of screen. Surprisingly, these parents thought they were good role models for their children. So taking a hard look at our own consumption is another good place to start, as we wrestle with what is best for our kids. The AAP report emphasizes to parents that; "The higher order thinking skills and executive functions essential for school success, such as task persistence, impulse control, emotional regulation, and creative flexible thinking, are best taught through unstructured and social (not digital) play, and responsive parent-child interactions."
Some of the new guidelines for parents include:
-Avoiding all media device use for children 24 months and under
-Allowing only 'shared media use' for one hour a day for children age 2 to 5.
-Avoiding using media as the only way to calm your child.
-Designating "no screen" times during meals and one hour before bedtime, and keeping bedrooms, mealtimes, and parent-child playtimes screen free.
-Turning off televisions and other devices when not in use.
-Avoiding fast paced programs and apps, etc., with lots of distracting content and any violent content.
For Family Media Use Plan Tips go to, healthychildren.org

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