



## **Fast Forward Childhood: When to Push Pause, Delete and Play**

Presented by Catherine Steiner- Adair, Ed.D.

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Co-hosted by Raising Girls and Teton County Library

### **Background**

Dr. Steiner-Adair is an internationally recognized clinical psychologist and author. In addition to her private practice, she is a Research Associate in the Harvard Medical School Department of Psychiatry. She has consulted to over 350 schools and businesses on work-family-life integration in the age of technology. Dr. Steiner- Adair is a resource to the media, having appeared on The Today Show, Good Morning America, NBC Morning Joe, The Huffington Post Live, WSJ Live, The Discovery Channel, CNN and PBS.

Dr. Steiner-Adair is author of The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age and the education curriculum *Full of Ourselves: A Wellness Program to Advance Girl Power, Health, And Leadership*. She interviewed thousands of kids, parents, educators and health professionals in writing these resources.

### **Presentation (focused on ages 6-12)**

As parents and caregivers you can reasonably be in charge of what your kids do with technology up until they reach about 8<sup>th</sup> grade. They need to learn at this critical point how to self-regulate, have a healthy “tech diet,” form digital citizenship, and engage in an enriching off-line life.

After 8<sup>th</sup> grade kids are already capable of outsmarting their parents. Most of us have a triangulated relationship with our kids and technology. Technology is so integrated into our lives that we are psychologically dependent on it. We check our phones even when we hear someone else’s ring; we take it to the bathroom with us. It has become a security blanket for us; we feel safer with it.

There are some great things about technology, for instance FaceTime, emailed photographs, Skype, etc. We stay connected through technology, and that is fantastic. 60-80% of the stuff online for kids is good stuff; the challenge is that the bad stuff is really bad! Educational stuff can be good, but there is a lot of *really bad* educational stuff.

In a study of 1000 kids ages 4-18, 500 teachers, 500 parents, 250 18-30 year olds, 25 2-4 year olds, and a group of grandparents, people were all asked, “What is it like to be a child in a family with technology?” In studies it is very rare to hear people in every stage of development describe something with the same adjectives, but all the often used the adjectives by everyone were “sad,” “mad,” “lonely,” and “frustrated.”

2-28 year olds experience relational fatigue trying to get attention from parents. Parents on phones at their children’s sports games, texting in the middle of conversations, or interacting with their kids just to get help with their smart phones. One child told me that he feels ignored at the dinner table, that his parents pretend

he is not there because they are busy with their tablets. He understands his parents didn't grow up with this. "I get lonely inside because my parents are always on their computers. Another child told me that she says in her head "Hello?! Remember me?! I'm your daughter! All you care about is your computer. You had me because you wanted me!" She says this in her head because she once said it out loud and got in trouble, so now she says it to herself as a self-soothing ritual. She knows her parents wanted her, knows they are supposed to love her, but is frustrated and lonely.

As caregivers we have lost our capacity to protect the sequence with which our kids enter the adult world. Make sure your child has a family-friendly child filter on his/her devices. Go to [commonsensemedia.org](http://commonsensemedia.org), it is a wonderful resource. It is very important to have a Responsible Use contract with your children (template available at [commonsensemedia.org](http://commonsensemedia.org)).

Boundaries are being lost. Work comes home with our devices. Kids will make up lies saying, "Did you see my basketball assist?" (when they didn't have one), and parents will lie and say "Oh yes, it was great – way to go!"

Kids have a lot of split screen time. They are doing homework and watching tv, sports, you tube, texting, etc at the same time. Their ability to learn vocabulary and to deeply comprehend what they are reading decreases. They engage a different part of their brain with split screens.

Kids will call their parents out on bad screen behavior, for example driving and texting. Often a parent will say, "Trust me, I'm in control." "I've never had an accident." "This is important." When you are on your screen, you're getting stimulated by 2-3 simultaneous things, and your capacity for empathy dims. We lose our ambient awareness. We say things in front of others that we normally would not. Doctors, lawyers, and other professionals are divulging information in front of strangers, bad mouthing others, sharing protected information, etc. What are they thinking?! They are *not* thinking. They have forgotten where they are; they have forgotten manners.

When our phones go off with a ring or a text message, we immediately think "danger," "emergency," "I must pick it up." Tell yourself it can wait, especially when you are driving. We as adults have to self-regulate. There has been a huge spike in accidents involving drivers with 0-5 years of driving experience, who are 700% more likely to have an accident. The uncontrollable compulsion to check our technology has us risking our lives and those of others.

There has been a 40% increase of people who feel lonely in their household. Elementary school aged kids through college aged kids have expressed the feeling of being ignored. When they tell their parents something important, their parents will pick up a phone call mid-conversation. A common response among older kids is "WTF? Are you really taking this call right now? I was telling you something important, and now I feel stupid for opening up to you and it hurts."

As a culture we are struggling with new norms. When we were children it was unimaginable that we would ask children to freeze in time like this for "I'm just checking." What is the quality of all of this connecting, this "just checking?" Our devices pull us away from our surroundings and anyone in them, including our small children. We ask them to freeze in time, but when we return the moment has been lost. Children see their parents on the phone all of the time, then arguing about who is on the phone more, breaking the family rules of "no tech at the table," etc. Are we using this tool to make our best selves? Never before has it been so possible to be so connected, but these devices are making us feel more disconnected.

Kids are going to get in trouble with tech. It happens. Sweet, nice, smart, good kids are getting into trouble. Kids being kids in an adult online world. Seeing commercials with misogynistic content and then acting on them. A school once called me for help -- a 6<sup>th</sup> grade boy asked his girlfriend to sext him a picture of herself,

she did so with her shirt off, he freaked out and showed his best friend. The friend then emailed the image to the entire school. The parents of the girl called their lawyer, police arrived to arrest the boy, the girl's parents demanded that the boy be sent to a psychiatric hospital for evaluation. These kids are often not neurologically developed enough to handle technology. This tool can be dangerous. Kids need really strict limits. They are too young to absorb and process these things.

Online games and social networking sites can be really bad. Games like Minecraft are not terrible, but it really depends on who else is playing (i.e. who is in the posse), and it can be addictive. Make sure your kids are playing with people they know. Strangers can get on and use extremely inappropriate language or try to get personal info from kids. Kids need to learn about digital citizenship, an e-culture with empathy. Instagram can be a hotbed for girl-to-girl lateral aggression. A seemingly sweet picture of girls at a slumber party can actually be intended to be hurtful to whomever was not included. Like and dislikes, followers, "friends," all are part of gaining social capital. Mean, smart and edgy comments get more "likes." Then there are the anonymous comments where kids loose their filter and say things online that they would never say in person. This can be really damaging and hurtful. They are using language that would get them sent home from school for using; language that is racist, homophobic, and misogynistic. Set up a safe site for your kid, check on it, talk with them. School has to be a sanctuary where kids can talk about this.

Social media sites can be really stressful. There has been a spike in body self-criticism, perfectionism, social anxiety, and social avoidance. Everyone looks super happy and popular and perfect in their posts. There are sites where you can be anonymous and criticize others. I know of an 8 year old who was messaged "u r fat. U r not my friend" with a devil emoji from another 8 year old. This especially upset the little girl because she was told that things online are permanent. She said if it had been said to her it would not have been as hurtful; she could have gotten over it better. But in writing online for all to see is a true assault.

We see a decrease in this generation for empathy and kindness. "Family-friendly" has changed. We see a new habit in children: they love to multi-task. With 6-7<sup>th</sup> graders, make sure they are not on their phones when they are doing their homework. Split screening has become popular, and kids are loosing their capacity for sustained focus. When you multi-screen you have a hard time focusing. This leads to lower capacity for frustration. Responses are so fast-paced now. Teachers are reporting feeling pressured to provide "edu-tainment," as kids can't follow along if it is not fast-paced and entertaining. Too much screen time leads to more frustration, which is highly problematic. Kids are addicted to technology. In China there are 300 treatment centers for children who are addicted to technology. These children can't calm themselves down. They do not know how to self-soothe or to be soothed by human contact. A hurt child will cry and cry, unable to be soothed by their parents until they are given a smart phone.

Children are loosing their capacity for good conversations. They can't sit at a table with adults during a dinner and engage or sit and simply be bored. It is a skill to sit patiently, or to engage and pay attention. Kids don't learn empathy and listening skills, and this is a shocking cultural change. Top business schools are now not looking for kids with the highest GPAs, GMAT, and SAT scores; they are looking for kids who can stay engaged, who can interact with others, who can collaborate with or lead others. The most important tool for our kids' success is social-emotional skills. Can your child identify his/her feelings, and then manage those feelings? Playing a game or checking social media can make feelings go away, and then they are not dealt with. Kids need to practice dealing with other people, not playing games that blow stuff up. Kids need to learn to stand up in front of others and connect.

### **Scary, Crazy, or Clueless Parents**

- *Crazy Parents*: they take on their children's pain and make it worse. They try to solve their children's problems for them.

- *Clueless Parents*: don't be these! Set up filters on your devices, get educated, link texts to your account. Other kids and parents can see what your kid is texting, so make sure you know too. Make sure your child is developing self-control to handle technology appropriately. Keep checking in on your kid's online activity randomly; let them know that you are doing this. This will help them to form good habits. Write a contract, sit down and talk about the rules and hazards (template available at [commonsensemedia.org](http://commonsensemedia.org)): e.g. "This is my phone that I am letting you use." "This phone is a not for embarrassing photos, inappropriate texts, or hurtful words." Be calm in these discussions, matter of fact, and stay approachable. Set limits and reinforce them, follow through with consequences. This all requires effort and can feel overwhelming but is necessary. You are teaching them to be responsible, and when you reinforce rules a child reacts better. You are not their best friend; you are their parent.

- *Scary Parents*: too intense and unreasonable

Your relationship changes dramatically after kids go to high school, so make the most of right now. Don't allow screens in the car, catch up, hear "the dirt." Don't be on your phone, it hurts kids' feelings, be fully present. Look at [commonsensemedia.org](http://commonsensemedia.org) to see what digital citizenship looks like. Reinforce the rules to keep them safe with their games and smart phones. Talk to each other. Kids are losing the ability for empathy; they need to hear tone of voice. "Sorry" texted can sound 20 different ways. Kids have a decrease in capacity for solitude, which is an essential human tool. Make time everyday to be offline; make weekends offline time. We need to help our kids connect with a spiritual sense of who they are; an app will not develop this. Stay connected to your kids and do the hard work of developing the capacity for play and show them how much they matter to you.

## Audience Q&A

*Music and homework?* Certain types are ok. If they are paying attention to the lyrics then it is not good, they can't focus on their work. Background music can help some kids. Everyone is wired differently.

*Audio books?* For ESL kids they can be great. Best way to increase vocabulary is to read an actual book – not an e-book, but a paper book in which a student can highlight words or underline passages. Comprehension is better with an actual book; neurologically we get the most out of reading a real book. Studies show that we don't read as richly on a screen. The screen light can silence the drama. More importantly, the screen light disrupts the brain's natural ability to produce melatonin. So absolutely no screens in the bedroom! No devices at all in the bedroom. Not for an alarm clock, not for music, and make sure these habits are formed by 8<sup>th</sup> grade. It is recommended that screen time stop at least 0.5-1 hour before going to bed.

## Screen time limits (and other things to keep in mind)

- 0.5-1 hour max per day for 7 year olds.
- Make sure your child is reading for pleasure, not gaming with strangers, that you know their "posse", is not gaming during the week, is playing outside plenty. Pay attention to gender stereotypes in games.
- 11-12 yr old boys are biggest population of porn surfers
- Follow 20-20-20 rule for screen time: after 20 minutes, look away at a 20 ft distance for 20 seconds.
- Flash card apps: some are good, others are not. Neurologically they interact really fast with kids. Go to [commonsensemedia.org](http://commonsensemedia.org) to find which one are good.
- Educational games in the car? Ok if you are doing them together, but recommend car rides is talking or letting kids be quiet, letting their brains rest. Kids are not getting enough time for rest and boredom. "Boredom" is good – solitude, letting yourself be quiet, staring out at the road.
- We text our kids too much. Kids now at college will text their parents basic questions they could be reaching and asking a roommate or a new friend. They need to interact with other so make friends.