

A close-up photograph of a young woman with dark hair in two braids, wearing black-rimmed glasses and a light-colored sweater over a white shirt. She is looking down at a silver smartphone held in her hands. The background is softly blurred, showing what appears to be a bookshelf.

TEENS AND SCREENS



NAVIGATING
TECHNOLOGY IN
THE REAL WORLD



PHOTOGRAPH · ADOBE STOCK

The dangers of technology are very real for children and teens, but no one benefits when we panic. Kendal Allsop, a practicing mental health therapist of 30 years, explains how to take a breath and teach your children how to have a positive relationship with their phones.

written by **KENDAL ALLSOP, LCSW**

In the 1930s and 40s, the tobacco industry discovered that if they could get tobacco into the hands of a 13 year old, they likely had a customer for life. This young teen group quickly became the primary target of tobacco companies.

Why? Because early teens have brains at the perfect stage of development to form addictions. The part of the brain that would help them resist addiction simply isn't developed yet. The prefrontal cortex doesn't fully develop until the mid 20s. Until then, the adults around the child are supposed to be using their prefrontal cortex to protect them.

In the case of the tobacco industry, they started to go around the parents and appeal directly to children. Put a cartoon camel on the packaging. Find the coolest thing to be as a young teen (a cowboy) and use it in advertising. Hook up with Hollywood and pay actors to smoke in movies. Make vending machines to be at eye level, placed outside, and within easy reach of children.

Almost 100 years later, those same tactics are being used by the pornography industry to target young teens. Teens have easy access to pornographic material through pop-up ads, games, and platforms like TikTok and Snapchat. With enough exposure, a 13-year-old brain will begin to actively seek out porn. It is the 21st century equivalent of giving kids free tobacco because now they have a lifelong customer. As parents, our role is to protect our children against this onslaught.

TECH IS JUST A TOOL

On some level, there has always been panic around parenting and technology. Back in the 1980s, we thought Nintendo was going to rot kids' brains and Dungeons and Dragons was corrupting childhood. We need to take things seriously, but let's not run into panic. Panicked people make poor decisions.

Instead of being scared of technology, we have to acknowledge that it's here to stay. And although it may be a double-edged sword, God gives it to us as a blessing. While pornography is one of the biggest uses of the internet, a staggering number are using the internet for

genealogy. The Church is using it for missionary work. I can have my scriptures constantly with me to access decades of General Conference talks and read from the best books.

So how do we keep our focus on keeping it a positive tool and how do we protect our children?

As parents, our job falls into roughly three categories: we are to protect our children, nurture them, and teach them. This applies to all of our parental responsibilities but especially to technology.



PHOTOGRAPH ADOLPH STOKK

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PROTECT

While there is much regarding phones and other technology that we cannot control, it's important that we do whatever we can do to keep our children safe.

Hold out on giving your child a smartphone for as long as possible. Age 15 is ideal but even 13 is a good minimum age.

Resist giving children under the age of 15-16 access to social media, especially Snapchat and TikTok. Social media algorithms are built to be addictive, and a growing body of evidence is finding links between increases in anxiety, depression, suicide, and social media use.

As well as its increasingly central role in the online pornography industry, Snapchat has alarming tracking software that can identify what house you're in. And numerous experiments show that within minutes of signing up for TikTok as a 13-year-old girl, the algorithm will push content around eating disorders, body image, and mental health problems, including suicide. The parental controls on TikTok and Snapchat, in particular, are simply not effective enough to counteract the algorithm.

Be stubborn and get used to your kids complaining and telling you all of their friends have social media. And then get used to the idea that your child may well be looking at their friend's social media anyway. Check regularly what your children are looking at. Make sure they don't have access to an old smartphone that they can use with WiFi.

Use all of the controls around technology that you can. Install software to limit accidental exposure to harmful content. Use screen time limits. Don't allow your child to download apps without parental approval. Turn off notifications on all apps to curb the addictive nature of technology and prevent it from interrupting concentration where possible.

If you want children and teens to spend less time on devices, rather than simply taking tech away, replace it with something else, otherwise you're creating a vacuum. If you're worried your son spends three or four hours a day on video games, it's up to you to fill that time with other activities. We have to teach our children how to play and create. We have to be okay with them making a mess. As they get older, they will need you to say, "Let's go ice-skating. Let's go hiking. Let's go to the pool." The younger you can start this process, the better. It's much easier with a 12 year old than a 17 year old. But it's never too late. Love them and invite them to do something better. That's what the Lord does.



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NURTURE

Of all the things we can do as a parent, nurturing may be the most important. Our children need to feel loved and accepted. Even if your child is making mistakes and not doing what you hope they would, love will be your most powerful tool. After all, the entire gospel is about the Lord allowing us to make mistakes and lovingly teaching us how to be better.

I had a parent come to me about their teenage son who they felt was making poor decisions around technology. He was 17 and more or less addicted to video games.

As the parents prayed about their son, over and over the answer from the Lord was, “You need to make sure that he understands that he is loved because he doesn’t.” Of course this boy was loved very much, but he didn’t feel loved and there is a big difference.

The parents did all they could to cut down on guilt trips and making their son feel bad. Instead, they made sure he felt loved. The son liked soccer, so the dad learned all he could about soccer and took him to games. They recognized that at age 17, there was a limit to how much control they had over him. But once they had a better relationship with him, they could have more influence on him.

Teens often don’t feel loved and can be very sensitive, so actively look for ways to connect with your children. Learn to talk about the things they are interested in. Watch *Gilmore Girls* or *Harry Potter* or *Twilight* and listen to Taylor Swift or whatever they love. If your son is playing too many video games, start playing some video games with him. We have to connect before we can teach.

The good news is that surveys have shown that children who say they feel loved and connected to their parents are more likely to follow family rules in general, even when they don’t like or understand those rules.

This is the Lord’s model for dealing with us. He doesn’t constantly reprimand us and tell us all the things we did wrong. He lets us try and knows we will fail but reassures us that He can help us get there.



TEACH

Phones are here to stay and now our job is to teach teens how to use them in a positive way.

Reassure them that figuring it out and learning how is what we’re here for. Rather than berating them and continually telling them they need to get off their phones, try using more positive language, such as, “It’s hard not to let phones take over our lives. Let’s figure it out together.”

Help your children see the phone as a useful tool. If used correctly, a phone can be used for tremendous good. We can program it to have uplifting words that give us guidance and direction. Gently help your child recognize that it doesn’t feel good to mindlessly scroll all day. Conversely, if we program it, the phone can uplift us.

HERE ARE SOME WAYS YOU CAN MAKE YOUR PHONE A TOOL FOR GOOD:



1. Make the first one or two pages of your phone screen filled with uplifting content. Make folders filled with shortcuts to good things so you're not scrolling the internet looking for content when you're feeling down. Be intentional.
2. Create a number of playlists that will uplift you and make them easy to get when you need it. Make a playlist for a sad, happy, or tired day.
3. Find talks that strengthen you on hard days or when you're filled with doubts.
4. Create links to uplifting content around your interests. If you're interested in science or travel or fashion, find books, talks, and podcasts about those topics and have them ready to go rather than fishing for it on YouTube when you're depressed.
5. Make albums of pictures that uplift you. Maybe it's family pictures, a trip you took, or aspirational places you want to go and see.
6. Entertainment is one of our needs. Make it safe and uplifting. Save movies that help you feel motivated and good about life. Have one or two video games that are safe. Have shortcuts to good YouTube videos.
7. Have your patriarchal blessing on your phone.
8. Save screenshots of letters and kind words you have received, put them in a folder, and read them when you need a boost.
9. Find reliable, good sources for news.
10. Include apps that make it easy to do family history, like *Family Tree*, *Get Involved*, and the *Memories* app.

Pick the best things that the world has to offer and make it easy to access them. While the road to figuring out screen use will always be bumpy, with a strong parent-child connection, good teaching, and positive modeling, we can help our children navigate the technology of the 21st century and protect them from the worst the world has to offer.

ABOUT KENDAL ALLSOP

Kendal is an independent Mental Health Therapist with 30 years of experience. He is the Director of LifeStar Houston, where he leads a team that helps clients overcome behavioral addictions.

Kendal holds a master's degree in Administration and Clinical Social Work from the University of Utah and a bachelor's degree in Psychology from Brigham Young University. He enjoys ultra running and spending time with his family.