



Safety Guidelines for Technology Use - Children and Youth A Resource for Parents from Lighthouse Fellowship

Theological Reasoning:

Christian parenting can be difficult. Sometimes the litany of rules that we end up reminding our children of daily (don't touch your brother; please clean up your room; don't forget to do the dishes; don't you have homework? etc., etc.) can make us feel like we're writing a bunch of laws that would put Moses to shame. We don't want our kids to become rule-followers – we want them to grow into followers of Jesus who know they need and can accept God's grace. We want them to feel free to talk with us about their personal struggles. We want them to feel God's unconditional love through our parenting. And yet, we swim against the strong currents of culture as we disciple our children. This document is intended to become a resource for you to use to enable you to protect your children from exploitation and to empower them to lean into Jesus and the safe adults surrounding them when societal pressures feel scary and overwhelming to them.

1. Protect

God protects us and brings us comfort as a shepherd protects his sheep. Parents are called to protect and comfort their children in a similar way.

“Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me.” (Psalm 23:4 NLT)

God gives us strength and courage through his presence and will never abandon us. Parents are called to equip their kids with the tools they need to keep them safe and empower them to seek help from safe adults when they feel afraid.

“So be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid and do not panic before them. For the Lord your God will personally go ahead of you. He will neither fail you nor abandon you.” (Deuteronomy 31:6 NLT)

2. Sin

Sin separates us from God and from other people; we all sin and fall short of the glory of God. (Rom 3:23) Jesus teaches us about the heart-problem of sin; it's up to us as parents to teach our children the difference in disobeying rules and sin. The two

result in vastly different consequences. **We want to protect our youth and children** from exploitation, bullying, pornography, and from believing that our bodies are something to be used for pleasure...not as a RULE, but **because these actions and beliefs defile our hearts** – and they also become the avenue of potential harm caused by those who would use our children and youth for profit.

These are mature topics – yet our youth are pushed into dealing with them at young ages because of the technology at their fingertips. This is why we encourage a S-L-O-W approach to giving children access to technology.

¹⁰Then Jesus called to the crowd to come and hear. “Listen,” he said, “and try to understand. ¹¹It’s not what goes into your mouth that defiles you; you are defiled by the words that come out of your mouth.”¹²Then the disciples came to him and asked, “Do you realize you offended the Pharisees by what you just said?” ¹⁶“Don’t you understand yet?” Jesus asked. ¹⁷“Anything you eat passes through the stomach and then goes into the sewer. ¹⁸But the words you speak come from the heart—that’s what defiles you. ¹⁹For from the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, all sexual immorality, theft, lying, and slander. ²⁰These are what defile you. Eating with unwashed hands will never defile you.” (Matthew 15:10-12, 17-20 NLT)

3. **Jesus IS the Sin-Solution!**

The Light of Jesus is S-T-R-O-N-G-E-R than the darkest sin. We defend our children by bringing dark issues into the Light of Jesus and helping them feel confident in his love and protection.

⁴The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.” (John 1:4-5 NLT)

God’s Grace is B-I-G Enough to overcome ALL sin! With Jesus, we can do and face all things in confidence and hope. NOTHING can separate us from God’s love because of the grace of Jesus and he will run to the ends of the earth to find us, comfort, and protect us.

¹⁶“For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:16-17 NLT)

“For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline.” (2 Timothy 1:7 NLT)

4. Justice

Rooting out exploitation by people on the internet and those lurking at parties is fundamentally a matter of justice. **A cell phone, computer, or tablet are essentially open doors into our homes.** Stalkers and abusers try to *trick* children and youth and build false relationships with them as they communicate through these open doors. As a matter of justice, we must defend our kids from these strangers and keep them emotionally, spiritually, and physically safe while they learn about the rich and satisfying life Jesus came to give us; one that often looks radically different from the secular world that is glamorized in society.

Jesus said, “¹⁰The thief’s purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life.” (John 10:10)

“And the King will say, ‘I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!’” (Matthew 25:40)

“Learn to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the rights of widows.” (Isaiah 1:17)

5. **God’s Grace covers us as we make decisions about our children’s technology.**

“My dear children, I am writing this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate who pleads our case before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who is truly righteous. ²He himself is the sacrifice that atones for our sins—and not only our sins but the sins of all the world.”

These are tough decisions for families to make. Often, if we limit our children’s and teen’s access to certain types of apps, we are pushing against the strong currents of popularity, age-related pressures to fit in, and other social demands. We are here to encourage you as you navigate these difficult decisions, and God’s grace will enfold you as you seek his will for your children in this new avenue of life.

Developmental Considerations

1. Fitting In:

In late elementary school and middle school, kids are often concerned about fitting in with their peers.¹ One of their biggest fears is being left out. This presents several implications for technology.

First, if a child senses that most peers have access to a given technology, they may pressure their parents for access, so they don't feel less than or that they are missing out on a group activity.

Second, many social media apps are used to plan parties and fun, then share photos of the people out having fun together. When a child does not have access to those apps, they can feel left out on many levels – especially when they don't receive the invitation because it was only announced on social media.

2. Adolescent Self-Absorption

Adolescents are naturally egocentric – they focus almost exclusively on themselves as they change and develop into teens and are often worried about the flaws they discern.² This phase is quite normal, and was named by Piaget in the 1960's. "Egocentrism," as defined by Piaget, is "confusion of the ego and the external world" when "the adolescent fails to differentiate between what others are actually thinking and his/her own preoccupations concerning the self."³ This natural disposition presents significant challenges related to technology.

During this phase, kids' *ability to think about how their actions affect others* is reduced, and needs a chance to mature. This fact contributes to the mean behavior middle school is known for, including bullying. Technology makes this behavior easier to act on because of the distance technology creates from the one they are hurting. They cannot see the emotional impact of their actions as they would if they were talking

¹ *Fitting in. What is Normal?* Ken Ginsburg. Center for Parent and Teen Communication, Sep 04, 2023
<https://parentandteen.com/what-is-normal-how-to-guide-teens-trying-to-fit-in/#:~:text=Some%20teens%20define%20%E2%80%9Cnormal%E2%80%9D%20entirely,impact%20of%20our%20teens%20peers> Original Source Rooted Conference, 2024, Dallas, TX

² *The Imaginary Audience, Self-Consciousness, and Public Individuation In Adolescence.* Richard M. Ryan Rebecca Kuczowski University of Rochester;
https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/SDT/documents/1994_RyanKuczowski_JOP.pdf

³ Ibid. (Piaget, 1965).

with someone face-to-face. The potential for anonymity also tends to escalate mean behavior towards others as the preteen believes no one will know it is them.

3. Body Image and Comparison

Throughout and following puberty, teens are often self-conscious about their bodies. They compare themselves relentlessly to other people in many areas of life, one is the shape and condition of their bodies. The US Surgeon General has warned that “social media may perpetuate body dissatisfaction, disordered eating behaviors, social comparison, and low self-esteem, especially among adolescent girls. **When asked about the impact of social media on their body image: 46% of adolescents aged 13-17 said social media makes them feel worse.**”⁴

An app’s algorithm may amplify this problem. For example, if a girl searches for “weight loss” or “exercise” videos on TikTok one time, the app’s algorithm will push videos showing ways to lose weight or extreme exercises to the child’s page repetitively, magnifying her feelings of inadequacy or need to conform her body to these standards.

4. Imaginary Audience

Another challenging aspect of early adolescence is known as “imaginary audience.”⁵ During this phase, adolescents grow a heightened awareness that other people are forming opinions about them, and they often believe that other people focus on their perceived flaws. In fact, from age 10 through the mid-twenties, people are often hyper-sensitive to social feedback.⁶ They live their lives in front of this “imaginary audience,” causing worry and distress which can be increased by social media platforms where the audience not only sees their profile, but also “likes” and comments (or don’t) on the child’s posts. Essentially, social media is a vehicle which confirms to the adolescent that people do, indeed, watch them and are forming

⁴ *Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory* (Executive Summary) US Surgeon General. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sg-youth-mental-health-social-media-summary.pdf>

⁵ *The Imaginary Audience, Self-Consciousness, and Public Individuation In Adolescence.* Richard M. Ryan Rebecca Kuczowski University of Rochester; https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/SDT/documents/1994_RyanKuczowski_JOP.pdf

⁵ *Executive Function for Middle and High School Students.* Cognitive Connections; Jacobsen, Ward, Anabelle; <https://www.efpractice.com/copy-of-middle-and-high-school-students-1>

⁶ *Potential risks of content, features, and functions: The science of how social media affects youth.* American Psychological Association. <https://www.apa.org/topics/social-media-internet/youth-social-media-2024>

opinions about every move they make. It's as if the developmental imaginary audience has become a real group of spectators, assessing their every flaw.

5. Executive Functioning is Still Developing

Executive function (EF) is an overarching term describing those processes required for purposeful, goal-directed activity, socially appropriate conduct, self-regulation, and impulse control, among others.⁷ Most middle school students, and some high schoolers, have under-developed skills in self-regulation and socially-appropriate conduct areas of EF. Many parents recognize this aspect of adolescence and take measures to regulate their children's activities, navigating the activities with them, to help their children learn self-control externally until their executive functioning matures.

Because of these developmental milestones, we, as parents, should be cautious about the types of technology we allow our adolescents and teens to access, and selective about the particular apps we allow them to use.

More to Consider...

Apps that are Addictive: Some apps are especially addictive in nature. For example, TikTok (and YouTube to a lesser degree) push videos the user has searched for over and over again onto the user's platform. If I search for "cute cat videos," I will be presented with cute cat videos over and over again as I utilize the app. Usually, the more addictive the app, the more time spent on it. One-third or more of girls aged 11-15 say they feel "addicted" to certain social media platforms and over half of teenagers report that it would be hard to give up.⁸

Mood disorders do not usually occur from zero to 2 hours of use of technology. However, **the occurrence of mood illnesses rises alarmingly when the user exceeds 3 hours a day.**⁹ An October, 2023 Gallup Poll determined that the average teen uses social media **four-eight hours every day** across seven different

⁸ *Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory* (Executive Summary).

⁹ *Potential risks of content, features, and functions: The science of how social media affects youth.* American Psychological Society. <https://www.apa.org/topics/social-media-internet/youth-social-media-2024>

social media platforms.¹⁰ Additionally, nearly one-in-three adolescents report using screens (most commonly social media) until midnight or later on a typical weekday evening.¹¹

Apps that may expose a child to adults and other malicious people who have dangerous or fraudulent intentions, and/or mature content:

- 57% of Instagram, 58% of SnapChat users were contacted in a way that made the child feel uncomfortable.
- “Roughly two-thirds (64%) of adolescents are “often” or “sometimes” exposed to hate-based content. Some social media platforms show suicide and self-harm-related content including even live depictions of self-harm acts, content which, in certain tragic cases, has been linked to childhood deaths.”¹²

Apps should be thought of as places we allow our children to go by themselves.

Would we ever consider sending our kids to a country club alone, or to a bar alone, or to a strip club by themselves (or at all!)? In the same vein, we should really consider the apps we allow them to use carefully.

The following table is a suggested guideline that parents may choose to consider as they adopt a proactive approach to technology and social media access. These suggestions are made by considering developmental psychology, research, and the risks and complexities inherent in various apps.

For more information, we encourage you to read the website: **Wait Until 8th** <https://www.waituntil8th.org/> This site will give you greater insight into the campaign to delay giving technology to children. It includes ideas on the following tips to empower your family to utilize technology differently:

- **How to discuss the Purpose of the Phone:** We suggest never giving a child their own phone – it should remain the parents’ property to remind kids of your ability to see what they are doing on the phone at any time.
- **Tips to Create a Family Phone Plan**
- **Ten Phone Parameters for Families**

¹⁰ *Teens Spend Average of 4.8 Hours on Social Media Per Day*. Jonathan Rothwell.

<https://news.gallup.com/poll/512576/teens-spend-average-hours-social-media-per-day.aspx>

¹¹ *Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory* (Executive Summary).

¹² *Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory* (Executive Summary) US Surgeon General. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sg-youth-mental-health-social-media-summary.pdf>

General Suggestions For Various Stages of Development

Stage – Ages

Developmental Considerations

<p>Stage One: 4th – 6th Grade</p> <p>Keep It Simple Stage</p>	<p>At this stage, we encourage parents to keep access to technology simple. Consider joining the Wait Until 8th Campaign https://www.waituntil8th.org/ For families who decide their child needs a device before 8th grade, Keep It Simple.</p> <p>Include: simple phone devices that only allow calling and texting; they don't download apps, and do not allow sharing of pictures or videos.</p> <p>Example: Gizmo watches or Gabb phones</p> <p>Rationale: A watch is a smartphone alternative for those who want their kids to Wait Until 8th (or even longer). They let you talk, message, and track your child's location without giving them full access to the internet, social media, games, and everything else a regular smartphone offers. <u>They're designed primarily for kids between the ages of about 8 and 13</u>, a time when many kids begin going out into the world on their own for the first time. They're not as easily lost as a phone, and many also come with apps and alarms that remind (and encourage) kids to do chores or finish tasks.</p> <p>Exclude: Smart Phones, Internet Connected Tablets, All Social Media</p>
<p>Stage Two: 7th – 9th Grade</p> <p>Slow Foundations Stage</p> <p>Encourage a slow, age-appropriate introduction to escalating technology use.</p>	<p>At this stage, we encourage slow, step-by-step adoption of technology. Introducing tech too quickly can easily overwhelm kids. Encourage kids not to use riskier social media apps because of the vulnerability of middle school development. When your family is ready to allow social media, we suggest you consider introducing the apps one at a time, with enough time between apps to allow your child to get used to each one. Talk with them about their social media experiences. Open dialogue is key</p>

<p>Stage Two Continued</p> <p>Slow Foundations</p>	<p>to helping your children feel safe sharing their fears and difficulties with you.</p> <p>A good approach is to make this a family effort. As each app downloaded is used responsibly and maturely, the child can earn more technology privileges in the future. This approach gives your child an incentive to use social media wisely and also provides protection to help them grow in their understanding of both the app, and their own response to the arena of social media.</p> <p>Include:</p> <p>Be Real – Limits photo sharing to one per day – should not be given before 7th grade – Caution! This app includes the opportunity for kids to view mature and inappropriate content.</p> <p>Smart Phones – 8th Grade and Above</p> <p>Internet Browsers with the strictest parental controls</p> <p>YouTube Kids – <u>until 9th grade</u> depending on the maturity of your child, then cautiously add regular YouTube.</p> <p>Instagram – <u>Not before 9th Grade</u> – 10th Grade may be better</p> <p>Exclude: Snapchat, TickTok, Discord, X</p>
<p>Stage Three: 10th – 12th Grade</p> <p>Preparing for Independence with Parental Guidance</p>	<p>This stage is a great time to incrementally prepare your kids for independent technology use by the time they finish high school. How much technology is given and how much oversight is exerted, will depend on your child’s maturity level and your own discernment with God’s guidance.</p>



Researched and edited by Pastor Carol B. Roberts
Original Data-Rooted Conference, Dallas, TX 2024