Electronics and Social Media

How best to help children gain benefits and avoid pitfalls

Electronic and social media are all around us. While there are benefits to their use, there are also pitfalls. (For example, the anonymity of many social media platforms makes it ripe for online bullying.) Parents often don't understand the new ways that their children are communicating or entertaining themselves online, which makes it harder to offer guidance. This is exacerbated by the fact that children are in the process of figuring out boundaries, which is challenging in real time and more so in the Internet's boundary-less space. Smart Love can offer a helpful perspective to guide parents as they consider ways to regulate their children's electronic media use.

All parents want their children to grow up to be happy and successful adults who make healthy and constructive choices for themselves. The prerequisite is that children need a solid internal self-esteem from which to make constructive and self-caretaking choices, which takes all of childhood to develop. In the meantime, our children need our help to be safe and healthy. Children develop this solid core through their relationship with their parents. They copy how you treat them and in turn treat themselves and others that same way. Nurturing your

relationship with your child is the best insurance you have to helping your child avoid the negative aspects of electronic and social media use.

Children are engaged in learning all about the world they live in and understanding those around them. The Internet and electronic media can be a useful tool for learning--completing homework, using computer games as part of a school's curricula, visiting teachers' websites to get assignments and hand in their work. In addition, there are numerous platforms that teachers use to communicate with students and parents. Electronic media can also be used to nurture a child's interests and social skills. For example, your son's hours playing *Minecraft* can spark a love of architecture. Your daughter's time playing her favorite sports game can help her learn the rules of the game and keep her interested in playing on the school's team. Children's interest in social media, such as Facebook, Pinterest, and Snapchat, helps develop social skills and an understanding of their likes and dislikes. Kids are under a lot of pressure at school and social media and games can offer a much-deserved respite from those pressures.

Discussions about constructive use of social media and being safe online can begin early. Ask your child about what they enjoy about social media and gaming and listen to what they say about it. Keep an open mind, ask questions, and offer helpful perspectives, such as not sharing details about personal information.

For younger children, place the computer in a central location rather than in their bedroom so you can engage with them and explore together while also keeping an eye on what they are doing. During middle and high school, children will most likely have a Smartphone and use a laptop for their schoolwork. It's more difficult to manage phone and laptop use when children are in their rooms, but you can set

rules together about their use. For example, at bedtime they can hand the phone and laptop to you so they can get the rest they need. If children understand that you are helping them make decisions that are in their best interest and not too restrictive, they will be more likely to accept them. If you have to say "no," put it in the context of concern for their safety and help them find a way to do what they want with your help, such as finding a suitable picture to post online.

Most importantly, maintain and develop your relationship with your child. As your child grows and his or her interests change, try to find fun things you can do together as an alternative to the mostly solo time spent online. Ride bikes, explore a museum, go skating, run a science experiment, cook, etc., and enjoy the time you have with your child. Parenting is a long-term process that provides many parent and child experiences that will help your child to discover over time the healthiest balance of enjoyment and stable self-caretaking.

Parenting Tips for regulating child's electronic and social media use

- Talk, engage, and listen to your child about their usage and what's fun about it

- Begin early, using age appropriate language, to talk about cyber-bullying, sharing personal IDs and information, etc.

- Involve your child in coming up with rules around usage

- Control the device not the child

- Provide fun alternatives to screen time that you can both share

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