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Family Focus Handling Your Child's Electronics Habit

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Is your daughter part of what I call the teen CNN syndrome where she needs to text her friends or go on Facebook practically round the clock for critical fast-breaking news-such as who got grounded or who just bought new shoes? Is your son zoned out in his computer or video game trance which can last for hours? Are you having trouble like many of us keeping up with the latest "i-something" or other device, and whether it's something you even want your child to have?

But more importantly, is your child's electronics habit interfering with family time, school and other responsibilities, a social life (for the solitary video game-players), or sleep? It's easy for children to become addicted to texting back and forth, being online, watching television, and playing video games. As a matter of fact, many adults have one or more of these habits. Each of these activities is compelling for many reasons, and they all provide recreation and diversion.

The problem arises when a child uses his electronic device in a compulsive way and is unable to break away on his own. Parents need to become the regulators and enforcers since children often have a hard time setting limits for themselves. But unless you are with your child 24/7, it is hard to control how he spends his time.

One teen I worked with, a high school sophomore, had a texting habit of over 3,000 texts a month, and that isn't even considered extreme these days. Still, that was an average of 100 texts per day which involved a lot of time. The reason I say she had a habit is that she compulsively checked her phone all day and throughout the night, resulting in interrupted and insufficient sleep. "Mia" also watched television over five hours per day on average. Mia's mom was a single parent who worked full-time, so Mia had free reign after school when she got home. Mia refused to change any of her behavior as her grades and relationship with her mother rapidly deteriorated.

In addition to seeing Mia, who was depressed and not taking good care of herself physically, I worked separately with her mother to encourage her to set better limits with Mia. Her mother had previously resorted to nagging, yelling, threatening punishments without consistently implementing them, and virtually throwing up her hands. Now her mom needed to figure out a plan for Mia that she could monitor. And she needed to stop letting her desire to get along well with Mia deter her from risking being the "bad guy" for a while.

Predictably, Mia didn't like most of her mother's new rules for her. Her mother shut down the cable TV and the home computer until she got home from work, and she also took Mia's phone away except for a two hour window of time per night when Mia could either use her phone, watch TV, or use the computer. If Mia's grades and attitude didn't improve, her mother would take away these privileges altogether. The only exception would be when Mia needed the computer for schoolwork, and then her mother would monitor its use closely. Since in the past Mia resisted her mother's attempts to regulate her electronics use, her mother would need to take Mia's cell phone to work with her and to sleep with it under her pillow at night. Extreme measures, perhaps, but Mia needed to get her life more balanced.

There were some immediate positive outcomes for both Mia and her mother. Mia had requested joining a local gym to work out and take yoga classes, but her mother hadn't wanted to spend the money. Now Mia's mom saw the importance of providing Mia with healthy alternatives to her electronics fixations and got a gym membership for both of them. Also, Mia and her mom signed up together for a weekly cooking class. Mia got more sleep and was able to stay awake and focus better in school. And since Mia's mom now had a systematic approach, she didn't need to make impromptu and usually inflammatory disciplinary decisions, so their relationship gradually improved.

A key basis for mental, social, and emotional success is achieving balance in our lives. If your child shows signs of excessive electronics use, it is important to help him moderate his habit. Often, before children can achieve self-discipline they need external guidance and limits from the adults in their lives. And, it goes without saying that they also need you to provide them with your own

good example of self-discipline. We want our children to leave space for unstructured brain time so they can think, feel, daydream, and create. We want to encourage them to interact with their friends in person and not just via electronic devices. And we want them to leave time for their families so that we can help them build lasting relationships and memories with us.

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