

Parent Involvement, Technology, and Media: Now What?

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Abstract

The rapid technological advances, the expansion of online media use, and the declining cost of mobile technology have introduced a communication factor that has precipitously affected parent involvement and the relationship between parents and children. The present article explores ways through which technology and online media have affected interactions, the impact such developments have had on parent involvement in children's lives, as well as the school's role in keeping parenting relevant in these confusing times. An adaptation of the ten principles of good parenting for a technology- and media-dominated environment are also offered for enhancing parent-child interactions and parent involvement in their children's lives and learning.

Key Words: parent involvement, online media, mobile technology, parenting, Internet, family interactions, learning, education, school, home, roles

Introduction

Over the past three decades, researchers and practitioners alike intently explored the power of parent involvement and its impact on student development and learning. Numerous studies investigated the type and nature of parent involvement effects and explored models of fostering home-school partnerships to enhance academic, social, and emotional learning (e.g., Eccles & Harold, 1993; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Patrikakou,

Weissberg, Redding, & Walberg, 2005; Sheridan, Marvin, Knoche, & Edwards, 2008). Just when we thought we had a good grasp of the factors and relationships involved, it seems that we have been thrown back—perhaps not to square one, but not far from it.

The ways through which technology and media use have been influencing parent–child interactions and parent involvement, as well as the school’s role in supporting parents to navigate the complex parameters of parenting in the digital era, are not well understood. In an effort to shed light on these aspects, the present article provides an overview of the growing access to technology and its broader impact on the lives of children and adolescents, family interactions, parenting and parent involvement, as well as the school’s brokering role in this technology-immersed world.

Growing Access to Technology

The rapid Internet boom since the 1990s, as well as the speedy expansion of mobile technology and its declining cost in recent years, have introduced a new interaction avenue and a communication factor that plays an increasingly important role in the relationships among parents, teachers, and students. The current generation is the first one that has known digital technology since birth and seems to feel the most comfortable with it—also known as *digital natives*, these are individuals born at the turn of the 21st century (Prensky, 2001a, 2001b, 2009). This generation has also been referred to as the *Net Generation* (Tapscott, 1998) or *Millennials* (Howe & Strauss, 2000). The term *digital natives* is often contrasted with that of *digital immigrants*, which describes those generations that encountered digital means and technological advances at some later point in life. With students being *digital natives* while parents and teachers are often *digital immigrants*, one wonders how the relationship among parents, students, and teachers is now filtered and regulated through technology and media use.

Although there is a digital divide with higher income households having more access to computers at home and being more likely to use the Internet, access trends among various household income levels seem to be slowly converging (Perrin & Duggan, 2015). According to a 2014 report, 62% of households with an annual income less than \$25,000 reported having a computer at home, while reported computer access in households with annual incomes between \$50,000 and \$99,000 was 93% (File & Camille, 2014). The Pew Research Center (2012) also reports that 97% of children between the ages of 12 and 17 have online access, which indicates that youth access the Internet via devices other than home computers—potentially school computers or handheld devices such as smartphones.

Expanding the infrastructure for universal, affordable access to high speed (broadband) Internet has been part of public policy for more than a decade already. On March 26, 2004, President George W. Bush proclaimed that “this country needs a national goal for broadband technology, for the spread of broadband technology. We ought to have a universal, affordable access for broadband technology by the year 2007” (2004, para. 1). In June 2013, President Obama announced the ConnectED initiative, which intends to provide access to next-generation broadband to 99% of American students by 2017, emphasizing that such connectivity will better prepare students to acquire those skills necessary to compete in an increasingly globalized economy. The President has directed the federal government to get educational technology in classrooms by making better use of existing funds, and he also called upon businesses to support this effort with donations of hardware and software. Following the 2014 State of the Union address, the President noted that significant progress has been made on this initiative, highlighting commitments by the FCC and the private sector (White House, n.d.). Such expansion of Internet access will enhance communication and provide additional opportunities to rural and low-income communities.

With the digital expansion being part of the presidential agenda for more than a decade and actual media use growing exponentially, access to information has become immediate and broader than ever before. Such immediate access has had a profound impact on learning. A trip to the library seems a relic from a past era, while an Internet search is more likely what *digital natives* mean when referring to doing “research” on a topic (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). It is expected that, in turn, these changes are also rapidly transforming the classroom and the broader educational framework. Of teachers surveyed, 81% report that they have access to personal computers or laptops in their classroom, and 63% use them daily (PBS Learning Media, 2015).

Children and adolescents spend more than seven hours a day with media (which is the most time spent on any activity, including sleep), and 97% of adolescents report that they play video games on a variety of platforms, including computers, handheld devices, and game consoles (Rideout, Foerher, & Roberts, 2010; Strasburg, Jordan, & Donnerstein, 2010). Often, it seems that time spent on a computer by students far exceeds the reported seven hours, especially since the number of schools that are going “green” or paper-free is increasing rapidly. Consider a day in the life of a middle school student, for example. She wakes up, checks text messages, grabs her tablet or laptop, and heads to school. There, she takes notes on her computer, reads and discusses from an e-text, and enjoys endless “apps” on all school subjects (it is indeed fascinating to see a 3-D representation of the human cell, virtually dissect it, and

explore its organelles!). Then it is time to go home; she text messages on the way. When at home, she listens to music on the phone or another electronic device. She completes and submits her homework electronically, while prepping for tomorrow's globalization discussion by reading a few articles on the topic online and learning globalization-related concepts.

Overuse of Computers and Media?

At first look, this glimpse into a middle-schooler's technology-heavy day may appear overwhelming—even alarming—in a variety of ways. Indeed, this extensive computer and media use in children's lives has brought forth several commentaries and books on computer and media use and their potential negative impact on culture, education, and society, as well as on parent, student, and teacher relationships. Whether browsing in an actual bookstore (the few that are left) or a virtual one, the titles and content of these books paint what seems to be a distressing picture of the current and future state of technology integration in all facets of life: "The way we live is eroding our capacity for deep, sustained, perceptive attention" (Jackson, 2009, p. 13). "Designed to serve us, please us, inform us, entertain us, and connect us, over time our digital devices have finally come to define us" (Steiner-Adair, 2013, p. 4). Computer use by children has also prompted a policy statement from the Council on Communications and Media of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) that expresses concern over increased media use and warns of its potential harmful effects. However, it is important to note that this statement also recognizes the positive impact of media use (AAP Council on Communications and Media, 2013). Recommendations made by AAP (2013) range from limiting screen time to two hours a day to monitoring web sites and social networking activity and establishing mealtime and bedtime "curfews" for all media-access devices.

In order for a medium to be considered overused, it must be used beyond the point of being effective and start to become harmful. In addition, the question arises of whether technology and media use is different than the use of any other tool that is as good as its user. In the sections that follow, let's consider this in light of the infusion of technology and media in that middle-schooler's life: social and family interactions, as well as the impact on parenting and parent involvement. Are there productive ways to take advantage of the tech-savvy ways of the *digital natives* to enhance learning, parenting, and parent involvement?

Interactions in a Tech-Immersed World

Technology has always altered the nature of social interactions, including those within the family. In its most recent forms, whether a public venue (e.g., chatrooms) or private media (e.g., instant messaging), a different type of social

interaction has rapidly evolved. Staying up-to-date with the latest version of technological gadgets has become a sign of status that has begun having an impact on peer relationships and gaining peer acceptance. “You are definitely not ‘cool’ if you don’t have the latest technology in cell phones, one or more iPads, and an e-book reader” (Jerpi, 2012, para. 7). This phenomenon can be considered as a contemporary example of the *social life of things*, where the existence of people is responsible for the creation of objects, and, in turn, the use of such objects—or in this case media—is responsible for impacting human existence (Appadurai, 1986). Such influence can have significant implications for identity formation and the development of self-worth for children and, especially, adolescents who are exploring who they are and in what they believe. Specifically, in recent years, articles that investigate identity formation and media draw attention to the phenomenon of a fragmented self-image stemming from the struggle with which teenagers are faced to integrate the varied online experiences of self-exploration into a cohesive picture of self (Davis, 2012; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011).

Online interactions lack features that have been a crucial part of human relations, such as eye contact, body language, and voice inflections and, therefore, are often characterized as lacking the richness of face-to-face interactions. However, there have been both positive and negative features identified in online interactions. Relieving the social anxiety of meeting and interacting with people whom you do not know well is an example of the former, while cyberbullying and sexual predation are examples of the latter, new phenomena that have caught families and schools by surprise, forcing us to scramble to address issues in a crisis mode (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008).

Adolescents report feeling more comfortable sharing their feelings online, as they feel they can be more honest and (especially for more shy teenagers) utilize the safety of being behind the screen to reach out and communicate (Rosen, 2007). It could be argued, though, that the minimization of social anxiety in an online environment may not foster quality social bonding. It could also lead to inappropriate self-disclosure and to compromised privacy (Ballantyne, 2011). Thinking carefully and planning before acting are important ingredients of responsible decision-making and gathering trust that, in turn, lead to meaningful social interactions. Therefore, removing or minimizing social anxiety may not always act as a facilitator of relationship-building (Farfan, 2013). It has also been indicated that most adolescents and young adults use online networks to extend and enhance already existing, offline friendships, indicating a “friendship-driven” and also “self-directed” form of social and emotional learning (Ito et al., 2008; Jacobsen & Forste, 2011).

The ways in which online interactions affect face-to-face relations are not yet fully understood, and conflicting findings have created controversy regarding the issues between online and face-to-face interactions (Kujath, 2011). Emerging patterns beg the question of the direction of causality. In other words, were face-to-face interactions problematic to begin with and that increased the desire for and pursuit of online interactions; or have online interactions directly curbed the occurrence and quality of face-to-face relationships? Some evidence indicates that youth seeking out online relationships with strangers had preexisting high conflict levels with their parents as well as low levels of communication (Wolak, Mitchel, & Finkelhor, 2003). Also, teenagers who spent a lot of time on social interaction sites felt that they received less support from their parents (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). However, other evidence suggests that youth use online media to extend already existing, off-line relationships and do not pursue online interactions because their offline, face-to-face interactions are problematic (Ito et al., 2008; Schurigin O’Keeffe, Clarke-Pearson, & Council on Communications and Media, 2011). Although these two broad types of evidence seem to contradict each other, they may just be pointing to the intricacies of media use, prompting us to closely examine the complexity of the reasons behind the use of certain media as a means to maintain and, to a different extent, form new relationships.

Family Interactions and Technology

One of the most important contexts of socialization, the family has not been immune from the use of technology and media, with both positive and negative effects (Patrikakou, 2015). For example, cell phones and other new handheld devices have undermined family practices such as mealtimes and have established new generational boundaries, including the lack of screening calls by parents (Ling & Yttri, 2006). Although tech-using families are less likely to share meals, they also experience benefits from the use of technology. For example, new forms of family connectedness have become possible with cell phone use and communal Internet experiences, making it more feasible to coordinate busy schedules, be in frequent communication, share news and happenings, and create common experiences in cyberspace (Kennedy, Smith, Wells, & Wellman, 2008). Although it has been indicated that adolescents’ Internet use can have a negative impact on family cohesion, it can also facilitate the creation of family experiences and memories and foster the family’s collective identity (Mesch, 2006). Such an identity has been traditionally formed through common activities, including mealtimes or chatting about one’s day. It has been argued that frequency of Internet use negatively impacts these family-shared

activities. However, one should take into account the context for Internet use before categorizing the activity as having a *de facto* negative impact on family cohesion. For example, at times when children are not at home, media use to keep in touch with them and share information or pictures could strengthen family ties and actually reinforce the family's collective identity. Technology and media use also expand the coparenting experience, especially in postdivorce cases when parents live apart, and the use of technology can facilitate communication in order to plan and make joint decisions for their children while avoiding coparental conflicts (Ganong et al., 2012).

In addition, contrary to popular belief, parent–child interactions within social media platforms such as Facebook have been shown to enhance their relationship by decreasing preexisting conflict and fostering closeness between parents and older children (Kanter, Afifi, & Robins, 2012). For example, a parent “friending” their child on Facebook is not viewed as an invasion of privacy, but it has the potential to reduce already existing parent–child conflict, probably because older children are reportedly more likely to engage in a discussion and even disclose additional information online than they are in a face-to-face conversation (Kanter et al., 2012). Another finding contrary to a broadly held impression is that monitored technology use, such as that of cell phones, is not necessarily viewed by children as a means of parental intrusion, but instead is seen as part of expected parental monitoring and, more importantly, as consistent with a supportive relationship between parent and child (Blair & Fletcher, 2011).

Learning Outcomes

The use of new technology also affects parent–child interactions in ways that have a direct impact on academic as well as social and emotional learning. For example, mother–child interactions when reading a book differ depending on the use of electronic versus printed books. Specifically, when using an e-book, children were more responsive to prompts by the mother and also initiated discussion about the story they were reading with their mother significantly more times than when reading a printed copy (Korat & Or, 2010). This finding could be attributed to the multimedia nature of e-books that include sounds, music, animations, or read-along features that significantly enhance, sustain, and extend child interest during this parent–child activity.

In general, computer use at home has been found to be associated with enhanced learning and increased academic achievement over time, especially for girls (Hofferth, 2010). Family use of technology also strengthens parent modeling of a variety of activities and their completion rather than explicit tutoring. Since learning at home and family use of technology are increasingly

intertwined, this interaction contributes to the creation of a stronger link between family culture and learning (Plester & Wood, 2009). In turn, use of technology and media by families provides the unique opportunity of fostering the education continuum between school and home and, therefore, expanding learning while better involving parents in the educational process (Becker, 2007).

Parent Involvement in Education

Schools and districts can maximize parent involvement and positively contribute to enhancing parent–child relationships. Through school websites, parents can be kept abreast not only of their child’s progress, but also made aware of specific topics, activities, and assessments in which their child is involved. For example, having online access to textbooks and other learning materials can further increase parent involvement at home and enhance modeling of healthy homework habits (Olmstead, 2013). Also, online gradebooks that give parents and students 24-hour access to expectations, assignments, due dates, grades, and so on provide opportunities for parents to communicate with their children regarding school work and progress and may also prompt parents to reach out to teachers more frequently because, by being continuously informed, they feel more involved in their child’s education (Zieger & Tan, 2012). In this way, both parent involvement at home and home–school communication can be enhanced to better support student school work and achievement. It is important to note that schools and districts must ensure that such technology use won’t alienate families whose access to technology may not be as extensive, by offering alternative points of technology access such as public libraries or expanding programs for checking out tablets or laptops.

The Core Principles of Parenting and Parent Involvement in a Tech-Immersed World

Good parenting helps foster empathy, honesty, self-reliance, self-control, kindness, and cooperation. It also promotes intellectual curiosity, motivation, and the desire to achieve (Steinberg, 2005). These characteristics have not changed with the increased use of technology; if anything, parents need to be even more diligent in observing these principles with the precipitous changes brought forth by technology and media use. Steinberg (2005, 2011) offers ten basic principles of good parenting: (a) what you do matters; (b) you cannot be too loving; (c) be involved in your child’s life; (d) adapt your parenting to fit your child; (e) establish rules and set limits; (f) help foster your child’s

independence; (g) be consistent; (h) avoid harsh discipline; (i) explain your rules and decisions; and (j) treat your child with respect.

The core of these principles remains intact despite the massive invasion of technology and media use, and these principles are applicable to navigating appropriate media use. Especially, leading by example has assumed a paramount role: How many times do we find ourselves asking children to stop playing with their phones or other electronic devices while, at the same time, we ourselves are emailing and texting? If we indeed want to carve out face-to-face interaction time with our children, we have to be the first ones to be disciplined enough to remove ourselves from the glowing screen. For example, if we do not want children and teenagers leaving the dinner table when the cell phone rings, a text dings, or an email alert chimes, we should not leave the table at every ring, ding, or chime.

In addition, being online all the time creates hazardous conditions with distracted parents putting children at risk for harm by not monitoring them appropriately while they are absorbed by activities such as texting or emailing. Equally importantly, tech-centered parenting may be perceived by a child as having an emotionally absent or neglectful parent (Steiner-Adair, 2013). This distracted way of parenting prevents opportunities for sustained attention and reflection, in turn affecting the way we interact with our environment and make sense of the world around us.

While setting rules and expectations for web access and technology use is important, it is equally important to clearly explain those rules and apply them consistently. Children are testing and pushing the limits from the time they are born, so the probability for parents encountering instances of rule breaking, especially during adolescence, is high. As frustrating as this can be, it can also serve as a teachable moment to further responsible decision-making. Parents cannot and are not going to be present all the time their children use technology and media, so the ultimate goal is to foster accountability and independence in order for children to be able to make safe choices for themselves and take ownership of their actions.

Technology and media will define us as parents and the way in which we are involved in our children's lives only if we do not apply common sense, fail to observe basic principles of parenting, and take our eyes off the ball to raise children to become knowledgeable, caring, and responsible adults. Figure 1 and the bulleted list that follows it describe the interrelated principles of parent involvement (Steinberg, 2005, 2011) and offer specific suggestions of ways they can be applied in this era of technology and media immersion.

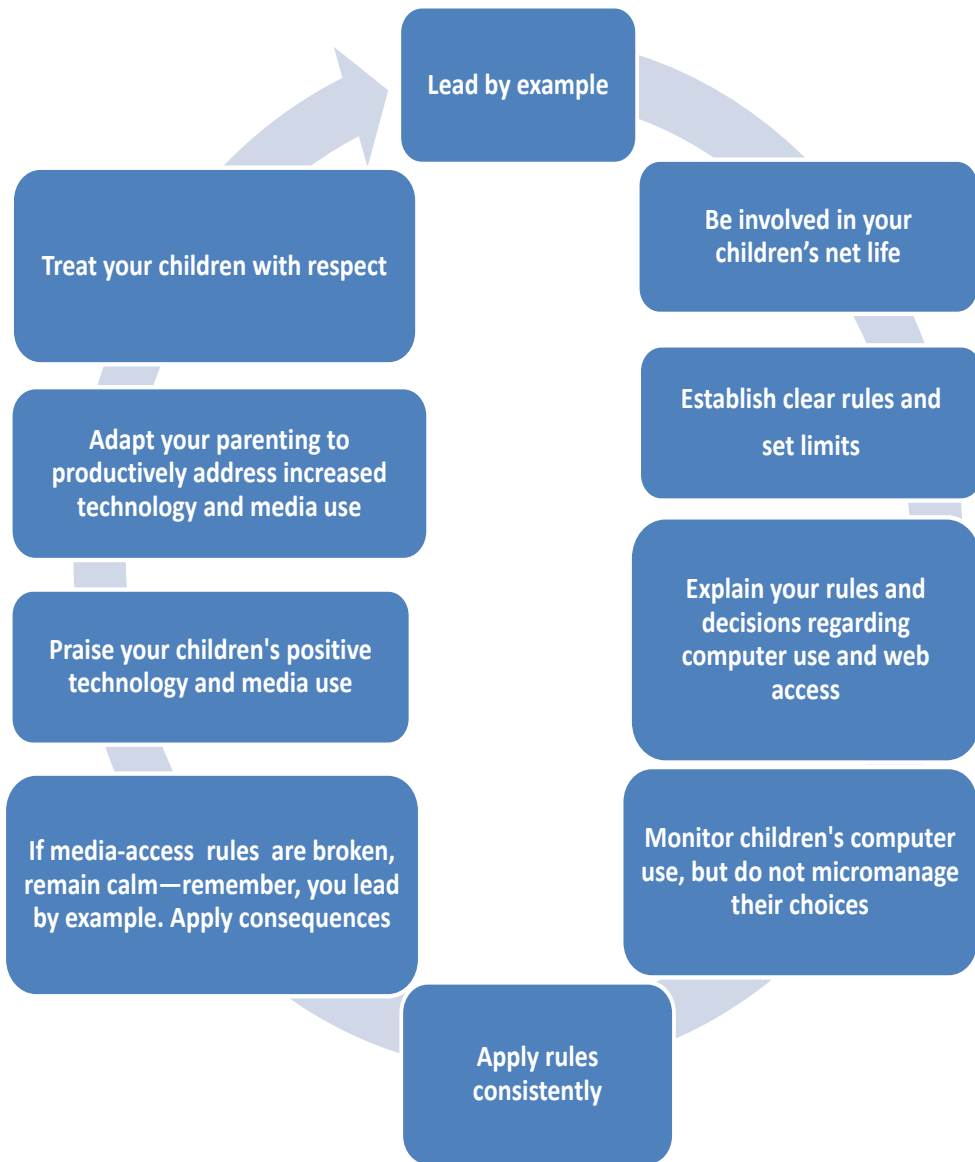


Figure 1. Ten interrelated principles of parent involvement applied to technology and media use.

To elaborate upon the principles depicted in Figure 1:

- Lead by example. Stop being in front of a screen all the time. Email, text, and browse online as you would like your children to use those communication tools.
- Be involved in your children's net life. Know how they spend their time online. Ask them to show you their favorite sites, music videos, etc. Play their favorite video games together—it's always fun to beat your parents!
- Establish clear rules and set limits for web access, downloading, and generic screen time. Tech use and web access for entertainment is a privilege—sticking to the rules makes it earned or lost.
- Explain your rules and decisions regarding computer use and web access, even those that seem self-evident to you (e.g., no crossing the street while texting). Highlight the reasons for blocking content that is not developmentally appropriate; review and discuss web dangers with your children—and brace yourself for occasional eye-rolling!
- Help foster your children's independence by closely monitoring their computer use, but not micromanaging their choices (e.g., music, games) if they are within your established rules. You want your children to ultimately make safe choices for themselves.
- Apply rules consistently. Clarify what is non-negotiable and stick to it—do not give in to temporarily save yourself from your kids' whining, as major grief awaits you down the road.
- If media-access rules are broken, remain calm—remember, you lead by example. Apply consequences, also making it a teachable moment. Do not make it a power struggle or a shouting match, but part of teaching your children accountability and keeping them safe, so that they can take ownership and control of their lives.
- Praise your children's positive technology and media use, online kindness, and thoughtfulness towards others. Do not be fazed by the all-too-familiar teenagers' eyeroll; they too crave praise and acknowledgement, as long as it is out of their friends' earshot!
- Adapt your parenting to productively address increased technology and media use instead of resisting it—it's here to stay. Be part of your children's online life; be open to exploring it together and learning from their tech-savvy ways.
- Treat your children with respect as you would like them to treat you and others, both in person and online. Be attentive to what they say via any online communication venue, and acknowledge their point of view. Beware: technology does not eliminate face-to-face conversations that foster growth. Allow children to talk about what is important to them!

The School's Role

Could or should schools facilitate parent–child interactions and parent involvement in this technological framing? If we envision schools becoming change agents in these times of precipitous changes, then the answer is yes. Due to the pressing need to catch up with technological advances, a rapidly increasing literature has focused on the integration of technology in instruction and has investigated the best ways to incorporate digital learning in schools, culminating in a broader vision and plan for technology-enabled education (Office of Educational Technology, 2016). Another smaller body of literature examines how home–school communication should be enhanced through technology and media use to keep parents informed regarding various school-related matters such as school events, homework, learning strategies, and student progress (e.g., Curtiss et al., 2016; Graham-Clay, 2005; Olmstead, 2013; Zieger & Tan, 2012). However, the school's pivotal function in addressing important issues to enhance parent–child interactions and, therefore, to maximize student academic, social, and emotional learning continues to be ignored. From the vital role that parents play in all stages of development and dispelling myths regarding parent involvement in adolescence to emphasizing the importance of and ways to adapt parenting in the digital era, schools can play a critical role in keeping parenting relevant in these confusing times.

At a basic level, schools should share information with parents that specifically target parenting principles as they relate to technology and media use, such as those offered in the present article. At a more comprehensive level, schools should also apply similar principles when working with students, so that common expectations and practices are observed across settings, namely school and home, increasing the probability for generalization and maintenance of healthy technology and media-use habits. For example, establishing, explaining, applying, monitoring, and enforcing clear rules regarding computer use and web access with students should not only be part of the school's planning and routine, but specifics of this sequence should also be shared with parents as a framing reference for what they could be doing at home to reinforce and extend healthy technology and media-use habits. In this way, schools can serve as facilitators of productive parent–child interactions and support parents in navigating the complex and often overwhelming parameters of the digital era. In addition, using and sharing resources that parents can also utilize to navigate these complexities can further facilitate positive technology and media integration into children's lives. Many sources for support exist, including websites such as “Edutopia” (www.edutopia.org) and “Common Sense Media” (www.commonsensemedia.org), which provide information, reviews,

guides, and toolkits that can empower parents and educators to foster safe and productive use of digital resources by children and adolescents.

In Lieu of Conclusions

With rapidly evolving demands for technological awareness on every aspect of our daily lives, setting conclusions would be paradoxical. Family interactions and parent involvement have been affected by the use of technology in both positive and negative ways. Scrambling to address the multifaceted issues that accompany technological advances in a reactive way has been the primary mode of operation in most settings, but the basic principles underlining responsive parent involvement and caring parenting that supports healthy development have not changed. Parents have to accept that all the electronic gadgets and technology-based resources, which at times seem wedged between them and children, are here to stay. Banning or restricting them should not be viewed as *the* solution anymore. All users, including children and teens, must become well-versed in the advantages and pitfalls of technology and media in order to maximize their benefits and, even more importantly, guard against serious adverse effects. Whether a *digital native* or a *digital immigrant*, we all need to critically think of ways through which technology and media can be best integrated to enhance learning and social interactions. What we need to turn our attention to is fostering *digital wisdom* (Prensky, 2009), not how to just limit technology use or denounce its ever-expanding applications. The broader definition of *wisdom* includes elements of knowledge, insight, and good judgment. Fostering *digital wisdom* should include educating both *digital natives* and *digital immigrants* about the benefits and pitfalls of technology and media, which will hopefully result in a reflection on the best ways to utilize such media in schools, homes, and, more broadly, in life. Such an approach will serve as a proactive rather than reactive way to take advantage of technological innovations. Schools are also in a position to play a crucial role in these times of change. They can assist parents in navigating the use of technology and media with their children and, quite importantly, enhancing the use of technology and media to strengthen the learning continuum between school and home. We cannot afford to lose time discussing the prospect of technology integration. We need to turn the discussion to ways through which such integration can enhance lives and enable children and teenagers to flourish by being prepared to address the challenges of the future.

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