

Generation Wired – the good and the bad

By Emily Listfield, Parade

The other night as I was getting ready for bed, I turned off my phone and put it on the dresser. My 17-year-old daughter stared at me in disbelief. “But, Mom,” she exclaimed, “it’s so far away!”

For today’s youth, technology isn’t just a handy way to keep in touch or organize your calendar; it’s as integral as eating and breathing—and seems to come just as naturally. Between smartphones, iPods, video games, and the Internet, being wired is a way of life. The average teen sends more than 50 texts a day; younger children spend over 10 hours a week playing video games; and the amount of time all kids spend online daily has tripled in the past 10 years.

We are just beginning to assess how this nonstop connectivity is affecting our kids’ social and intellectual development. It is increasingly clear that it’s changing the nature of children’s relationships to each other, to their families, and to the world around them. The latest research suggests it may even be rewiring their brains.

In a world where sexting is on the nightly news, plagiarism is just a Wikipedia click away, and people have hundreds of online friends they’ve never met, helping your kids make smart choices has never been more crucial. But there are few rules of the road, as any parent who has watched his or her child fall down the Facebook hole for hours can tell you. In part this is because technology is changing so rapidly that it can be hard to keep up. Just a few years ago, a 10-year-old with a cell phone could do little with it beyond placing a call. Now, handing her one is giving her the ability to text, go online,

and send and receive photos. Are kids ready for that? Are you?

The notion that parents need to get involved in their children's digital lives as actively as they do in academic or sports activities is still new. "The digital landscape is a positive place for kids," says Dr. Gwenn O'Keeffe, lead author of the American Academy of Pediatrics 2011 report on the impact of social media on children, adolescents, and families. "It promotes a lot of healthy habits like socialization and a sense of connectedness to the greater world and to causes." But, she says, children need guidance. Here are some of the thorniest issues and how parents can navigate them.

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