Mrs Dowdell's Parenting Pointers

Tackling Technology

We all know that our children are going to need increasing levels of skill to navigate the virtual world. E-safety is vitally important and something that parents and children must be aware of, but what about other practicalities? How can parents find a balance between giving children opportunities to use technology constructively and using it for leisure time? Here are some thoughts …

Firstly, it's absolutely fine for children to be using technology in their free time. Our job is to make sure they're getting a healthy balance of play, fresh air and face to face contact too. Adults need the same balance to stay healthy both physically and mentally. Maybe looking at how we use technology as a whole family is a good place to start. We can't expect our children to monitor their screen-time if they see us on our phones all the time.

Set family rules around screen time that *everyone* (yes, that's parents too!) has to stick too. Write up a contract that everyone has to sign and stick it on the fridge. Think about having rules around phones staying out of bedrooms at night (use an old-fashioned alarm clock) or no technology at the dinner table. Make sure we are accounting for all leisure-screen time, that's TV, Xbox, Playstation, tablet, smartphone, etc. It can add up very quickly. Once the rules are agreed, offer bonus minutes to be used at the weekend for children who comply with the rules during the week.

Some of you may be thinking "That's all very well, telling me to limit my child's leisure-screen time, but you don't know how much fuss they're going to make if I do." Good point! And for children who have been regularly used to unlimited time on their gadgets, it will be hard to break old habits and make new ones. Children having leisure-screen time is a privilege, not a right. As a parent, you are not depriving your child if you limit the time they spend on gadgets – you are doing your job!

Make sure that children know how much time they're going to be allowed to play before they start. "Remember we agreed that you can play on your Xbox for half an hour before tea." Give them gentle reminders as their time comes to an end, "you've had 20 minutes on your Xbox, you've got 10 minutes left" and then "you've got 5 minutes left now". Have a timer that will make it clear when time's up.

When it's almost time to stop, try sitting alongside your child and taking an interest in what they are doing. "I can see this is a really exciting game but it is time to stop now." If they know you care about what they are doing, they are far more likely to comply when you ask them to stop. If they protest, follow through anyway and remove the device/turn off the TV or internet. There are some great parental control apps available, which allow you to control your child's devices from your phone. If they really protest, walk away and don't get pulled into an argument. Remember, you have set the rules and you are in charge.

Make a list of things to do instead of playing with technology and put it somewhere everyone can see it. Add to it as you think of new activities. Often we default to using technology because we're bored or because it's a convenient "babysitter". Having alternative suggestions ready can sometimes distract from that post technology tantrum. When children follow the rules and come off their gadgets as soon as they are asked, remember to praise them. "Thank you for turning off your tablet when you were asked to. You can have 10 extra minutes at the weekend."

I'm not anti-technology but I do often have to help families where parents and children no longer spend any quality time together because everyone is in separate rooms in front of screens. Let's find ways where we can access all the wonderful advantages that the internet can bring, whilst making sure we remain connected to real flesh and blood humans, especially the ones we care about most.

If you need any support with parenting issues, you can email me at parenting@foundrylaneprimary.co.uk