



During lockdown, many of us threw the rulebook in the air as regards boundaries for technology in the home in order to survive. Now is a brilliant time to reset those guidelines, writes Katharine Hill

She has been my trusted companion for many years now. Always by my side, she is loyal and attentive, bringing me what I want at any time and even helping me discover things I didn't know I needed. Colourful and interesting, she is great company. It's so easy to spend time with her; in fact, the hours slip by without my realising it. Dressed for this season in dusty pink, she reminds me of my appointments, pays for my coffee, recommends music to listen to, and even helps me keep track of my children's whereabouts. And during Covid-19, her presence was a genuine lifeline. Sometimes she runs out of energy, but then I plug her in ... and all is well.

The digital age has undoubtedly brought huge advantages to society, and especially so during the pandemic. Technology use skyrocketed during Covid-19 as bedrooms were converted into offices, children tapped through online lessons during the day, moving on to their Xbox at night, and grandparents upskilled to become Zoom experts. I wrote the first edition of my book *Left to Their Own Devices?* in 2017, and since then our relationship with technology has undergone a paradigm shift (reflected in updated editions). Professor Sonia Livingstone from the London School of Economics summarises it well: 'We've moved, I'd suggest, from seeing technology as a valued addition to our lives, to seeing technology as vital infrastructure. And as Covid-19 has made really clear, for young people especially, life is digital by default.'¹

As a consequence, parents' concerns have intensified about the sheer number of hours their children spend glued to

glowing screens. During the pandemic, screen time increased the most among primary-aged schoolchildren, going up by an extra hour and twenty minutes a day according to one study.²

Generally, parents' worries regarding screen time cluster around three areas of safety: content, contact and conduct. What images are our children seeing? Who are they talking to? How are they behaving online? The issues are myriad, including access to pornography, sexting, online bullying, gaming, grooming, gambling, addiction, sites encouraging self-harm and eating disorders, the insidious effects of social media, and the cumulative effect of all of this on their emotional wellbeing.

Whatever the shape or size of your family, perhaps one of the most effective things we can do is to put in place a 'family media agreement.' This is essentially some guidelines in line with your family values for use of technology in the home that

¹ Elena Martellozzo, 'Life is digital by default – so what's the impact on young people's mental health?', London School of Economics, 21 December 2020, blogs.lse.ac.uk (accessed 12 July 2023).

² Andrew Gregory, 'Primary-age children's screen time went up by 83 minutes a day during pandemic – study', *The Guardian*, 24 June 2022 (accessed 12 July 2023).

everyone, (including parents!) adheres to. Get some drinks and snacks and make it a fun experience to talk through the issues together. It's obviously easier the younger they are, but even the most combative teenager may cooperate if they think they will be listened to.

The kind of things you might like to consider include:

- **Time on screens.** We use screens for many different activities, so rather than simply monitoring the number of hours, instead look at what the screen is being used for – maths homework, a game of Fortnite or a Zoom call with Granny?
- **Where and when screens are used.** Do you allow phones in bedrooms, or at mealtimes? One great piece of advice is to get hold of a multicharger, place it outside the bedrooms (perhaps in the kitchen) and for everyone's phones to be charged there overnight so the whole family gets a good night's sleep.

- **Sensible sharing limits.** What personal details can be or shouldn't be shared online? Are any platforms or websites off limits?
- **Handling difficulties.** What should your child do if they encounter something scary or something that makes them upset or uncomfortable online?

The idea is that the agreement works *for* your family, and is used not as a straitjacket to restrict freedom, but as a seatbelt to keep everyone safe.

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Written 2,000 years before the advent of the smartphone, the book of Proverbs gives some good advice: 'Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her and she will watch over you' (Proverbs 4:6). As parents, we are best placed not only to put good boundaries in place, but to pass on to our children the gift of wisdom so they can make wise choices themselves in all the online spaces that they inhabit.



Katharine Hill is the UK director of Care for the Family. She is a well-known speaker, broadcaster and author of a number of books including *Left to Their Own Devices?* and her latest book *Born Free – A call to be still, know God and flourish in a hectic world.*

