Navigating the World of Technology with Kids in the Home, in the School

by Bill Rupp

Bill Rupp offers practical wisdom from his perch as a Montessori parent of four children and as a self-proclaimed digital immigrant who has spent over twenty years in the information technology field. His list of "Considerations before Making Rules for Technology Use" builds on a positive environment of conversation and communication with wise suggestions for placement of computers, time limits, access, and a screen/life balance. Suggested guidelines for schools and a guide for the ideal times for schools to re-evaluate technology rules will be valuable to administrators and teachers at all schools.

Background

I am not a teacher or a Montessori scholar, and I am not an expert who is paid to provide consulting services for schools or parents. I am a "techie" parent with four kids, ranging in age from thirteen to twenty-six. Three of them have attended Montessori schools from primary through middle school, and two of those have moved on to high school. They are digital natives, having grown up with computers and the Internet; I am a digital immigrant, having started using the Internet in the early days of the Web when I was about twenty years old.

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While I may not be a digital native, I grew up killing hour upon hour, day upon day on my Atari console, so I have a good idea of what it feels like to be a child addicted to a "glowing rectangle." Since that time, I have spent over twenty years in the information technology field, and technology is a significant part of my home life.

Each of my kids, each having a unique personality, each growing up in a progressively evolving digital landscape, has created challenges for my wife and me regarding technology use, and each of them has challenged us to dive deep and to rethink our rules and values in the digital world countless times.

I am a parent who completely buys into the Montessori philosophy. Although technology is a huge part of my life, I am not the parent who asks why we don't have more computers in the primary and elementary classrooms. But valuing the students' solid Montessori base, I also believe there are ways in which to introduce technology-based, Montessori-like, "works" into the classroom without adding screens, in order to facilitate their ability to pursue a career in technology.

In my daily job, I work with a lot of high-tech gurus, and I have been surprised that many of them shared my perspectives on limiting screen-time. They have all set varying ranges of rules for their kids. Some have established guidelines that are fairly open, others are completely locked down, a few spy on their kid's every move, and there are even some who have a rule of screen abstinence.

It is important to recognize that although we have been confronted by screen and Internet challenges for years, we are still in a very immature phase of dealing with everything that comes along with addictive screens, limitless Internet content, and social networking. We can help ourselves by sharing our lessons learned, our insights, and our issues, and I believe that this is an important thing to do. Having these discussions between teachers, staff, and parents can be even more powerful and insightful. In the Montessori setting, we have an advantage above standard public schools, because these conversations can be tuned to the school and family communities and to our shared cultural values.

The information presented in this article should be taken merely as advice; it is a collection of findings and points to ponder for parents and teachers. It was not concluded by using the scientific method, but is based on my experience in raising my kids, and from gathering information and insights from discussions with my family, other parents, teachers, and co-workers in the technology field.

Guidance for Parents

It is a challenging time in regards to our use of information technology. With the combination of massive amounts of content being poured into the Internet every day and the ability to access this content from anywhere, on any device from anywhere, we, as adults, are drinking from a fire hose. Many adults are distracted by their use of technology; some even to a level that they have sought professional help. If we are challenged with this as adults, think about the impact on kids. It is safe to assume that if we point this fire hose at them, and they have less capacity and fewer tools to deal with this than we do, that they will fare far worse than us. Kids aren't equipped to take the digital world in moderation or to make the right choices with it on their own. Without education, guidance, and rules, this can become a very slippery slope. This puts us in a difficult position as parents. Without becoming educated on this

topic, it is difficult for us, as parents, to provide guidance and rules and to understand what life our kids are living in the digital world. Ultimately, just like junk food and bedtimes, limits and rules must be set for kids, until they are able to gain, through experience, the tools they need to limit their own usage.

Considerations Before Making Rules for Technology Use

No set of rules is 100% effective for all children, parents, or families in regards to the use of electronic devices, the Internet, social networking, or texting. Family values, parent-child communication effectiveness, individual personalities, and many other circumstances contribute to appropriate decisions for these areas. Assume any rules you create will need to change over time, due to many factors, including the child's age, his or her level of experience and understanding of systems and applications, and what systems and applications are available or being used by others. Keep in mind that it is always easier to give than to take away. Consider giving kids a little access to start, reviewing how that worked, and then giving more access and freedom based on the outcome. For instance, I have talked to many parents who can't get the screens out of their kids' bedrooms and regret that they ever allowed bedroom usage in the first place. Role modeling is also a key factor in shaping your child's vision of electronic device usage. If you are always glued to your device, checking texts, and using social networking, then you are modeling that behavior for your child.

Rules to Consider

Avoid technology use in private areas: Seriously consider not allowing your kids to have screens in their rooms or private areas. It is very difficult to know what they are doing, when they are doing it, and for how long, if they are out of your sight. Even for tech-savvy parents, it is difficult and time-consuming to attempt to track and lock down activities using software products. So that kids aren't forced into private spaces, establish nice computer and homework areas in public spaces in the home. I have also found it effec-

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tive to have kids "park" phones in a designated place (not in their rooms) at bedtime. In my household we created a ritual where the kids send out their good night texts, then park their phones in a charging area in the kitchen.

Limit access to the Internet: Think of the unlimited access kids have to the Internet. It is difficult to keep up with the technology that limits Internet and screen usage, but here are a few guidelines that can help:

- A good way to filter out the extremely bad Internet sites at home or at school is to use the free *OpenDNS* service (opendns.com). This service can block sites, based on your configuration, and provides reporting of what sites have been visited.

- Consider using parental controls on PCs and laptops. Don't overlook the access kids have on phones. Most phones have parental control options—Apple iOS, Android, and Windows have the ability to create a child account and to limit Internet usage and set app installation rules.

- Remember that giving your child a "smart phone" doesn't create a technology requirement for him/her to have Internet access. Using built-in security features, most phones can have Internet access turned off, while still allowing calling and texting features.

- Consider requiring your children to give you the pin/password for their devices as an ongoing rule, with the understanding that if you have a cause for concern, that you can have access to the device.

Time limits and screen/life balance: Determine how much screen time fits within your values and what habits you are creating and embracing regarding screen usage and addiction. Consider setting limits on the overall amount of time your kids spend on all screens combined: Spending an hour playing an app on the phone plus an

hour social networking on the PC plus an hour on a game console is three hours. Possibly base the number of hours on the amount of constructive time on the screen versus the amount of social/game time. We made a family rule against having screens at the dinner table (no texting, social networking, TV, etc.). This rule applies to the adults as well. Having kids become more skilled with face-to-face conversations has become especially important in contrast to their electronic conversations. For younger kids, consider using things other than screens as pacifiers. Replacing the screen with an engaging conversation with your kid is invaluable, and if you start out giving them lots of screen time as a small child, then reducing their screen use as they get older will be difficult. As mentioned previously, role modeling is an important factor: If you aren't able to regularly give full attention to your child due to your distracting screen, think about the impact on your child.

Teach kids about social networking "hazards": It is important that kids know about social networking and electronic communication "hazards." They should be told to assume that anything they text, chat, record, or take a picture of, is out of their control and will become permanent record immediately at the time they share it on-line or with another person and that there is no way to take it back.

They should also assume that other kids' parents are reading and viewing all of the texts, posts, and photos that their kids can see. Explain to kids that taking unwelcome or candid photos of others and sharing them in any manner can create unexpected reactions and potentially serious consequences. I have found that giving kids examples of specific activities that have gotten others into trouble, and the related repercussions, has helped to illustrate the impacts of social networking issues and it has helped them understand that I am not exaggerating or being a paranoid parent. A good guide is to tell kids to behave on the Internet and in electronic conversations just like they would behave in a face-to-face conversation and that feeling like they are shielded in an electronic conversation is entirely a false sense of security and can blow up much worse than a verbal conversation. Parents should consider trying out the latest social networking, viral product themselves. If we learn it, then we can learn how safe or unsafe it can be for our kids.

Ideal Times for Parents to Re-evaluate and Discuss Rules

Parents can find it hard to find the right time to dive into a deep conversation about technology use with their kids. I have found that, if possible, it is best to determine the starting rules for the use of a new piece of technology before giving it to them. For instance, before giving your child a smart phone, it would be ideal to determine what features will be enabled on the phone, what parental controls might be enabled, and what your expectations are for your kid's usage and time management on the device. Additionally, I have found that parents tend to be unprepared for electronic device usage in regards to friends. It is ideal for parents of younger children to discuss their screen usage rules with the parents of a new friend before a play date. "What activities will the kids be doing at the play date?" "We are trying to reduce screen time in our house." "We don't allow first-person shooters in our house." Before having a group of kids over, have a discussion with your child. Will they be gaming the whole time or be sucked into social networking? Will they be asked to dock their phones in the kitchen for a sleepover? Another thing that can catch parents off guard is vacation time, when kids will have an abundance of free time: If a vacation is coming up, and kids are used to having a lot of screen time on weekends, it is hard for them not to think every vacation day is equivalent to a

weekend, high-usage day. Having a conversation with them about screen usage expectations before the vacation can be a good way to proactively head off problems.

The more you have discussed technology use and hazards with your kids the more you will be able to evaluate if they will be able to use good judgment. This will allow you to adjust rules appropriately for them.

<h2 style="text-align:center">GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOLS</h2>

Like parents, school faculty and administrators need to be moderately technologically educated in order to guide the children while they are at school if they have access to computers and to the Internet. It will also help them understand what kids are doing off-hours. Start with a faculty discussion regarding whether or not computers will be used or required for classroom work. The school can then determine what level of technology use is appropriate and required in classrooms per age or grade level. The faculty should additionally discuss their policies for personal computer and phone use while at school. Parents and students will need to understand these rules.

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Homework and Information Sharing

Homework and information sharing at school is an interesting issue. It isn't very cost-effective for schools to manage their own servers and computer networks. This issue lends itself to the use

of cloud services for storage and sharing, such as Google Docs or Office 365. We are currently in a time in the cloud technology curve that this presents some potential challenges for the children.

Requiring kids to have a cloud account for school may create these and other issues:

- A requirement for kids to have computers and Internet access from their homes

- A requirement for kids to utilize the Internet to complete their Montessori work

- Exposure to social networking that is imbedded by cloud service providers

- Exposure to other Internet distractions (shiny things) while trying to complete their work

- School requirements superseding family screen and Internet limits

- The potential for kids to have a cloud account with an Internet presence, which parents may not have access to monitor, that they could use for nonschool related activities (schools can get help to disable these activities, but they aren't necessarily locked down by default)

There may be no perfect solution to this problem at this time, but the above should be considered and discussed among staff and with parents before implementation.

Ideal Times for Schools to Re-evaluate Rules

Assume your rulebook is a living document that must adapt over time: The landscape is changing at an incredible rate. Creating a set of rules for kids at home or for technology use at school is just the beginning of the program. As technology, apps, devices, and content delivery change, the rules must adapt. For example, Facebook changed the game on social networking,

taking unprepared parents and schools by surprise. An annual review of the rules may be sufficient to take these factors into consideration.

Between annual reviews, re-evaluate rules when circumstances come up that require attention. For example, if inappropriate behavior in social networking has created an issue at the school, if student trends seem to be straying from the rules, or if new technology is released that disrupts the classroom environment.

When making changes to school rules, involve parents. It is valuable to hear parents' concerns before creating rules. For instance, a new rule to ban cell phones at school could conflict with a parent's requirement to communicate with their child.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Being a person who takes great interest in technology and technology usage, I have found that the most important tool in determining the right path for technology use for my family and to assist with the school's technology direction is communication. Communicating with other parents within the school community and with co-workers has helped me gain insights and ideas, and especially helped me determine whether my ideas are off-base with the local norms. Communicating with my wife has been critical so that we could collaboratively strategize on ideas, make sure we were in agreement on rules, and ensure each of us was communicating the same messages to the kids.

Additionally, it is critical for school faculty to communicate with each other. It is worthwhile to work discussions of technology into "parent night" meetings, not only to communicate school technology rules and issues with parents, but also to validate to the parents that the school takes technology usage seriously. It also serves as a catalyst for parents to start discussions with other parents on the topic.

I have found that not communicating, or not communicating frequently enough, can lead to situations getting out of hand in the schools and in the home. Maintaining frequent and open communication between the faculty, parents, and kids will ensure ev-

eryone is in step and will enable new information to enter into the equation as things change. It also allows not-so-technology-savvy participants to learn more about technology issues so that they can better parent or teach the kids. It is safe to say that the information technology age isn't going away anytime soon. Therefore, through regular, open communication about technology, in combination with becoming more technology-savvy individually and as a community, we can better guide ourselves and the children.

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