

A Montessori Guide to Technology and Teens

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Submitted by Paula Lillard Preschlack

As devices such as laptops, smartphones, and tablets become more prevalent in our lives, parents can look to Montessori for guidance on how to handle technology and teens.

As our families leave the comfortable world of our Montessori grade schools behind and enter high schools, with new parenting challenges to face, we can look to the Montessori approach we have found so useful and apply it to this new landscape. Adolescence is a stage of life that necessitates new freedoms and adjusting boundaries, as our children begin to join the adult world with growing independence. Considering the basic tenets of the Montessori approach, this means we'll provide support and some scaffolding, model for our adolescents, link them to the best of this adult world, and provide expanding freedoms with reasonable and supportive boundaries.

Let's apply this approach to a well-known struggle most of us share when our daughters and sons enter high school: what to do about technology use. I hear too many parents lament that their 14- to 17-year-olds seem "addicted" to technology, huddled over their iPhones and laptops for hours at a time, irritable, stressed, and often distracted. A push-and-pull drama unfolds, where parents and teens struggle to figure out what limits and "rights" are reasonable, on both sides. Here we'll suggest things that can help you get off to a better start with teens and technology.

The "Take Off": Developmental Considerations

Until they graduate from Forest Bluff School, our students really do not need to use computers or smartphones. In fact, there are many reasons we recommend holding off on technology exposure for children, which we will explore in a future blog. Our Forest Bluff students learn to touch type and use the computers in our Secondary Level like any other piece of classroom material, with support and supervision. Then, as our children head off into high school, a laptop computer and in some cases, a smartphone, may become necessary.

Because technology is very much a part of our adult world, and developmentally, adolescents can think more abstractly, high school is a logical time for our children to begin using it beyond learning to touch-type a paper or planning a Secondary Level trip. Now it can be a tool for communicating, collecting information, and creating. After having the first stage of adolescence (middle

school) under their belts, when learning to read social cues and expressions more accurately is key, high school students are more ready to find the power of the written word when there are no physical expressions to inform them. They are developmentally ready for the abstract world of technology and the gifts it offers to adult--and evolving adult--minds.

A word of caution, however: adolescence is also a time of increased distractibility, when the brain is undergoing big changes that make it more open and vulnerable to addictive behaviors (see *Brainstorm*, 2015). The tendency to overuse technology must be taken into account and should be a topic of conversation with your children before problems arise. The desire to connect with friends and be part of a group drives teens towards their iPhones and computers. This makes it an important time to help them stay aware of what else is going on around them and involve them in family and community life.

At home, we encourage parents to emphasize intellectual life, spending time outdoors, being physically active, reading, conversing, and contributing with chores and collaboration as a family. As an example, my own 13-year-old daughter and 15-year-old son have dinner with my husband and me every night, with each member cooking a weekly meal from scratch. We all pitch in on the clean up. Even though it can be a challenge with homework, sports, and busy schedules, we continue to come back to these basics of family life and are always grateful to find how this feels. Especially now in these teen years, we work hard to prioritize these habits of how we spend our time. It really pays off.

Adolescents will naturally want to stretch away from their families but still need the home base; they need to feel that they are necessary to their first core group. As technology competes for their attention, ask your adolescent to participate in more adult-like roles within the family, like driving, doing an errand, planning the logistics of a trip, caring for an elder or younger person, and sharing more of the load that the adults are carrying. This fundamental connection with the family unit and sense of responsibility is so important to emotional, social and physical health. There is good evidence that developing life skills and connecting with family and community in the teen years aids confidence and supports academic success. Whenever I have asked veteran moms for advice on raising teens, the first thing they invariably say is, "keep them close," and I believe this is what they mean.

Introducing Technology: Preparing the Environment, Modeling, and Setting Supportive Limits

Prepare the Environment

When you give a laptop computer or other electronic tool to your adolescent, fix it the way you would like it to be used: block inappropriate sites, remove features you do not think your child should use, and put parental controls in place that allow you to adjust the hours and amount of time the computer will function. Some families choose to turn off their internet at a certain time each evening or plug all their devices into chargers in a central, confined location, so that nighttime is guaranteed to be tech-free. It is worthwhile to find a professional who knows the latest apps children use and who is thorough in covering what you need. You can also use an application like Disney Circle or Net Nanny, which enables you to set parameters on screen time and use for all family members. The purpose of preparing the tech environment is to remove the need to be controlling and micro-managing. Set things up from the get-go to be used how and when you think is best. Then there's no negotiating or issues. The parameters do the work.

Next, present any device as a useful tool and talk about your values when you gift one--this is your moment! Ben Moudry, a Montessori child who became a Montessori teacher of adolescents and head of a Montessori school, observes that the students who were given technology when they were younger often see it as a toy for games and entertainment, rather than a tool. "They constantly goof around on the computer, so it's become a habit that's hard to break," he says. But if their introduction to technology was as a tool to use for learning, Ben sees that they have a different attitude, one that helps them make better use of it in school. Because so many computer "learning programs" are like games, they can also create this association of entertainment. When we talk about using the computer as a tool, we're referring to writing papers, searching for and reading research, building graphs, designing programs and the like.

Realize that no smartphone or computer is a "right." It is a luxury, and if you, the parent, are giving one to your child, it is reasonable to explain that it's your money and your decision. A device comes with your conditions and can be taken away. It also should be given with instructions on how to use it properly and what your clear expectations are. It is useful to decide together what the guidelines ought to be and make an agreement, as an offshoot of your conversation about what temptations may come up. If you think your child may be fuzzy about the

guidelines agreed on, type them up to refer to. Look at this as a contract. This may sound unnecessary, but I cannot tell you how many parents wish they had started out this way, as they end up there after much frustration and disappointment. Start out more clearly, and you won't regret it.

Talk with your child openly about why adolescence is a time of greater distractibility in life, that you know other teens who have struggled to "unplug" from their devices, or that you yourself have challenges with doing so. Ask, "What guidelines do you propose that you think can help you avoid these things for yourself?" (If your child is not mature enough to engage in this discussion and follow through by typing up a short list of good guidelines, that's a definite sign that they are too young to handle freedom with technology.) You may want to shorten, simplify, or adjust the list. Make it simple and help your child set himself/herself up for success.

Model Screen-Free Time and Appropriate Use of Technology

Share your values by living them in front of your children and talking about what's most important to you. Mealtimes, bedtimes, in the car or on walks, are moments for connecting, telling stories, asking questions, sharing your thoughts and listening to your children's. Turn off your devices and put them away when together, be demonstrative about your priority; adolescence is a crucial time to be emotionally and cognitively "present" for your children.

As adults, we can now set limits on our own technology use: We can set our own phones up so that we cannot text or use the screen while driving cars and our computers so that they do not alert us when new emails arrive while we're working. What has been a free-for-all can now become a more controlled experience for us.

As adults, we can make these choices to restrict ourselves--and do so--because we desire work spaces and times without constant interruptions. But children are not coming at this from the same perspective, with the many years of self-control and choices that we have under our belt as adults. When a parent gives a child or adolescent a device and simultaneously tells them that they need to control their use of it by their sheer willpower, we are asking something most of them are going to struggle with--*a lot*. Their constant failure with this can be disappointing not only to you, but also to them. With the news on how technology is specifically designed to capture our attention and make us use it more and more, it is incredibly unfair to give it to young adults and expect them to control their use with adult-like strength. Much better to begin with boundaries that will help our adolescents to expect that this scaffolding is useful and necessary, even for adults.

Also model your manners with your smartphone or computer. Put it down, turn it off, and interact with people when appropriate: when in a restaurant together, at check-out counters, at social functions, or when having a conversation with someone. Model alert and aware behavior when walking through a city, crossing a street, or getting in or out of a train, bus, taxi-cab or Uber ride. Adolescents may not be watching us with the same absorbent minds as young children or the analytical minds of elementary aged children, but they are looking to us as immediate examples of adult behavior as they are becoming adults themselves. Our young adults need to see us make clear decisions about technology.

Set Supportive Limits

Handing tech devices over to children without limits built in may seem harmless when you see other parents doing it. But as we see mounting evidence from families we know, and substantial research pointing to the issues arising from doing this, parents are backtracking to set limits. So, supply some clear boundaries, such as which rooms in your home devices can or cannot be used in. For example, it is advised to keep electronics out of the bedrooms for a lifetime habit of protecting that space for sleeping and relaxing. It is also widely advised to prohibit bringing them to meals, so that everyone engages with each other, and not their devices. These two are common ones. Beyond that, some families have other specific boundaries. In our own house, for instance, we keep the laptops in the kitchen, library, and office--study areas that are in the lower level of the house. We don't bring any devices or laptops upstairs, which is where our bedrooms are. My husband and I follow the same guidelines as our children.

For a child in middle school (ages 12-14) we recommend keeping computers positioned where you can see the screen. I know many families who did this and were glad that they were able to establish good habits, especially with emailing, texting, and Face Time. Nowadays, we can check a computer's history through the parental controls feature (in settings) and see what the user was doing, but many parents may still want to be around with younger teens. This also sets the tone that a computer is not a privacy right; it is an interactive and social device that's open to audiences. Realizing that their computer activity is seen by others, whether from the exterior or interior, is an important message.

Keep Your Goals in Mind

If your aim is to support your adolescents to develop their abilities of concentration and self-reliance, then align your decisions with this outcome. Support developing concentration by maintaining that computers are tools for writing papers, building graphs, and doing other thoughtful work. And encourage self-reliance by making computer and smartphone use realistic. For instance, one guide for the timing of getting an iPhone is when a high school student can

handle the financial responsibility; one of my older sisters told her children that they could have iPhones when they could purchase them and pay for the call plans on their own. With money from their first jobs, her teenagers did this in high school, and they took very good care of those devices! The girls received their bills each month, and my sister and her husband taught them how to pay them with their own wages. This was an empowering experience that helped these adolescents learn more about how adults function. They understood the responsibility of the freedom. Rather than feeling they were being punished by not being gifted the devices, these daughters saw their parents' actions as a way of helping them enter the adult world with realistic expectations and awareness of their own abilities.

Maintaining Focus for Learning

When our children become young adults, they begin a process of using the tools we use in everyday life; along with this introduction must come the ways we keep ourselves focused. Dr. Angeline Lillard has been a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia for over 20 years, and when she saw that her students could not seem to control their laptop or smartphone internet use in the classroom, she banned them during lectures. The research coming out at the time was showing that we do not retain information as well when we type it as when we handwrite it (Mueller & Oppenheimer, 2014). Therefore, Dr. Lillard did not believe that the students needed their laptops to take notes during her lectures (with some exceptions, of course). There is also strong evidence that being distracted--as we are when messages come in on our devices--doesn't just interfere with learning new information, it can actually block it.

Prohibiting smartphone and laptop use in the classroom was novel for the early 2000s, but as Dr. Lillard's teaching assistants sat in the back row and excused offending students from class, she noticed the quality of student work and participation increase convincingly. More research in recent years supports this observation (see the articles listed below, which cite many studies). The students enjoyed Dr. Lillard's class more and actually thanked her for setting these guidelines to keep them on track. Today, many of Dr. Lillard's colleagues at UVA also require that students not bring laptops or smartphones to lectures and class discussions.

It's just a matter of time before all educators find that any classroom designed for group discussion and learning in lecture format is no place for smartphones, laptops, or any other kind of screen that distracts the participants from what they are there to do: learn from a teacher and each other. Teachers who are using technology interactively in their classrooms may have another perspective, but as long as a classroom teacher cannot see what is on their student's screens, the temptation to shop for new shoes, Snapchat a friend, or check Instagram while

they look like they are “taking notes,” is too strong for many. Such activity detracts from their own learning, and because it influences participation, it also affects the learning of their classmates as well as the entire class atmosphere.

We know that what makes Montessori classrooms so impactful is the emphasis on developing the ability to concentrate. All learning is based on this premise: that one who can focus can think. This is why protecting learning spaces for focused concentration and thinking must be the aim of educators, as well as parents at home.

Conclusion

As a stream of research in recent years links anxiety, depression, and a compromised ability to focus to unrestricted technology use (see *Irresistible*, 2017), parents must take precautions before handing devices over to their children. Pause to think of Montessori’s explanation of the characteristics and needs of each stage of childhood. Adolescence looks like the most logical time to introduce technology as a tool for adult life, despite the fact that increased distractibility is a characteristic of this stage of brain development. Before you begin down the technology path, prepare your home environment in some important ways so that your child is supported and set up well. Model with your own technology use, and demonstrate how you actively curb your use where necessary. Provide freedoms thoughtfully, and set limits with care. Remember that freedoms can and must be given in steps, so that children have the chance to respond with increasing responsibility. And finally, give your adolescent scaffolding for practicing the best habits. Technology is no different from any other new landscape when you look at it this way. The basic principles of the Montessori approach have much to offer us in these new adventures!

References and Resources

Articles

Carr, N. (2017, October 6). *How smartphones hijack our minds*. *The Wall Street Journal*.

Mueller and Oppenheimer. (2014). The pen is mightier than the keyboard: Advantages of longhand over laptop note taking. *Psychological Science*, 25, 1159-68.

Loh, K.K., & Kanai, R. (2016). How has the internet reshaped human cognition? *The Neuroscientist*, 22(5), 5-6-520.

Books

Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain, by Daniel Siegel, MD

Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked, by Adam Alter

Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age, by Sherry Turkle, PhD

The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains, by Nicholas Carr

Videos

What is "Brain Hacking"? Tech Insiders on Why You Should Care. Anderson Cooper/CBS News, *60 Minutes*, April 9, 2017.