

Empathy and Social Skills for Tech Savvy Teenagers

The explosion of technology is revolutionizing the way we communicate, the way we work and how we live. Just as parents of the sixties worried about the harmful effects of television on their children, there is concern today about the way the unstoppable march of technology is affecting young minds.

Neurological studies have found that daily exposure to computers, smart phones, video games, and the internet can profoundly alter our brains according to Dr. Gary Small in his book iBrain. These activities stimulate brain cell alteration and neurotransmitter release, gradually strengthening new neural pathways in our brains while weakening old ones. Neuroscientists believe that our brains neural circuitry is evolving right now at a speed like never before.

While the brains of tech savvy teens and young adults are wiring up for rapid-fire cyber searches, the neural circuits that control more traditional interpersonal learning methods may be neglected and gradually diminished. Pathways for human interaction and communication weaken when customary one-on-one people skills atrophy.

Adolescence is a critical stage of development when the brain advances from concrete to abstract thinking. Teenagers develop the capacity to understand the emotional experience of others, as well as practice their empathy skills. Solitary hours at a computer or video screen hinder the accomplishment of these developmental milestones. The allure of simulated interactive technology imitates 'in-person' interaction but lacks the sustained attention and depth of contact that real face to face connecting has. In the absence of the practice of social and empathy skills in person, the neural pathways do not get strengthened.

Does this sound like your digital teenager or young adult?

- spends hours a day text messaging, instant messaging while listening to their iPod
- does their homework on their laptop while instant messaging or text messaging while listening to their music. (They pride themselves on 'multi-tasking' but really they are in a 'continuous state of partial attention' as evidenced by the effort and outcome of their work)
- must know moment to moment what their eight online pals are up to right now and are unwilling to wait until seeing them tomorrow to them to find out
- does not make plans in advance, but waits to see what emerges among their online pals at the moment
- never steps into a library because they say they can find everything they need on the internet and finds reading a book for pleasure either boring or too isolating
- seems to be escaping into the internet or video games to avoid going out with peers
- puts their most personal feelings and photos on their Facebook page and sees nothing wrong with that kind of exposure
- has many 'online friends' - people who they have never met in person but who they spend lots of time 'chatting' with.

There is evidence that we are raising a generation of tech savvy but easily distracted teenagers with little empathy and poor social skills. They may have difficulty attending to activities which are not highly stimulating, have low impulse control, difficulty making commitments or plans, have an exaggerated sense of self importance, lack good judgement and have under developed interpersonal relationship

abilities. Helping them find the proper balance between solitary and social activities is an important parental responsibility.

What Can Parents Do to Encourage Balance between Technological and Social Activities

1. Support your teen's social and recreational activities.
2. Encourage their friends to come to your home
3. Attend sports, drama, dance, music events your child is involved in
4. Have regular family dinners and other social activities with your kids
5. When driving them somewhere make it an opportunity for conversation with them
6. Set an example by not allowing interruptions from your devices distract you from connecting with them.
7. Try to learn about their world and how they use technology
8. Work at finding many ways to generate conversation with them and learn about their world

Some Relationship Skills to Work on with Your Teens and Young Adults

They will learn best by example when you demonstrate these skills yourself.

Communication Skills

- Talk directly about your feelings and if you are worried about conflict or awkwardness let the other person know what you are afraid might happen and tell them anyway
- Avoid blame, insults and criticisms. Say "I felt upset when you....."
- Accept responsibility for your own part of the difficulty
- Listen carefully to what is being said and resist reacting with a defensive or critical comment

Non-Verbal Communication

- Read body language like posture to understand another person's mood, attitude or energy level
- Maintain eye contact when talking as it tells others you are interested and care about them
- Read a facial expression to tell you the mood or feeling of the other person
- Touch others such as a reassuring pat on the shoulder, a handshake, a kiss or a hug to convey care and concern

Self Esteem

- Pinpoint what your feelings of low self confidence or self worth are related to - school performance, social awkwardness, job dissatisfaction etc.
- Adjust your expectations for yourself and have realistic goals
- Support a cause you believe in because it will make you feel good
- Remind yourself of your accomplishments and frame your weaknesses and mistakes as opportunities to learn

Empathy and Listening Skills

- Recognize the feelings of others(see communication and nonverbal communication above)
- Learn to listen by putting all distractions aside (email, text messages) and internal random thoughts. Do not interrupt
- Let others know you understand them by restating what you heard or by expressing your interest

Paying Attention

- Be aware your mental wandering
- Consciously engage your mind
- Choose tasks you enjoy when possible

- Minimize distractions
- Take brakes when needed
- If you suspect you have ADD, seek medical advice

Relaxation and Creativity

- Meditation, yoga, self-hypnosis are excellent ways to relax
- Creative activities such as sculpting, pottery, painting, writing are all ways to help you access your imagination which can have a calming effect on you

The beneficial consequences of technological progress on helping us stay connected are enormous. However, technology can also interfere with the development of authentic, deep and close personal relationships. We are social beings who survive based on interpersonal attachments. In a time-starved society, it is tempting to believe that communication technologies can substitute for face to face, in-person conversations. Creating deep, committed relationships with our teenagers and helping them do the same with others can prepare them for the rapidly changing world.