

Technology & the Family

How to stay plugged in without tuning each other out.

By Melissa Auman Greiner

While she jokes that her husband hardly ever uses his cell phone, Michelle Vogel of Cherry Hill and her three children are constantly plugged in. She says her family is always on one of their computers. Her 7-year-old son can typically be found with his Nintendo DS1 in his hands. Her 9-year-old daughter keeps herself occupied with her iPod Touch. And, yes, even her 3-year-old knows how to turn on the video games and control the family's Wii.

Just down the road, Sheila Perlick's family of five, also from Cherry Hill, is plugged in as well. Three cell phones, a smartphone, an iPod Touch, a computer, three laptops, an Xbox and a Wii may be on at any time.

Technology is no stranger in these homes, and that's no surprise. It's a digital world, and laptops and smartphones have replaced the old pencil and paper. All these devices are great for information and entertainment, but with all the time we spend online, what are we missing with each other?

The Lure to Log On

In today's modern world, technology is everywhere. But why exactly are we all so drawn to it?

"For many people I think the appeal is access," says Dr. Lorin Basden Arnold, professor and interim dean at Rowan University's College of Communication.

When online, "we can reach far more people than we would ever have access to in our local community. We can always find a group of people interested in the same things we are, no matter how esoteric. In the workplace, or even in the social realm for people under 40, not being continually connected is felt to be detrimental to status—though that depends on the workplace and the social group one is in."

That need for connection is felt by all members of the family, although who they need to be connected to may be very different.

Parents may be worried they'll miss an important e-mail from the office; kids may worry about missing a Facebook status update that everyone will be talking about at school the next day.

Helping or Hurting the Family

For all its grandness, technology can become a double-edged sword. While we connect with the world, we may be forgetting about the people just down the hall.

"Whether or not technology helps or prevents connection depends on the person and on the circumstance," says Patricia L. Obst, MSW, LCSW, a family therapist in Westmont. "For instance, someone may use Facebook to get in touch with old friends—that's connection. On the other hand, when two people are having a face-to-face conversation and one of them keeps answering texts from a third party, then that could be felt as an intrusion and possibly be a symptom of an addiction."

Technology can also help keep the family unit running smoothly, says Arnold. "Families may find that having an online calendar of activities that everyone can post to wherever they are helps them to coordinate their schedules in a way that reduces stress and provides more time for togetherness," she says.

In other families, however, Arnold says that technology begins to replace communication. Arnold stresses that in these cases, it's not the technology that's to blame; it's simply being used as the crutch. "Those are probably the families that didn't have a particularly strong belief that there is an importance in having dinner together or watching a show together. The technology itself doesn't do that. We utilize it in ways that make sense to us, and we set the boundaries of its use."

Obst agrees. "Usually it's not the technology that pulls kids away; it's other underlying conflicts or issues that cause the distance that then the technology fills," she says.





While it's easy to judge, particularly if you're a dyed-in-the-wool Luddite still sporting the first cell phone you've ever had, experts say that ultimately, if it works for your family, you don't need to pay attention to what's considered "normal."

"We have to be careful about assuming that more traditional ways of interacting as a family are always better than those accomplished through technology. If family dinner is a stressful event, where little is said or where the communication is largely negative, it may not be a particularly helpful happening for that family," says Arnold. "On the other hand, if a parent having a discussion with a teen over [text] messenger can keep the conversation at a less volatile level and engage more than would have been possible face to face, then that may be very helpful for that family."

Obst shares an example of how to use technology to get closer to your kids. "For instance, a mom can initiate talking with her daughter about a break-up with her boyfriend by starting with text messages—which [because it's generational] the daughter may be more open to at first than a face-to-face discussion," she says. "Then the mom can suggest in a text that they talk, then go to her room later, give her a hug and let her cry on her shoulder."



The 43-Hour Day

So how attached are we really to our iPhones, BlackBerrys and notebooks? According to a recent study done by Yahoo! Inc. and OMD, just think of technology as an adult version of a child's "Binky." And who wouldn't love it? Statistics show that multi-tasking between TV, Internet and our day-to-day actions like eating allows many of us to pack in an average of 43 hours of activity into a 24-hour day.

Another statistic from the study says the average U.S. family owns 12 technological devices. For Mantua resident Sandy Grexa's family, that number is actually a little low. The Grexas beat that number in video game devices alone, owning nearly every Nintendo console ever released in addition to an Xbox and PlayStation 3. Add in the family's iPods, Droid phones and more, and the home is buzzing with more than 20 items.

Grexas's eldest children, ages 18 and 19, can spend five hours an evening on the PlayStation alone. "They go to school, come home and play," she says. "It's how they relax."

Sheila Perlick's son, Matt, is on a personal quest to get as much time logged in as possible. "Matt is always 'plugged in,'" she says. "He loves everything techie. If we let him, he would play Xbox 360 all day (with the headphones on, which means he's actually also talking to his BFF who is also playing the game online). If he could, he would text while doing this."

"Parents need not allow technology to have any more power over their interactions with their children than anything else does. Just because it's technology doesn't mean we can't say no to it or teach our children how to use it in moderation."

Shutting Down (or at Least Setting to "Vibrate")

If your family is in need of some download detox, the first step is recognizing exactly what forms of technology seem to be getting in the way. "If members of a family feel that computer time or cell phones are getting in the way of their face-to-face interaction, they need to specifically address this issue as a family," says Arnold. "This might mean a child telling mom, 'I don't like it when you work on your computer all day on Saturday and we can never play.' This may mean a father telling a teen, 'Talking together at the table is important to me, so you need to leave your cell phone in the other room during meals.' It could mean one parent saying to another, 'We really need to figure out a way to disconnect a little on the weekends so that we can all do something that isn't sitting in front of a screen.'"

Obst says that parents need to step in when they feel the situation is getting out of control. "It's up to the parents to set limits and boundaries on the use of technology just like any other issue," she says. "Parents need not allow technology to have any more power over their interactions with their children than anything else does. Just because it's technology doesn't mean we can't say no to it or teach our children how to use it in moderation."

Cherry Hill mom Vogel says that she'd like her family to cut back on their time being plugged in, but that old habits die hard. "We joke about it, but sometimes



SIGNING OFF

If a family of four put down their devices for 10 minutes each day, what would they have the time to accomplish?

- Bake a batch of brownies.
- Play a regulation basketball game.
- Plant a mini vegetable garden.
- Have a water balloon fight.
- Go for a mile walk.
- Complete eight rounds of Charades.
- Decorate the entire driveway with sidewalk chalk.
- Tie-dye four shirts.
- Tell three funny family stories.
- Enjoy one amazing sunset.

—M.A.G.

I'll e-mail my daughter just to tell her to get off her iPod Touch," she says. "I know I need to put limits on it. I just need to come up with a plan on how I'm going to do it."

Perlick too may have to convince the kids to turn off the games, but in the end she says they are usually "well behaved" about it. She hasn't seen a need to go cold turkey on her high-tech gadgets and gizmos. "We still have more fun just being with each other than with any of these things," she says.

Even just getting everyone in the same room is a step in the right direction. "We'll sit there and watch them as a family," says Grexa of her sons' nightly video game sessions. "It doesn't take time away from being a family. We make the time for them."

Ultimately, families need to find their ideal balance between virtual and physical connections. If you think something might work for you and *your* family, try it out. If it doesn't seem to have good utility, then let it go. "It's important to remember that we can control our use of communication technology," says Arnold. "It doesn't have to control us." ♦



Cross-County, Cross-Platform

It's not just what we do in our spare time that sets today's families apart from the Cleavers. Moms work. Dads cook. Families live in different parts of the world. The now old-fashioned nuclear family may have been able to sum up a day over meatloaf, but these days, it might just be done over Skype.

"If Grandma lives in Indiana and her 9-year-old grandchild is in New Jersey, playing online games on Webkinz World might be just the ticket to maintaining a relationship across that distance," says Arnold.

How can you connect with your family online? Set up a family blog and have everyone near and far take turns posting stories and photos of recent events. Create a Flickr or Skype account so that your son at college can watch his little sister as she grows. It may keep you online for a few more hours, but it also may be able to keep your family together. —M.A.G.

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