**Children, Technology & Social Media**

**CHBC Parenthood Class**

**Introduction**

“Electronic narcotic.”

“Face magnet.”

“Portable babysitter.”

These are just some of the synonyms for your smartphones, tablet and other devices.

From writing to “friends,” to knowing the latest news almost instantly, to watching a funny video, to checking in with our spouse – or getting everyone back together at the mall, to listening to music – or to a sermon during our commute, to email, to task lists, to calendars, to movies…. [need I go on?]. Technology is a part of our life. It is *everywhere*. We have an internet of things.

Is that a problem? Is it a problem for you? What about for your kids? Al Mohler noted a study by the Kaiser Family foundation on this issue, saying:

As anyone who knows a teen or tween can attest, media are among the most powerful forces in young people’s lives today. Eight-to-eighteen-year-olds spend more time with media than in any other activity besides (maybe) sleeping – and average of more than 7-1/2 hours a day, 7 days a week.

So technology is with us. And whether good or bad, one thing is certain: technology is affecting us and it is affecting our children. And because it has become literally a part of everyday life, most of us don’t think about this very much day-to-day. It’s like the air we breathe.

On the whole, we probably view technology and social media as neutral, like books or movies: It’s fine if used properly. That said, however, I do want to pause here and offer a call to care – even a warning. Certain technologies can have dangers that are inherent to them. John MacArthur put it this way in a 9Marks interview with Mark Dever:

Now people have in their hand what is essentially a deadly weapon – the most forceful tool for life-destroying temptation that’s ever been put into the human hand. You’ve never been able to bring temptation at that level – visually, audibly, with that availability – in history. ***You can pollute yourself faster and more extensively than ever.*** [Repeat]

So it is imperative that we stop and think about this and even those outside of the church understand this. Neil Postman, a secular humanist, wrote in his book *Technopoly* that,

A family that does not or cannot control the information environment of its children is barely a family at all, and may lay claim to the name only by virtue of the fact that its members share biological information through DNA. … That the family can no longer do this is, I believe, obvious to everyone.[[1]](#footnote-1) [Interestingly, Postman wrote this in 1992 – 22 years ago. He died in 2003.]

**Discussion**

Is Postman right? Have families lost the battle? How do we know? ***Does the Bible give us any guidance, especially as parents, in the area of technology and social media***?

To help us answer that, I want to offer ten questions that I hope will help us test, from Scripture, the effect of technology in our lives and homes, especially as parents. Our goal is not to draw bright lines – *can* *do this; can’t do that –* but to encourage us to think together about this important topic. As the apostle Peter said, “whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved” (2 Peter 2:19).

For our purposes today, when I say technology, I mean information technology, including the Internet, laptops and iPads, smartphones, communications devices, and entertainment devices such as TVs, iPods, and video games. And by social media I mean social media: Facebook, Google+, Twitter, Instagram, iMessage, Pheed, KiK, SnapChat, Vine, Tumblr, Ask.fm, Pinterest, Wanelo, Reddit, LinkedIn, Telegram, etc. And as to all of these tools, I believe God’s Word has much to say.

With that, ten questions:

1. **Is it helping us be present in our families?**

This may seem like a strange question. Don’t technology and social media help us be present everywhere? That’s the beauty of having a blog and Twitter account!

Well, not exactly. When I say “be present,” I’m thinking of Deuteronomy chapter 6:

These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deut. 6:6-9.)

As we said when we discussed family worship, God’s Word should be the constant subject of our conversation—something we impress on our children when we “sit at home,” and “walk along the road,” when we “lie down” and “get up.”

Do you see the point here? Like the television when I was growing up as a “latchkey” kid, the phone is becoming an electronic foster parent. We should not delegate our job of influencing our children to the phone or to tablet. And I don’t mean just the technology, because the tech is simply gateway to other people, including their friends any many who are not. It is our privilege and responsibility to talk with them when they get up and when they lie down about God’s commands!

In our house, our kids leverage tech for learning and for play. But, their “online time” is strictly limited and monitored—they may not have devices alone in their rooms, for example.

Dads and moms, here’s a word to us as well: *We* need to put the phones down. Be Present together as a family. The emails will wait. The blog post can be read later. And no one cares about the picture of your meal.

On the upside, technology can help us be present. Some of us can work from home from time-to-time. Facetime, Skype, and Google-chat can helpful if you genuinely have to be gone – say, deployed abroad with the military (numerous soldiers have seen their newborns via Skype). Also consider the blessing of leaving a lifetime of Scripture-laden e-mails or even videos to your children after you are gone. A *New Yorker* cartoon recently showed a little girl asking where grandpa was; her mother said, “he’s in the cloud.” In seriousness, though, consider the blessing of easily storing messages to your children.

Is technology helping or hindering you from being present?

1. **Is it helping us be alert?**

Have you ever noticed how many times Scripture commands us to be “alert” (e.g., Mk. 13:33, Eph. 6:18, I Thess. 5:6, I Peter 5:8) “watchful” (Col. 4:2) and “awake” (Rev. 16:15), and how easily technology and social media can render us addled, lulled, and distracted by our longing for the next “info-snack”? Think of the poor guy walking into a light pole while texting – a perfect metaphor for our culture, and for many of us and our kids. Pick your head up and look where you’re going!

Brothers and sisters, final judgment is coming. Life is moving and we’re staring at our face magnet, texting. Are we watching for chances to serve or are playing Angry Birds? In one sense, I get it: Long day, tired – take a couple minutes to zone out. But perhaps we’re too ready with that excuse. Richard Neuhaus speaks of listlessness of, “…Evenings without number obliterated by television, evenings neither of entertainment nor of education but of narcoticized defense against time and duty.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Father, mother: By your habits with technology, do you teach your children to be content to “swim in the shallows and pass their time with passing the time”? (DeYoung, *Don’t Let the Screen Strangle Your Soul*, Part II.) If your family at times seems addled by technology, consider memorizing this Scripture: “The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.” Rom. 13:8, 11.

Is technology helping or hindering you from being alert?

1. **Is it helping us be transformed?**

God commands us: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Rom. 12:2. There is a pattern to how this world thinks. That pattern presses itself on us – forcing us, if it can, to conform. Surely the endless bombardment of information from technology and social media is a worldliness delivery system unequalled in human history.

Nicholas Carr in his book *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* collects an impressive array of research showing that our brains are like plastic, and what we run through them carves deep channels that are hard to remove. Think about that. Technology actually shapes your brain. That’s scientific support for what Paul wrote 2,000 years ago. The world would conform you; be transformed by God’s word. Carve biblical channels in your brain.

Here, technology can also be very helpful. It’s never been easier to read, hear, see, memorize, share, study, understand scripture—because of technology. But friends, remember, our minds are being conformed to something and we need to be mindful of what is shaping us.

We must also ask: If our brains are plastic, what are our children’s? What channels are you carving in your children’s brains? Run God’s Word through them day and night. Help them be transformed by the whole Bible, meditating on it with them all the time. And yes, leverage technology to assist you in this.

Is technology helping or hindering you from being transformed into the image of Christ?

1. **Is it helping us grow in wisdom?**

Information technology can blur the distinction between knowledge and wisdom. We need to remember that, biblically, what’s new is not always better and more is not always best. The latest blog-post may well be less valuable than something written 500 years ago – indeed, it probably is less valuable, since the blog-post hasn’t yet lasted 500 years.

We need to help our children see that they live in a swamp of often entirely useless information, and teach them how to find sources of true wisdom. This may mean simply shutting off the games and media and handing them books, especially older ones. For us, among other things, this means encouraging our kids to read real, physical books and not just new ones.

Is technology helping or hindering you from growing in wisdom?

1. **Is it helping us be patient?**

I’ll make this point quick because I know you’re getting bored. The name of the game in technology is speed: faster processors, more bandwidth, quicker downloads. But repeatedly we are taught in Scripture that the wise man is patient – patient waiting for his farming to yield fruit, patient with others’ faults, patient waiting for the Lord’s coming. This means we must be able to focus, to hold our attention on the long view of things, and not always be looking for the next snack from our Facebook or Twitter “feed.”

A Christian psychiatrist noted one of the big problems with technology and social media he sees in children – and all of us – is that it teaches us to demand everything right away. We don’t learn resilience and perseverance, say, with a long book or a difficult problem. This is true for adults and children.

I trust you see the point. Children need to be taught to persevere. Limiting their time before the flitting screen can help.

Is technology helping or hindering you from being patient?

1. **Is it helping us be content?**

Many of us are visual gluttons. We always “need” more information. We lack self-control. We are enslaved to the “continual lust for more” (Eph. 4:19) cognitive content, more novelty.

Author Nicholas Carr writes of discovering that he could no longer concentrate on his work without stopping to check the Web:

At first I’d figured that the problem was a symptom of middle-age mind rot. But my brain, I realized, wasn’t just drifting. It was hungry. It was demanding to be fed the way the Net fed it – and the more it was fed, the hungrier it became. Even when I was away from my computer, I yearned to check e-mail, click links, do some Googling. I wanted to be connected.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Surely an apt description of this is “chasing after the wind”! (Ecc. 1:14.) As the writer of Ecclesiastes told us, of making many books there is no end (Ecc. 12:12), and that was thousands of years before the printing press.

An important question: Can you and your children take a day or two off from Facebook or texting? Can you avoid your Twitter feed for a day? Can you take an afternoon off from e-mail? Could you skip the games for a week?

You say your answer is yes to all of these? Great. But will you do it? What would it look like for you to take a family technology fast? Why not find out?

Is technology helping or hindering you from being content?

1. **Is it helping us be real?**

The Gospel is not a game. Jesus’ love did not cost Him His virtual life. He was real flesh and blood, he contended with a real Satan, he showed real courage, he felt real pain, he was nailed to a real cross, and he experienced a real, bodily resurrection.

Please don’t get me wrong. If online fantasy literature and games inspire hope of heaven and motivation to accomplish real exploits, they may be worthwhile. But if these sources instead play the deceiver – making you feel a real sense of courage and accomplishment, or a real romantic connection, when you have accomplished nothing in the real, physical world – then they are flase. Jesus calls us to love real families and real church members, with real sins and real difficulties, leading to real joy.

Here we come to a very important word for all parents, but especially (for now) parents of boys. I’ll hand the mic over to Russ Moore:

Pornography promises orgasm [pleasure] without intimacy. Video warfare promises adrenaline without danger. The arousal that makes these so attractive is ultimately spiritual to the core. …

This is a generation mired in fake love and fake war, and that is dangerous. A man who learns to be a lover through porn will simultaneously love everyone and no one. A man obsessed with violent gaming can learn to fight everyone and no one.

The answer to both addictions is to fight arousal with arousal. Set forth the gospel vision of a Christ who loves his bride and who fights to save her. And then let’s train our young men to follow Christ by learning to love a real woman, sometimes by fighting his own desires and the spirit beings who would eat him up. Let’s teach our men to make love, and to make war . . . for real.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In short, our children need courage to love and to fight, to nurture and to protect and to work, in the real world.

How can we encourage this? By all means start by putting up boundaries – enacting time limits, placing stuff off-limits, installing filters. But we should also teach them to how to respond when they’ve run across something they shouldn’t have. Even filter providers will say: Don’t just rely on the filter! A filter won’t help when your son is handed a phone by a friend with a pornographic picture on the screen. *Assume* your children will see things they shouldn’t and teach them how to respond when they see it – i.e. flee, and, if necessary, repent.

This is something for us to think about as well, as the social media world allows us to create a totally private world that feeds selfishness and pride – and militates against genuine fellowship. On the one hand we can consume and enjoy whatever *we* want. We are used to listing to or watching what we want, when we want, where we want.

We create our own private worlds, which very often others don’t know about. As MacArthur put it in the interview I mentioned previously, it can now be that “you don’t know my world; I’m not going to tell you about my world, because my world is now infected with things that I can’t tell you – that I don’t want you to know…” More than that, we control what others see of us. “I not only create my world, I create myself… The only me you’re going to know is the me I’m willing to Tweet; the only me you’re going to know is the me I want you to think I am…”

This can make it a challenge to help our kids grow up being honest, authentic, sympathetic, humble, genuine. If we DO help them to be those things, and they’re not quite as slick at communicating in the virtual realm, they’ll be fine.

One last side tip for “keeping the internet real”: have your kids use technology to teach them to do real things. We’re teaching are kids to code using iPad apps. We regurlarly refer to Youtube for all kinds of instruction like building fires, sewing, fixing toys, etc.

Consider, too: Are your kids using technology and social media to select their “friends” and overlooking their real neighbors?

Is technology helping or hindering you from being real?

1. **Is it helping us pray?**

When Jesus faced overwhelming crowds, he went to “desolate places” to pray. (Luke 5:16.) Do you and your children know how to find desolate places? Can you still your mind enough to pray, to think over a passage and pray it back to God? Can you sustain a line of thought as you talk with God about an issue in your life or your family? Do you and your children look at news stories as occasions for prayer? Do you pray over e-mails you receive? “The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray.” (I Peter 4:7.)

The challenge here is not merely that technology is distracting; it promises its own escape from stress – a God-alternative. Video games, movies, news sites would have us leave our problems behind and enter another world. But God wants to be our refuge! (Ps. 46:1.) When faced with a moment of stress, would you or your child rather zone on the Internet or pray? Make a habit of praying at all times with your kids, especially when tempted to anxiety. Train them not to run to the screen but to Jesus.

Is technology helping or hindering you from praying?

1. **Is it helping us be humble?**

God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. (Ja. 4:6.) Does social media enable you to live a life of well-tended pride, cultivating your public face, your long list of “friends”? Do you consider your motives when you “share” a success (or your kids’ success) on Facebook. Does it inspire you to envy? Teach your children about the temptation to fear men, to sinfully compare ourselves to others, and how pride can be behind (or be fed by) what we post – especially through tools like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

Is technology helping or hindering you from being humble?

1. **Is it helping us be stewards?**

We have been warned to multiply our talents and avoid dissipation. “Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.” (Eph. 5:15-16.)

What is the opportunity cost of your time with technology? Keep a log of the hours. Proverbs calls young men to diligent labor. The Proverbs 31 woman was not reading romance novels; she was married to a real man, with real children, running a real household, staying up real late, and getting up real early. Yes, I realize she was a composite person; but she is a picture of how our girls are to aspire to real accomplishment!

Yes, technology can be a multiplier. I can get caught up on key events in the world that affect my work, in the first 30 minutes of a day (or I can waste the first 30 minutes surfing the headlines instead of praying!) Our family has learned all sorts of things about God’s creation as we Google some interesting question that came up in conversation. Gospel blogs and sermon sites can be helpful. But still we must ask: Is technology helping or hindering us from being good stewards of our time?

**Bonus Question (because 10 is better than 11)! Is technology helping me to be holy?**

James 1:27 puts it fairly plainly: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.”

Likewise Heb 12:14 – “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” And 1 Pet 1:15-16 – “but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” Paul told Timothy to “flee youthful passions” (2 Tim 2:22).

Remember MacArthur’s comment earlier: “the most forceful tool for life-destroying temptation that’s ever been put into the human hand.” Whether it’s temptation to pornography, or to emotional fornication, or to pride – we must be honest about whether our use of technology is enabling us to think about “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable...” (Phil 4:8). It *can* be that kind of help! If it’s not, we need to confess that, and seek the help of our brothers and sisters in Christ to bring even our smartphone use under the Lordship of Christ. And then teach and help our children to do the same.

**Conclusion**

The bottom line to contemplate is this: Is technology helping or hindering us, and our families, from serving our God – from being holy? Are we mastering it, or is it mastering us? May God give us grace to use technology for His glory alone.

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Examples for “Digital Boundaries”

• Do not check my smartphone until after my morning devotions.

* Turn notifications off

• Try to end my digital day by 9:00 p.m.

• Don’t check my smartphone when having lunch or dinner with a friend, or leave phone in car.

• Take a digital fast every Sunday (or start with every Sunday afternoon)

• No digital gadgets at mealtimes.

• Limit checking emails or texts to once an hour.

• Try not to talk on the phone to virtual people when real people are in front of me.

• Pray daily for God to help me become a good steward of my virtual life.

1. Neil Postman, *Technopoly*, Ch 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. DeYoung, Don’t Let the Screen Strangle Your Soul, Part II) (quoting Neuhaus, J., Freedom for Ministry 227 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. (What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains 16.) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Russ Moore, Fake Love, Fake War: Why So Many Men Are Addicted to Internet Porn and Video Games (http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/fake-love-fake-war-why-so-many-men-are-addicted-to-internet-porn-and-video-games). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)