Safe Driving on the Information Superhighway:
A Guide to Social Media, Information Technology and Electronics
For Parents of Tweens and Teens

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Evidence that we are living in an age that is influenced by and evolving through technology is all around. Looking across the landscape of the present, you will see people on cell phones, laptops, and tablets. Professional, personal, and intimate encounters that were previously reserved for face to face contact are now taking place in virtual space. Old friends are reconnected and new relationships are formed and fostered through the use of the internet and technology. Children and adolescents speak in terms of status updates and hash-tags, and they are connected to friends, family, and information in ways previously thought impossible. Free access to the internet through Wi-Fi is available almost everywhere, and still more "hotspots" are opening up in schools, grocery stores, malls, airports, and airplanes. This technological boom has irreversibly changed our culture, and provided immeasurable benefits. But, these new advances come with many new challenges and dangers. In order to successfully navigate this unfamiliar and ever-changing landscape, parents need to familiarize themselves with the world where their children are living. The goal of this paper is to provide parents with a roadmap to help them guide their children away from wrong turns and dangerous situations.

Benefits:

To say that the information age is without benefit would be grossly inaccurate. The benefits of technology are reaped everyday in schools, businesses, and our homes. Smartboards, laptops, and tablets are becoming readily available in many public and private schools. Teachers are providing students and their families with real time access to grades, feedback, and upcoming assignments through web-based applications. The proliferation of smart phones provides users with tomes of information available at their fingertips. Questions that previously required hours of time combing through books and journals in the library can be answered in seconds.

In addition to immediate access, recent breakthroughs in technology also provide an easy method of storing, organizing, and retrieving information. Flash-drives, hard-drives, and compact disk storage provide tangible and portable solutions for saving large amounts of data. However, even these storage solutions are becoming obsolete due to the development of "cloud" based storage. Storing things "in the cloud" allows for immediate access to all saved files, regardless of the location or the device used to access. With this technology, children can begin an assignment on a computer at school, access and edit the assignment from their home computer, and even make last minute changes to the document from their smart phone on the way to school.

Technology is also making connecting to others from all over the world simple and streamlined. Teachers, schools, and businesses are taking advantage of video conferencing websites to develop virtual classrooms and meeting spaces. Colleges offer online courses that feature live lectures from professors who can respond to students in real time. The medical and mental health fields have begun to embrace this technology, and it is possible to have remote medical and therapeutic consultations. Children can have consistent contact with family and friends previously separated by great distances through the use of applications like Skype, Facetime, and Google+.

Finally, the proliferation of cellular phones helps parents to more effectively monitor their children's whereabouts and activities. Research consistently states that parental monitoring is key to reducing the likelihood of children engaging in risky behaviors. Parents can use GPS and phone finding applications to monitor the location of their children, and can quickly and efficiently exchange information with their children by text messaging.

Risks:

Even with all of the benefits listed above, the technology boom is not without its downsides and pitfalls. Electronic entertainment and social networking can lead to a more sedentary lifestyle. In prior generations, children felt compelled to go outside and engage in creative play. Social gaming was thought of in terms of tag, hide and seek, make believe, and sports. With today's generation, interacting socially often takes place virtually. Rather than engaging in active play, children are attracted to tablets, phones, computers, and console based video games. These games restrict our children to the couch instead of the back yard. This inhibits our children's ability to develop fine motor skills, and curbs creativity and expression.

Technology can also hinder healthy sleep habits. The allure of social media and digital gaming can be so attractive that children and adolescents ignore their body's cues, and develop problematic sleep patterns. Teenagers attached to their technology will often stay up late to remain connected to the drama of the day, attend school tired, and then nap for hours upon returning home. Lack of sleep can impair school performance, judgment, and motivation. Also, napping during the afternoon takes away from quality family time, and can negatively impact family cohesion and communication.

A common argument in favor of technology heard from children and teens is that texting, "facebooking" and tweeting are the ways that this generation communicates. While this is true to an extent, the detrimental effects of solely digital communication become evident in the development of social skills. Children who primarily live and communicate within a digital world have a more difficult time responding appropriately in face-to-face interactions. They have a harder time deciphering body language, making the recognition of emotions not an easy task. Digital communication also allows for a level of anonymity and distance that does not allow the children to see the immediate results of their communication on others. If the child can not see the

emotional reaction of the other person, their developing social skills will be impeded. These children will often say inappropriate things to peers and adults, and have difficulty developing and maintaining healthy relationships.

Another risk associated with the proliferation of technology is social isolation. This seems contradictory to the commonly used verbiage "social networking." The term social networking implies that the online experience enhances social circles, and creates networking opportunities. These points are valid to an extent, but can serve to isolate children if used without regulation. Deep immersion into our gadgets can actually lead to missed opportunities for developing relationships and engaging in face to face interactions. School hallways are now filled with students mindlessly walking to class with headphones in their ears. Rather than seeking conversation during down times, children are seeking their phones to ease their boredom. The paradox of social networking and gaming is that it has become so addictive that children are actually missing opportunities to be social.

The rampant use of technology has also been seen to impair learning abilities and impulse control. Several recent papers have been published linking technology usage to the development of attention problems and poor study habits. A recent article found that, on average, middle school children checked their phones every two to three minutes while attempting to study for an exam. In fact, a recent study found that in America the average attention span is 5 minutes, which is a staggering decline from the 12 minutes found just 10 years ago. Children are developing inefficient and ineffective methods of studying, and are more concerned with what is happening on their phones than what they are learning in class.

Finally, unchecked use of technology can expose our children to inappropriate and dangerous situations. A common topic in contemporary news is the notion of cyber bullying. With the use of technology, children who are victimized during school by bullies are no longer safe at the end of the school day. Rumors, pictures, videos, and taunts can continue throughout the day and into the night. This constant abuse can have devastating effects on the child, and can lead to dangerous and harmful behaviors. On-line predators and exposure to websites with violent and pornographic content are also present and often easily accessible.

Unmonitored use of technology has the potential to open children up to these and all of the risks listed above. The best way to combat these risks, and effectively utilize the benefits technology provides is to develop a plan of action. Below is a sample road map to help you navigate this ever-changing landscape.

Guidelines for Tweens (10-12 years; driver's permit):
Prior to entering into the turbulent teenage years it is important to establish a foundation of responsibility in your children, and clarify your expectations regarding their use of technology. Below are some simple guidelines that will help foster health and responsible usage of technology in your Tween:
1. Purchase a simple phone only. No smart phones quite yet.
2. They must return calls to caregivers within 15 minutes.
3. No social media accessible through the phone.

4. Phone should be on the charger in a common area 1 hour before bedtime. No phones in the bedroom overnight.

Guidelines for Teens (driver's license):

Once your child has demonstrated their ability to use their phone in a responsible way, they can now be given more freedoms. The following guidelines should help your teen continue to develop a respect and understanding for the appropriate usage of technology:

1. After two years of compliance with "driver's permit" a smart phone may be purchased.
2. Your teen must reply to text messages within 30 minutes.
3. Place filtering/parental controls on the phone to block inappropriate web content.
4. They also must share all passwords for social media outlets.
5. On charger in public area one hour before bedtime.

Overcoming peer pressure:

Peer pressure is not something that only affects our children. Parents may feel pressured to get their children phones, tablets, computers, and music players. Their children might ask relentlessly for the newest piece of technology, and other parents might talk about how technology makes the parents' jobs easier. However, it is up to you to decide how to parent your child, and what is appropriate for them. The old adage about friends jumping off a bridge is applicable here. Other parents purchasing these items for their children should not influence your decision. Slick advertising campaigns develop an artificial need for the latest, greatest, biggest, and fastest. High tech devices are not a requirement of growing up, and should be treated as a privilege. If they are not used in a responsible way that promotes healthy functioning and is within the established guidelines, technology privileges should be revoked. This might make you unpopular with your children for a short period, but it will teach them the value of acting in a responsible and safe manner. Utilizing guidelines such as the ones presented here will provide you and your children boundaries for the acceptable uses of these technologies.