



Head and Heart Workshop | Engaging Digital Technology

The aim of this workshop is to shed light on the potential benefits and dangers of digital technologies and then to offer some ways to guide our children towards healthy and Christlike engagement with them.

Select Data on the Use of Technology

95% of US teens and 92% have access to a smartphone and 45% are almost always online (Pew Research Center, 2019).

72% of teens check phone messages and notifications the moment they wake up (Pew Research Center, 2019).

The average teenager spends 7hrs. and 22mins every day (Gitnux). Teens who spend 5 hours daily on their mobile devices are 51% more likely to have inadequate sleep (BankMyCell, 2020).

The average child from ages 8–12 spends 5hrs. and 33mins. online each day (Gitnux).

Teens who spend too much time on social media face a 27% increased risk of depression (BankMyCell, 2020).

56% of pre-adults feel lonely, anxious, or upset when they don't have their phones with them (Pew Research Center, 2019). Another study suggests this number is closer to 85% (DataReportal).

The average American clicks, taps, and swipes his or her phone about 2,500 times every day (TechRepublic).

47% of parents believe their kids are addicted to their mobile devices (BankMyCell, 2020).

Digital Natives versus Digital Immigrants

This distinction reveals a major problem facing many parents in 2023. Most of us are *digital immigrants*, i.e., we did not grow up with the digital capabilities we now have. However, we are tasked with raising *digital natives*, i.e., those who have always had current digital capabilities.

Digital immigrants remember a time when connectivity was not so readily available. Relationships, access to information, and research were slower and less efficient. This reality affords immigrants some advantages and poses some disadvantages.

Digital natives have grown up in a world that offers massive amounts of information and ways to connect with others. They have no experience of life without these technologies. Again, this reality affords natives some advantages and poses some disadvantages.

As digital immigrants, parents in 2023 must both acknowledge the benefits and warn against the dangers of our digital world with tact, curiosity, and evidence.



Benefits of a Digital Age

- 1. Digital spaces connect people in meaningful ways and afford us significant opportunities to shape real flesh-and-blood communities.*
- 2. Digital spaces provide the opportunity to do research that is deeper and more efficient.*
- 3. Digital spaces foster more efficient work that can even be done from the comforts of home.*

The Cultural Mandate

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." ²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. ²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (Genesis 1:26-28)

Dangers of a Digital Age

- 1. Digital technologies threaten to damage human relationships, including with those closest to us.*

Couples who spent more time on their phones reported a lower level of relational satisfaction. 51% of people report their partner being distracted by a phone when trying to converse with them. 40% report being bothered by the amount of time their partner spends on digital technologies.

Parents are often distracted by digital technologies when spending time with their children. In the book *Alone Together*, Turkle describes, "A sixteen-year-old named Audrey describes her mother, 'immersed in her cell', not even looking up or speaking as Audrey opens the car door." This is a common scene in many of our lives.

- 2. Digital technologies threaten to damage our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being.*

Digital technology is linked to decreased physical activity and, in turn, worsened health in adolescents. High use children are often more obese and more likely to become diabetic. It also negatively impacts posture, muscles, eyes, and sleep patterns.

Notifications and pressure to keep up with social media adds tremendous stress, distraction, and feelings of being overwhelmed to people's lives.

High use of digital technologies, especially social media, is strongly linked to risk of depression, anxiety, body image problems, and a decreased sense of self-worth.



3. *Digital technology threatens our natural understanding of what it means to be human in our striving and limitations.*

It is crucial to live within our boundaries re: workload, accessibility, and self-sufficiency. When we use and abuse digital technology, we imagine we have transcended natural limitations and have achieved superpowers. This tendency catches us with us in myriad ways.

We were made to interact with only about 100–150 people. The digital world forces us to pay attention—emotionally and physically—to many, many more. It's beyond our limitations.

The call to regulate our children's interaction with digital environments is a call to protect their physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual health.

The Importance of Ideas and Images

⁸ *Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things. ⁹ Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me or seen in me – put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:8-9)*

¹ *Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³ For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (Colossians 3:1-4)*

Navigating Digital Spaces Well

The goal for most of us is healthy engagement with digital spaces, not total restriction. The good news is that it's possible to achieve—given that we are appropriately **intentional** and **vigilant**. Let's explore principles that help keep us where God wants us to be in our lives and families.

1. *It starts with casting vision.* It's easy to list all the bad things that can result from overindulgence with digital technologies. In fact, it's almost always easier to complain. As followers of Jesus, we want to do the harder work of casting vision for the culture and values that we want to foster in our homes.

For instance, suppose you and your children discussed:

- The benefits of being present to one another and your neighbors.
- The value of caring for one's mental health.
- The goodness of focusing our attention on life-giving ideas and images.
- The advantages of positive sleep hygiene.

This list could go on. Imagine what might happen if you led with a vision of the life God has for us and why it is so good. Then, you have authority to highlight ways digital spaces might enhance or detract from that life. We can help our children see why limits can be a really good thing.



2. *Be ready to be lovingly resolute.* This doesn't mean that the guardrails you set for engagement with digital technology can never be set aside. Surely there will be times for flexibility. But it means not giving in when the rules you've set are there for the good of your kids.

It's not fun to be resolute. We're often the bad guys. Remember, there is much at stake in a digital world, and we owe it to our children to guide them well—even when they don't see it that way. It's a labor of love and should be done **resolutely** and **lovingly**.

3. *Set clear boundaries on engagement.* This can be a great exercise to work on together. In other words, include your children in the conversation of what's reasonable and healthy. You'll need to think through two distinct areas. **First**, when and where will use of digital technology be allowed? Be specific here. Set days, times, and spaces in the home where it's allowed. Make sure you include times where you all unplug as a family from digital spaces.

This conversation will most certainly be a balancing act. Our children are growing up in a digital age. That bids us to be reasonable and seek out the redemptive elements of technology. At the same time, the harmful effects of too much consumption are clear.

Second, what content will your children be allowed to access? Again, be specific and consider making a list of the activities, sites, and games with which they can engage. For instance, what degree of violence do you find acceptable? What about sexualized content? Social media? Can they spend time viewing influencers? Are any sites simply off limits (e.g., Tik Tok)?

As parents, we need to guide our children to healthy and fun inputs. They will shape the people they become. They need content that will help them live Philippians 4:8-9 and Colossians 3:1-4.

4. *Provide real world relational activities and experiences.* It's important not only to regulate kids time with technology, but also to provide healthy real-life alternatives. This can be as simple as getting together with friends, taking a hike, or playing a board game. Let's demonstrate the full range of the goodness of life to our kids, even if it means sacrificing our own time.

5. *Model healthy engagement with technology in your own life.* You'll have no authority if you don't heed the dangers of digital technologies. It's time for us, parents, to embrace and model a better and counter-cultural way of living. Let's be present and available and engaged when we are with our kids. Let's strive first to be lights in our homes.