Digital Parenting Research Insight

Several research studies are helpful in understanding the issue of effective digital parenting. These studies ground their analysis of the impact of parenting styles on Dr. Baumrind’s seminal work on parenting styles.1

• Authoritative—actively involved in a positive manner.
• Authoritarian—actively involved but in a negative manner.
• Indulgent—positively involved but not active.
• Neglectful—negatively involved and not active.

Research that examined the relationship between parenting styles and online teen behaviors found that the children of parents who adopted an authoritative parenting approach demonstrated fewer online risk behaviors.2 Another study that investigated cyberbullying incidents found that those teens who had parents who used an authoritative parenting style were less emotionally distressed and better able to respond effectively to these incidents.3

Parenting Education Opportunities

There are a number of formal or informal ways that schools can reach parents with important information.

Parent Workshops

Unfortunately, the parents who are likely most in need of the insight and information frequently are the parents who are least likely to attend these workshops. However, the engaged parents who will pay attention also are most likely to have children who can be important peer leaders. In these workshops, it will be helpful to involve a panel of older students presenting information and their recommendations.

Information Resources

Schools may also provide just-in-time information resources in the office and library or on the district web site.

Informal Educational Opportunities

Schools can publish brief tips in school newsletters and on district/school websites. Older students could also assist in producing these. These should provide brief positive, norms-based insight.

Outreach Tied to Instruction

It is possible for teachers to specifically tie parent education with student instruction. This is the “Mom you have to read and sign my assignment” form of parent outreach.

Positive Comment

The most important strategy to recommend to parents is reliance on this specific technique: Every time they interact with their children in relation to using the digital technologies, they should be mindful of the need to make one positive statement about their children’s activities. Just one positive statement per interaction—more if they are so inclined.

This is classic operant conditioning. From the child’s perspective, interactions with a parent related to use of digital technologies will “feel good.” Thus, the child will be more inclined to want to share aspects of his or her digital life with a parent.

Filtering & Monitoring Technologies

There are excellent family safety features that are provided through computer operating systems and browsers, or provided as a software or service by companies. These features are also provided on interactive gaming consoles. These family safety features allow parents to limit their child’s access to selected sites, control who can communicate privately, manage time spent online, and review the history file. Their child should know that everything he or she does online is open to their review. These safety features can be useful in creating a “fenced play yard” for children.

Parents of tweens and teens should never expect to be able to keep their children in electronically fenced play yards using filtering software. To show parents the futility of this, simply conduct, or suggest that they conduct, a search on the term “bypass Internet filter.”

The current new marketing push is for parents to install monitoring software. These companies are, as is to be expected, marketing their products in a manner that communicates significant fear. Installing monitoring might be an appropriate parental response if a child appears to be at higher risk or as a logical consequence of situations where their child has engaged in wrongdoing. However, there are some significant concerns regarding reliance on monitoring technologies.

Some preteens and early teens might be willing to accept this level of parent involvement, but a significant number of them will view this degree of intrusiveness as an indication that their parents do not trust them. Monitoring technologies can also encourage passive reliance on a technology quick fix. Some companies provide monitoring for free, but are market profiling children’s personal communications.

General Guidance for Parents

The following guidelines are appropriate for parents of children, tweens, and teens:

• Appreciate your child’s online activities. Show interest in your child’s online friends. Help your child learn to make positive choices in accord with your family’s values, and comment positively every time you notice that they have done something that reflects these positive values.

• Never overreact if your child reports an online concern. You want your child to feel comfortable reporting online concerns. Your first comment when your child reports a negative situation should be positive. Your next comment must indicate a commitment to a partnership in respond to the situation.

• Use logical consequences. If your child engages in any risky, inappropriate, or harmful behavior, impose a logical consequence that will focus your child’s attention on why this action has caused or could cause harm to him or her or to someone else. Require that your child remedy any harm.

• Pay attention to possible red flags. Red flags include appearing emotionally upset during or after use, disturbed relationships with family members or friends, spending too much time online, engaging in excessively secretive behavior when using digital technologies, and making subtle comments about online concerns. If any red flags are evident, pay closer attention and carefully try to engage your child in discussion.
• Encourage personal responsibility. Encourage your child to help others directly or to report to you or another responsible adult if he or she witnesses someone being harmed or at risk online.

• Maintain computer security. Make sure you have implemented appropriate security against malware, use a spam blocker, block pop-up ads, and use safe search features. Never allow peer-to-peer (P2P) software, as this can lead to accidental access of pornography and is a significant source of malware that can result in identify theft.

• Educate yourself on issues of profiling and advertising. Read the privacy policies. Pay attention to the strategies sites use to obtain your child’s demographic and interest information and the various ways in which sites advertise, including targeted banner ads, ads integrated into games, and sites that ask their child to sign up to receive ads or send ads to their friends. When you recognize these profiling or advertising techniques, point them out to your child to increase his or her understanding. Take advantage of the emerging ability to restrict the ability of sites to track use for profiling.

Parenting Tips for Children & Tweens

When children are young, it is the parents’ responsibility to make sure their Internet use is in a safe online environment and that they engage in safe communications. Children who still believe in the tooth fairy cannot be expected to protect themselves online. To them, the Internet is more of a “magic box.” By third grade, young people can begin to grasp essential concepts about how the Internet functions, which provides the ability for them to take on more personal responsibility for good decision making. By middle school, many tweens will want to jump into environments and activities with teens. This shift needs to be made carefully, based in part, on an understanding of the child’s social-emotional maturity.

These are strategies educators can advise parents to take for children and tweens:

• Create a “fenced play yard” for your younger child online. Limit your child’s access to sites you have selected as appropriate. As your child grows, make decisions together about additional sites that are appropriate.

• Make sure you personally know everyone your child is able to communicate with through e-mail, instant messaging (IM), and any other form of personal communications. Limit communication with strangers to general areas of safe, moderated children’s sites.

• Keep your family computer in a public place in your house so you can remain engaged in what your child is doing.

• If you provide a cell phone to your child or tween, implement the safety and security features provided by the company.

• If you want to allow your child to participate in a social networking environment, select a safe site that is designed for children and tweens, not teens.

• It is best not to allow your child to register on social networking sites for users over the age of thirteen. If you do allow this, go through all privacy settings to make sure that only accepted friends can see your child’s profile. Have your child’s login password, insist that your child only establish friendship links with people whom he or she knows and trusts, and review all friends to make sure this is the case. Advise your child that you will regularly review his or her profile, and if any material is posted that is not safe or not in accord with your family’s values, you will place restrictions on his or her use.

• Help your child create a safe and fun username that does not disclose personal details, as well as a safe password. Make sure your child knows to never disclose his or her password to anyone other than you. Use your e-mail address for any site registrations.

Parenting Tips for Parents of Teens

Encourage parents to be actively and positively involved with their teens by transmitting the following insights.

• Implement the use of cell phone safety and security features, if you have any concerns about your child’s responsible use. Otherwise, discuss these issues of responsible use, including texting and creation of potentially damaging images of self or others. Make sure that your child turns off his or her cell phone when going to bed. If there are any problems associated with this, make sure his or her cell phone remains outside of the bedroom at night.

• When your child sets up a social networking profile, jointly go through all privacy settings to make sure that only accepted friends can see this profile. Insist initially that your child only establish friendship links with people he or she knows face-to-face and trusts. But as your child gains experience, allow the establishment of friendship links with people whom your child’s friends know face-to-face and people they meet online through safe online activities. Jointly review the profile of anyone whom your child does not know face-to-face to evaluate this person’s values, standards, and choice of friends.

• Either have your child’s login password (best approach when they are starting) or create your own profile and friend your child, so that you can regularly review what is happening on your child’s profile, including materials posted and friends added. Advise your child that you will regularly review his or her profile, and if any material is posted that is not safe or not in accord with your family’s values, you will place restrictions on his or her use.

• Keep your computer in a public area until your child is older and has demonstrated that he or she is making positive choices.

• Pay attention to what your child is doing online, but balance your supervision with your child’s emerging legitimate interests in personal privacy. Positive interactions will encourage your child to share. Remember, at this age, if your child feels that you are overly intrusive, he or she could easily find a way to go behind your back. In a few short years, your child will be out of your home. It is necessary for him or her to independently make safe and responsible decisions, which requires practice in doing so.

Embracing Digital Youth

Embracing Digital Youth (a program of Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use) promotes approaches that will best ensure all young people become cyber savvy and that seek to address youth risk in the digital age in a positive and restorative manner. 

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Nancy Willard’s online course, Empowering Students Against Digital Aggression, Abuse, and Exploitation (Knowledge Delivery Systems) provides comprehensive coverage of these issues. Her new, Cyber Savvy: Embracing Digital Safety and Civility (Corwin Press), and online course, Cyber Savvy: Promoting Students’ Safe and Civil Internet Practice (Knowledge Delivery Systems) extensive insight into effective instructional approaches.

