

# Introduction

## Throw Away the Rule Book

For thousands of years, we have relied on our parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles for parenting advice. While we often get advice that we don't want and didn't ask for, we instinctively turn to what our parents might have done. Recently, I have found myself asking the following questions:

"When did my parents reward my good behavior with apps?"

"How did I finish my homework while texting, chatting, tweeting, and posting?"

"How old was I when my parents gave me my first smartphone?"

"How did my parents choose which Disney series to download, and which role-playing video game (RPG) was acceptable to play?"

"How did my parents keep my sister and me safe and protected from cyberbullying and sexting?"

"How did my parents help us manage our digital footprint and instill in us the tenets of good digital citizenship?"

"How did my parents help me balance the need to be digitally connected with the need for real play and real human interaction?"

Wait! I grew up in the 1970s and '80s, and my parents were awesome, but they didn't face any of these dilemmas. I was born before the

digital revolution. I am what is now called a “digital immigrant.” Technology is not my first language. I have learned it and embraced it, and it now runs much of my life, but I’m not completely fluent. I speak “technology” or “Digitalese” with an accent. If I am keeping track properly, my 9-year-old and 7-year-old sons are the youngest members of the iGeneration, the millennials, or the “app generation”—born since the inception of the Internet. My 5-year-old daughter, born in 2008, is a “Digitod.” The Internet is ancient history for her generation. She was born after the iPhone and following the touch-screen revolution.

Technology has changed since you were a kid. In fairness, technology is always changing, and every generation of mothers and fathers faces a different landscape from their parents. My father never tired of telling me that his family was one of the first in Winnipeg to own a television. He and his brother sat for hours watching the “Indian-head” test pattern before there was any real programming. From the 1950s to the ‘80s technology advanced at the speed of sound, but today we are experiencing progress at the speed of light.

There is an ongoing intellectual debate about whether we drive technology (instrumentalism) or whether it drives us (determinism). Sigmund Freud promoted the concept that our early childhood experiences shape who we are as adults. That is not to say that we can’t reshape who we are, but there is no escaping your childhood completely. This is also true when you are parenting. The problem here is that no one has any direct experience with growing up with interactive digital technology. I suspect that our kids will have it a bit easier when they grow up. They will, at least, have experienced childhood in the digital era, from which they can draw parenting tools. Today, no one has any real personal experience helping parents figure out whether toddlers should use the “iPotty” or learn to read on a tablet. No one can say definitively when children should get their first smartphone or sign up for Instagram. How do you help your preteen daughter balance her changing body with the pressures of managing her online identity? How do you help your teenage son manage the demands of high school with the constant intrusions of games, messages, and Instagram?

You and your usual sources are equally lacking in experience on how to parent with digital technology. Unfortunately, the “experts” don’t offer much help here either. There is burgeoning research in this

area, but limited longitudinal studies. Even studies that have followed kids since the '90s are somewhat outdated at this point. A lot of the early research was fearful and pessimistic. It mostly focused on passive television watching, and there hasn't been much time to focus on interactive digital technology.

My friends and my family repeatedly asked me why I embarked on this project when I have a full-time job and three kids. I decided to embark on this project because as a parent and as a child and adolescent psychiatrist, I wanted to develop a more thoughtful approach to parenting with digital technology. There is so much fear about the digital age. When I tell friends and colleagues about the book, the first response is usually a fearful one: "Are you going to tell parents how to keep their kids safe?" or "Is there any chance that our kids will grow up to have meaningful relationships?" You can run, but you can't hide from the digital age. It is here to stay, so I wanted to develop a more fearless approach where we embrace it and control it so we are not controlled by it.

I've seen mind-boggling benefits accrue to kids who are digital natives, as well as disadvantages, both in my office and at home—some of them completely unexpected. I wanted to combine the collected knowledge of pediatrics, psychiatry, and parenting to answer the questions we digital immigrants ask and to start a constructive dialogue about how we can get the full benefit of this "new" technology for our kids while minimizing any downsides.

I routinely get calls from parents asking if their child is ready for an iPhone and whether it is safe for the child to join Instagram and play Call of Duty. As I sit at Le Pain Quotidien (a New York Belgian-bakery franchise) finishing up the book, all I have to do is listen to people at the neighboring tables to hear the questions. On my right, a young couple Googles "recommended screen times" for toddlers, while their 18-month-old baby sits in the high chair pinching and swiping his parents' other iPhone. On my left, two teenage girls sit facing each other, feverishly texting and laughing while looking at their phones. They are interacting with each other in a way that even the *Jetsons* and the sci-fi movies couldn't have dreamed up when I was growing up in the 1980s. Unfortunately, there is no parenting playbook for each new update and innovation. We are suspicious of SnapChat and fearful of the epidemic

of sexting and unprepared for what comes next. Parents, educators, and physicians are in a constant state of “catch-up.” We want rules but there are no rules. The goal of this book is to help you develop a thoughtful, systematic approach to digital technology with rules, guidelines, and open communication in place as early as possible.

As with any other parenting issue, our approach needs to be developmentally appropriate. What is appropriate for a 12-year-old may not be for a 9-year-old. When is it OK for your son to start playing *World of Warcraft*? At what age can your daughter be trusted with the responsibility and privilege of her own smartphone? Throughout this book, I encourage you to rely on your own instincts and your intimate knowledge of your children. You know your family best, and you know the values and customs underlying your family’s culture. Trust them to guide you.

Of course you’ll also want to know what the research has to say. I offer the scientific evidence that we do have, and when there isn’t research, I try to make recommendations based on my teaching and clinical experience. The hope is that your children will develop online resilience and a healthy evolving digital footprint that promotes self-expression, not self-destruction.

A lot of earlier research warned of an anticipated digital divide between rich and poor—the idea that poor kids have less access to digital technology and this will hold them back and keep them in poverty. The “digital divide” research has already changed in the last 5 years, with more computers in classrooms and the smartphone revolution. A recent Northwestern University study found that lower-income families had more devices than families with incomes over \$100,000 per year. The current concern is not about access but about usage. If lower-income kids are accessing the Internet with smartphones and not computers, will they be able to create online or only consume? In the early 2000s, researchers were concerned that social networking would replace “real” friendships with online strangers. With the pervasiveness of social media and the Internet, the issue now is how you can best connect with your “real-life” friends in a virtual world.

Our parents can’t help us here, and the research keeps on changing. So what do we do now?

Since your parents and the researchers are of little help, we need to go back to the drawing board and develop an upgraded parenting model. We break down this journey into three steps:

**1. Figure out your parenting style and family culture.** The “rules” by which you parent and the customs followed in your household form the foundation for your children’s use of digital technology. You must integrate digital technology into your children’s life in a relatively seamless way that is consistent with your family culture, values, and rules. For example, you are doomed to failure if you decide that your 10-year-old son should be limited to 1 hour of gaming per day when your spouse plays Angry Birds for hours and hours. Restricting your 15-year-old daughter’s TV time to 2 hours when the TV has been on in the background of your home since her birth could be setting yourself up for conflict. In Chapter 1, I take you through the process of discovering the roots of your parenting, defining your own parenting style, and then candidly assessing your family’s technology diet. The ultimate goal is to consider what kind of relationship you have with technology and what kind of relationship you wish to model for your family in the future.

**2. Understand the digital landscape.** It’s important to understand the developmental evolution of the use of digital technology: what happens at what age. It’s also essential to get a feel for how digital technology is actually used today by children and adolescents. The entire basis of this book is developmental. That is, all of my analyses and recommendations are founded in an understanding of the developmental goals and milestones of different ages. This developmental model of digital parenting will examine how technology supports growth and what specific issues you need to address at each stage of your child’s life. We examine the research on how technology affects your child’s development in Chapter 2 and take a tour of the broader digital landscape in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4, I introduce the hot topics that monopolize conversations among parents—everything from the iBlankie to the proverbial 5 minutes of Facebook fame. Then in Part II of this book you’ll find chapters about different age groups, each of which explains how digital technology intersects with what your child needs to achieve during

those years and how you can promote technology as a tool to support, not hinder, healthy development. In Chapter 11, we take a more sophisticated look at children who need more attention and parental involvement and may exhibit red flags for attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, and depression. These “orchid” children may need extra care and modified digital parameters.

**3. Create a family technology plan and family media rules to ensure that technology has a positive impact on your child’s development.** The subject of rules will come up over and over in this book, with specifics pertaining to different developmental ages in the chapters in Part II. While I’ll advocate a few hard-and-fast dos and don’ts, for the most part it’s your family and your rules. I will encourage you to be honest with yourself and the reality of your own tech use—which of course you model for your children every day. I will help you think through your own values, beliefs, and customs so you can apply them to your family technology plan. The concluding chapter provides guidelines for putting everything you’ve read in the book into your personalized family technology plan. I strongly suggest you take the time to formulate a plan for your family. It’s the only way to chart an intentional course through this wide-open frontier. With a family technology plan and an understanding of the shifting digital landscape, your family can make the best possible use of digital technology and remain adept, smart, safe users of the most exciting tools the world has ever known.