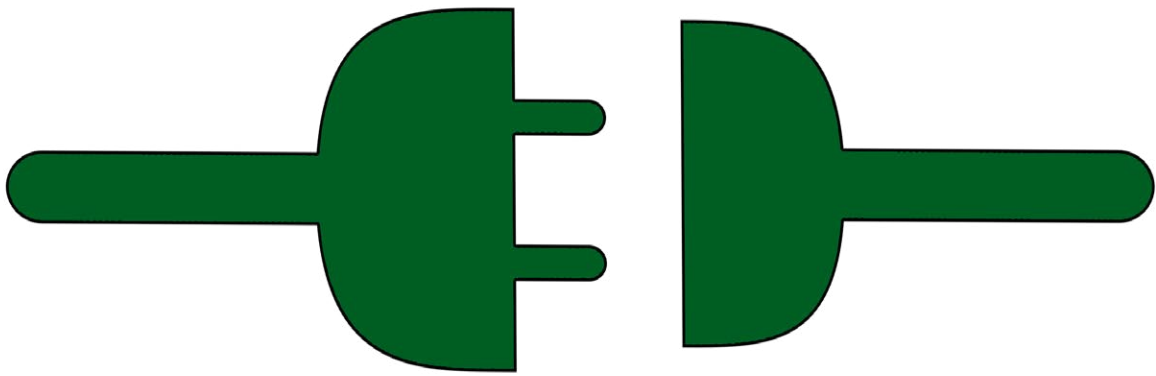


MMB



PLUGGED IN

BUILDING TECH-HEALTHY FAMILIES

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I. INTRODUCTION

THE TECHNOLOGY DILEMMAS OF TODAY'S PARENTS

Parents now face daily dilemmas about technology, social media, and their kids, a common point of anxiety, frustration, and even despair. Parents are in a difficult situation. Most feel a sense of responsibility to make good parenting decisions around technology, but often are overwhelmed by the diversity or lack of information to empower them in these choices. Meanwhile, the technology and social media landscape changes so rapidly that many parents want to throw their hands up in frustration, rather than track and adapt to these constant changes.

The troublesome aspects of technology move many parents to delay and then dramatically restrict their kids' access to various technologies. But they also recognize that, increasingly, doing so is impractical and may seem to keep their kids from being connected socially. Parents often hear their children lament, "But I'm the only one my age who doesn't have [insert the device or app]!" Parents hesitate to give their children access, but they also fear isolating their children at a time when kids are anxious about being left out.

Furthermore, parents often feel their children know substantially more about technology than they do. When their children bring a technology-related request to them, parents often feel uninformed about exactly what their kids are asking for.

THE PURPOSE OF MB PLUGGED IN

MB Plugged In: Building Tech-Healthy Families is a service of All In Mountain Brook and aims to offer parents the technology-related information and some of the support they need.

Shortly after its organization in 2023, MB Plugged In volunteers began gathering local information. People who work with children and teenagers may offer considerable knowledge about youth's use of technology in ways and to degrees that would be difficult for parents. Pediatricians, therapists, youth pastors, teachers, and school counselors often discuss social media with kids and otherwise encounter the widespread use of it on a regular basis. They often are familiar with research on the mental health impact of technology and social media as part of their jobs. In addition to these professionals, college and older high school students have also learned experiential lessons about practices in this area that could benefit parents.

MB Plugged In aims to connect parents with these groups, who offer insight and wisdom. We have conducted seven focus groups in which we asked the individuals what they believe parents need to know about technology and social media, how it functions in the lives of teenagers, and at what age certain apps seem reasonably safe. In addition, volunteers have read studies and articles about the connections between social media and the mental health of teenagers.

Through these sources of information, MB Plugged In provides resources such as this report, has hosted its first Technology and Youth Conference held in April 2023 and attended by over 225 parents, and creates opportunities to participate in the MB Plugged In campaign to help parents in our community form or expand their knowledge and skills in these ways:

(1) Be informed and confident about technology and social media.

We want to help parents develop a familiarity with the technologies and social media that kids use, to understand how they function in kids' lives, and what potential dangers each may involve. We hope that parents of younger kids will feel they know enough about social media to be able to communicate the way they would hope when introducing their children to various technologies. We hope that all parents will find themselves on a more equal footing with their kids and that parents of younger children will have the knowledge to be more proactive than reactive.

(2) Have a proactive plan.

Parents often feel as if they are constantly reacting to their children's requests for apps and technology. They report that it feels like a never ending negotiation. They do not always know how to react to their kids' constant pressure for more access and freedom. An objective of MB Plugged In is to provide resources and suggestions that may enable parents to develop a proactive plan for when they allow children to have certain technologies. We hope that with knowledge and a plan, parents will not feel as if they are constantly saying, "No," but can respond, "Not now, but maybe in the future, provided you demonstrate that you can handle other technologies."

(3) Have a sense of community solidarity in navigating this challenge.

This year and in coming years, we intend to provide opportunities for parents to participate in and support a campaign to create a tech-healthy community for our kids and families. Through the campaign, we hope that parents will not feel alone and will instead feel solidarity and support. When their children say, "But I'm the only one," a parent will be able, we hope, to respond, "No, look at all the bumper stickers and signs around the community. There are lots of families that are taking a slower approach to technology and social media." You can find information on how to participate in this campaign on the last page of this document and in communications to come.

LIMITATIONS

(1) Each child is different. Every family is different.

Parents are the experts on their own children. They have their own values and goals. No parent should feel burdened or pressured by guidelines and recommendations. We recognize the complexity of the problem and respect both the struggles and the best efforts of parents to navigate this tough problem. This guide is not intended to be prescriptive.

(2) We do not demonize technology, nor any particular social media platform. Although regulation of these technologies will continue to be debated by policymakers, we are confident that social media and related technologies are here to stay and will continue to develop.

In this report, we share comments and observations from focus groups and research that may point to risky or unhealthy ways that young people use certain devices and apps. Of course, technology enhances our lives in many ways, and digital technologies now seem indispensable. We do not intend to vilify these technologies, but instead to add to parents' knowledge on the risks that may exist with age-inappropriate use.

II. DEVELOPMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

Parenting decisions and practices are based on parents' best understanding of their kids' development. Parents are less likely to ask themselves if they ever will allow their kids to do X or have access to Y, than to ask when they will.

When considering the risks and benefits of various technologies, parents consider common characteristics of their kids' development. A rough division we have used in our work is "childhood" (before age 11), early adolescence (ages 11-14) and middle-late adolescence (ages 15-17). This section of the report focuses on some basic developmental challenges that kids encounter in the late elementary school and junior high phases, and how they relate to technology use and boundaries. We will use these developmental terms often but will tend to make recommendations based on grade level.

KEY DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES

Fitting in

In late elementary school and middle school, kids are often concerned about fitting in with their peer groups. They fear being left out. (Thus, the popular acronym Fear of Missing Out, "FOMO.") This presents several implications for technology. First, if they sense that most peers have access to a given technology, they may pressure their parents for access to that technology to avoid feeling on the outside of their peer group. Increasingly, this is a concern over which parents may empathize with their kids. When young people say that, for example, Snapchat is a primary means through which their peers plan their social lives, they are likely telling the truth and revealing their worry about being left out. Moreover, social media fuels kids' hypersensitivity to feeling left out. For example, on Snapchat, many students use "Snap Map" which shows where their friends are at a given time. On any given night, a student may see that their friends have all gathered some place and wonder why they were not included. The same can occur on other platforms, such as Instagram, where kids post pictures with their friends together, and other peers perceive that they have been excluded.

Adolescent egocentricity

Egocentricity, in which kids demonstrate an overly self-involved perspective, is often seen in adolescence. During this phase, kids have a reduced ability to think about how their actions affect other people. This may be why middle schoolers are sometimes stereotyped as "mean," and why a fair amount of bullying occurs during this time of life. These factors are exacerbated when youth interact virtually because, not only do they not naturally think about how their words may hurt another person, but they also cannot observe the emotional impact of their actions as they might if they were face-to-face. For example, a group may post a picture on Instagram of them out together socially and not consider how it may affect another friend in the group who was not included.

Body image and comparison

During and after puberty, young people are often distinctly self-conscious about their bodies. They can struggle with comparison in general during this season, but it's common that they particularly experience difficulty in relation to their bodies. In the MB Plugged In focus groups, many professionals warned about the problems that certain platforms can present as children, particularly adolescent girls, follow lifestyle and fitness influencers, which can create a greater sense of anxiety around body image. There is a premium placed on videos posted by people who have improbably "perfect," idealized bodies.

Imaginary audience

A challenging aspect of early adolescence is what may be called “imaginary audience,” a concept in developmental psychology championed by David Elkind. This refers to the time when a young person gains a heightened awareness that other people can formulate impressions of them. This new level of awareness contributes to an exaggerated sense of self-consciousness and a belief that others perceive and focus on one’s flaws. Since a natural stressor of adolescence involves the feeling that they are living their life in front of an audience, some social psychologists note that social media platforms may heighten this anxiety. Not only do social media platforms expressly create a child’s “profile” in front of an audience, but the platform’s audience also “likes” and comments on the child’s posts. These factors can push all the unpleasant buttons of the imaginary audience aspect of early adolescence.

Still-developing executive functioning

We typically think of executive functioning in relation to a person’s ability to plan, manage time, think through decisions, assess outcomes of decisions, and monitor impulses. While neuroscience and psychology explain this, those who work with kids observe a substantial difference between the executive functioning of early adolescent / middle schoolers and high school kids. High school youth have a better ability to manage both their impulses and their time. Because most youth prior to high school (and some kids in high school) have underdeveloped self-regulation skills, parents recognize their need to help children set boundaries and learn to self-regulate. A fundamental aspect of parenting is the application of external regulation as children’s self-regulation develops.

III. PRINCIPLES FOR APPROACHING TECHNOLOGY

The following are themes of principles that came out of the focus groups and research. These principles may help guide parents as they navigate technology and social media.

Consider the Cognitive Limitations of Late Elementary and Middle School Students

As we would expect, the executive functioning and decision-making of an early adolescent and a late adolescent (high school) youth are considerably different. In our focus groups with high school students, they discussed the difference in how they handle social media / technology today versus how they did in their early adolescence. They see themselves as having developed some ability to self-regulate in ways they just were not capable of when younger. For example, they talked about their growing abilities to limit their time on, for example, TikTok, to allow themselves to study, in a way they could not when they were younger. Professionals in focus groups commented on the self-regulation skills that late elementary and early adolescents do not have as an aspect of brain development.

Furthermore, high school and college students expressed concern for younger kids on certain apps, where they could be exposed to, exploited, and negatively influenced by adult strangers. High school kids talked about the necessary thought process in considering friend requests, to make sure they are not from people seeking to exploit them. Younger kids simply do not have the life experience or cognitive maturity to assess which users on social media present a threat.

Take a Slow-Technology, Not “No Technology” Stance

Without exception, all focus groups urged a slow, one-at-a-time adoption of technology. Students talked about the overwhelming onslaught they experienced when they first started carrying a smartphone and mostly had immediate access to all apps. They strongly urged parents to introduce apps one at a time and to monitor and guide this slow pace. Children, they felt, cannot handle degrees of digital freedom often granted to them, and parents cannot adequately monitor it. Parents should, our focus group recommended, restrict a child’s ability to download apps on their phone, or else the parent will be unable to control their pace. This one-at-a-time approach can be used to incentivize kids to use technology responsibly to earn more freedom and privileges.

Consider a Less Punitive, Less Fear-Based Approach (Guidance vs. Policing)

The high school youth in our focus groups, college students, and youth pastors were emphatic and universal in their agreement that parents should not rely on playing the role of “the police.” They encouraged parents to walk through this transition with their kids in a relational manner, in which they avoid a tone of threat of punishment and instead try to cultivate trust with their child. Youth pastors frame this as going on the technology journey together. If parents convey mistrust from the outset, kids are more prone to lie and hide, because they are operating out of fear of punishment, knowing that the punishment for inappropriate use of technology is often withdrawal of their technology privileges. Information and a proactive plan can help parents create a trusting relationship when it comes to technology.

Many parents adopt an approach that they will moderate their negative response when their kids come to them and tell them about a problem they have had on social media, as opposed to “catching them” in the act. Many parents recognize that overuse of punishment and restriction has the unintended consequence of encouraging more secrecy and concealment of online behavior. This argues for a balance of providing support and reinforcement for kids choosing to talk to their parents about their lives, along with measured, non-judgmental punishment when required.

Try to Stay Up to Date

Focus groups all emphasized that parents need to be sufficiently informed to speak intelligently with their kids about social media. It helps to build trust in the relationship. We hope that MB Plugged In can be helpful to parents in feeling more confident and informed.

Kids Need Parents to Regulate Their Technology Use

Young people in focus groups talked about the difficulty and frustrations they experienced because of an inability to regulate themselves on social media in early adolescence and to a lesser degree in high school. They indicated that, despite their protests, kids need (and probably want) their parents to help them regulate their social media use. In every focus group, we repeatedly heard participants say, “A junior high kid cannot handle _____,” meaning that they do not have the maturity or cognitive development to regulate the use of apps that can be addictive, abused, and employed to victimize others.

Consider Similar Approaches to Teen Driving and Technology Use

Focus groups and reviewed articles compared the journey of parents guiding their kids in learning to drive at the right time to learning to use technology appropriately. Cars have considerable utility and value but pose real danger. Parents know to slowly introduce teenagers to driving at a developmentally appropriate time, devoting, ideally, an entire year to supervised practice and skill-development. We do not let them drive at twelve or thirteen. We do not put them on the interstate for their first drive. We start in parking lots at age fifteen. We then drive on non-busy city streets. It is a slow, gradual process requiring patience and guidance. All voices advocated for the same slow and measured approach to technology.

Communicate Expectations Before Privileges Are Granted

Students in focus groups recommended that parents clearly communicate expectations of appropriate use before a child is given new technology privileges. All groups encouraged written technology contracts/agreements.

Be Mindful About Young Women, Body Image, and Related Anxiety

Students and professionals repeatedly highlighted the pressures and anxieties that social media creates for girls dealing with the already challenging issue of body image. Girls either seek out or are fed content on TikTok, YouTube, or Instagram that heightens their insecurities and anxieties around dieting and weight loss. These apps present unrealistic standards for bodies and prompt comparisons that are likely to impact self-esteem and body image. In addition, the research’s most developed theme is the proposed correlation between a rise in teen female anxiety and social media.

Consistent concern for access to pornography

Students and professionals talked about the pervasive presence and easy access to pornography in certain apps. When parents allow students to have access to the internet on any device, they should have the parental controls set to the strictest level for content. (They should also have a code that prevents a child from changing the content settings, allowing them to access pornography and then turn it back to the restricted mode when finished.) Additionally, most focus groups identified social media apps, such as Twitter, TikTok, and Snapchat, as backdoor avenues to pornography. Most social media apps do not permit pornography, but they do permit users to promote pornography and illegal sexual services. Given the damaging effect and potential for addiction, parents want to restrict access to pornography as much as possible.

Universal concern for the role of technology in sleep deprivation

Professionals, particularly pediatricians, expressed concerns over technology’s role in lack of sleep and low-quality sleep. Many students keep their phones in their room during the night and are awakened by notifications. Furthermore, overstimulation from social media appears to compromise sleep quality as well. Professionals strongly recommended that a child “put their phone to bed” a substantial amount of time ahead of when they go to sleep. They also urged parents to establish the boundary that their child is never allowed to take their phone into their room at bedtime and reminded us that old-fashioned alarm clocks are available at low prices!

IV. INFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA APPS

This section provides information about specific social media apps for parents. All In Mountain Brook and the MB Plugged In project do not take any specific position on these apps. In this section, we compile the information provided in studies and the focus groups for the information of parents. The age recommendation does not mean that a child should have the app at this age but that this is the earliest the focus groups generally thought it should be considered.

BE REAL	
How Kids Use	Be Real is a photo-sharing app that allows users to post once per day. Only their followers can see the pictures. Be Real does not provide any filters that allow users to manipulate the appearance of the pictures. Many consider Be Real a good starter app.
Potential Risks	Be Real carries limited risk, but children’s use still needs to be monitored.
Earliest Age/Grade for Safe Access	School counselors were emphatic that families should not introduce Be Real before 7th grade.

INTERNET BROWSERS/WEB ACCESS	
How Kids Use	Internet browsers (Safari, Microsoft Edge, Chrome, etc.) enable a child to surf the Internet.
Potential Risks	It is imperative that a child have parental controls on their phone such that they cannot access pornography or inappropriate content. Furthermore, their phone must have a restrictions code that only the parent has, which prevents the child from getting into the parent controls and taking them off when they are away from their parents.
Earliest Age/Grade for Safe Access	As much as any app, when a child has restricted Internet access on the phone depends on the child and is at the discretion of the parents. In general, focus groups suggested 8th to 9th grade, with strong emphasis on parent controls and filters at the strictest level.

INSTAGRAM

How Kids Use	Girls and boys tend to use Instagram differently. Boys less commonly post pictures of themselves or their lives. They view other people’s profiles and posts more often. Some girls post pictures and videos. Most girls at the very least feel the need to “like” all their friends’ posts and perhaps comment on them too. They also follow celebrities and influencers. Boys and girls alike often have one account that they curate for an optimal outward appearance, and another that they share only with their friends.
Potential Risks	<p>Risks related to Instagram tend to differ for boys and girls. For girls, risks include challenges to body image as they compare themselves to the often-filtered images of influencers. They also experience pressure and to like and comment on all their friends’ pictures, a significant time waste. Finally, many studies point to IG as a likely cause of increases in teen girl anxiety and depression over the past ten years.^{1 2}</p> <p>Boys and girls alike can often receive direct messages encouraging them to access explicit material. They can also be vulnerable to “sextortion,” in which a person (usually a profile of an attractive young person) slowly builds a relationship with the child. They ask the child to friend them on Snapchat. On that platform, they will send nude or other inappropriate pictures and ask that the child send one in exchange. When they receive that picture, they threaten to distribute it to all their Instagram friends, unless the child gives them money.</p>
Earliest Age/Grade for Safe Access	The various focus groups unanimously pointed to 9th or 10th grade as the earliest time that students should have IG, especially girls.

¹ Facebook Knows Instagram Is Toxic for Teen Girls, Company Documents Show” (Georgia Wells, Jeff Horwitz, and Deepa Seetharaman, Wall Street Journal) <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-instagram-is-toxic-for-teen-girls-company-documents-show-11631620739>

² Teen Mental Health Is Plummeting and Social Media Is a Major Contributing Cause (Testimony Before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Subcommittee on Technology, Privacy, and the Law) <https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Haidt%20Testimony.pdf>

YOUTUBE

How Kids Use	It is important to distinguish between YouTube and YouTube Kids, the latter of which is considerably better monitored and curated with youth safety as a goal. Kids watch videos on YouTube (not YouTube Kids) for innumerable reasons. Some kids (boys in particular) start their own channels and try to gain a following. Girls seem to watch a variety of influencers who have Vlogs (video blogs) that focus on diet and skincare. Many focus group people commented on “what I eat in a day” videos that many girls watch.
Potential Risks	School counselors, therapists, and youth pastors all grouped YouTube in a similar category as TikTok, although they saw it as less addictive and less predatory. YouTube is like TikTok in that it reloads a new video, according to your interests, right after another video ends. Accordingly, experts commented kids waste lots of time on YouTube. Focus groups also expressed concern about girls seeking out content that heightens their anxieties and insecurities related to body image. School counselors, therapists, and youth pastors were emphatic about two things: that parents limit YouTube use and that students remain on YouTube Kids (not full-on YouTube) at least until 9th or 10th grade. Two counselors separately said, “I don’t know if I’ll ever allow my kids to have full-on YouTube.”
Earliest Age/Grade for Safe Access	YouTube Kids with time limits until at least 9th or 10th grade. At 9th / 10th grade parents may consider regular YouTube, according to their knowledge of their child.

SNAPCHAT

<p>How Kids Use</p>	<p>Snapchat is the primary way that middle and high school kids communicate and text one another. Snapchat functions for teenagers like texting / iMessage functions for parents. Youth like the filters, the “memories” feature, and the group texting features. Many kids maintain streaks with their peers where the app records the number of consecutive days where they “snap” (message) one another. A routine part of many teenagers’ days consists of going through their snaps to maintain their streaks. Teenagers do most, or all, of their group texting among peers here. When teenagers claim that Snapchat is the means through which their friends coordinate their social lives, they are telling the truth. Most teenagers regard Snapchat as indispensable.</p>
<p>Potential Risks</p>	<p>People refer to Snapchat as the “sexting” app because the messages and pictures disappear within a few seconds. There is a belief (and false sense of security) that whatever a child sends on Snapchat goes away forever (which fails to consider that people can screenshot photos, or a peer can take a picture of the photo with their phone when it comes through.) Snapchat has a very poor reputation among many adults. Few adults who work with kids ever communicate with them via Snapchat because of the lack of transparency and the negative associations of Snapchat.</p> <p>Kids waste a good amount of time on Snapchat maintaining streaks with peers every day. Students commented on how there are automated bots on Snapchat that will “friend request” users, particularly teenage boys. These bots are peddlers of pornography. If the child accepts the friend request, they will receive snaps from this user with pornographic images and links to their website. Furthermore, via the Discovery page on Snapchat, teens can access a great deal of pornography very easily. One final feature of Snapchat is the SnapMap. If students have location services on, they can see where all their friends are at any given time. This can lead to kids feeling left out when they see all their friends at the same place on a Friday night.</p>
<p>Earliest Age/Grade for Safe Access</p>	<p>Determining a safe age for Snapchat is a particularly challenging decision. In one focus group (youth pastors), half the group said that there is no age at which having Snapchat is wise or appropriate. However, the use of Snapchat as the primary texting app has become normalized among teenagers. Ideally, students would not have Snapchat before 10th grade for two reasons: first, Snapchat has many risks and vulnerabilities to which middle schoolers do not need to be exposed; second, if restricted, students would learn to use iMessage as their primary texting app -- helpful since Snapchat is frowned upon and not used among adults.</p>

TIKTOK

How Kids Use	TikTok is a social media platform used for creating and sharing short videos. Some kids will make silly videos or dance videos and post them on TikTok. Mostly kids will scroll through and watch videos for entertainment or for a break. It is not uncommon for kids to huddle around a phone in a social setting and watch TikTok together or to talk about videos they saw on TikTok at the lunch table. Note that TikTok has also rapidly become popular with adults.
Potential Risks	TikTok received the most intense condemnation in the focus groups (just ahead of Snapchat) because of its addictive nature and some of the content. The word “addicting” came up in every focus group relative to TikTok. Students often talk about falling into a “TikTok” trance, where they intended to watch for 5-10 minutes and then came out of it 30-45 minutes later. All groups identified it as a huge time waster for kids. Students talked about how TikTok disrupts their ability to focus when they study and that it disrupts their sleep. Students and adults alike talked about the presence of toxic and inappropriate content on TikTok, particularly people expressing extreme political, social, and religious beliefs that parents would not want influencing their child. (In three groups people explained that TikTok may block fully pornographic visual images, but that plenty of content talks about porn.) Many individuals in the “adult entertainment” industries and who engage in “sex work” have TikTok accounts. The hard thing about TikTok is that a user does not choose the content as much as the app feeds it to them based on algorithms. This can mean that if a user clicks on a video of a woman in a skimpy bathing suit dancing provocatively, he or she will get fed a stream of videos like this. Female students said TikTok causes as many, if not more, issues with body image than Instagram because girls are fed a stream of videos on weight loss, eating, and skincare that press on body image anxieties.
Earliest Age/Grade for Safe Access	Universal and emphatic agreement existed among the adult focus groups that no child should have TikTok prior to 10th grade. In one group (youth pastors), half of the participants said that there is no age where it is wise or healthy to have TikTok.

DISCORD

How Kids Use	Discord is primarily an app that enables people to play computer games together across devices in multiple locations. The app has evolved to a point that different ideological and interest-related affinity groups find each other and chat. Many boys who have Discord use it for gaming with their friends or with random people (although PlayStation, Switch, and Xbox have interfaces that enable kids to play together without Discord). Some boys like to watch other people play video games in the way that one might watch a sporting event. They may wish to interact with other gamers to get tips and strategies. Other students use Discord to find chat rooms for interaction with people in certain affinity groups.
Potential Risks	High school students expressed grave concerns about Discord for kids younger than high school due to the free access and interaction with adults (many of whom the students said parents would not want their kids communicating with). Professionals and students alike expressed concern about kids entering chats and groups that may have bad influences. Professionals expressed concern for kids who struggle socially going to Discord to find places of belonging that may not be particularly good influences on them.
Earliest Age/Grade for Safe Access	There was universal agreement among the focus groups that kids should not access Discord before 10th grade. Given the potential for communication with adults, high school kids believed middle schoolers are not equipped for the potential vulnerability of these interactions. Adults expressed a similar sentiment.

TWITTER

How Kids Use	Students did not suggest that many middle school kids use Twitter a great deal. They said that some students like to follow sports figures, sports updates, celebrities, or politics on Twitter. They associated Twitter more with high school kids than middle school.
Potential Risks	Both high school boys and girls described their surprise at the presence of pornography on Twitter. They said kids can easily access a great deal of porn via Twitter. One female student said, “I never really believed porn was as easily accessible as everyone says until I got on Twitter. There is so much porn on there.” High school and college students also said that Twitter can have many toxic interactions and dark messaging.
Earliest Age/Grade for Safe Access	The groups universally agreed that students should not have access to Twitter prior to 10th grade.

V. PATHWAY – GENERAL PHASES

This table provides phases that parents can use to adopt a proactive approach to technology and social media. These phases integrate and apply what we know about developmental psychology, research, and the risks and complexities presented by different apps.

PHASE	AGES	CHARACTERISTICS/MINDSET
Phase 1 Simple Plan: “Keep it simple.”	4th - 6th Grade	In this phase, we encourage parents to keep technology simple. According to the discretion of the parents and needs of the family, we recommend that children in this phase abstain from smart phones and social media. (The Wait Till 8th Campaign recommends that children not have a smart phone at least until 8th grade.) If a family decides that their child needs a phone of some sort, we recommend that it be a simple device, such as a Gizmo Watch, where a child can only call or text and their contacts are limited and controlled by the parents.
Phase 2 Slow Foundations: “Slow, age-appropriate introduction.”	7th - 9th Grade	In this phase, we encourage slow, stepwise, technology adoption. We are discouraging the “0 to 90 in 1 second” onslaught of technology that overwhelms kids. We are also trying to abstain from riskier social media apps due to the vulnerability of middle school children, a product of developmental factors. If a family decides to let a child have safer social media apps during this period, we recommend that they introduce them one-at-a-time with periods of time between apps. An approach a family may espouse is to tell a child with each app that if they demonstrate mature use, then they can earn more technology privileges down the road. This incentivizes kids to use responsibly.
Phase 3 Finishing Touches: “Preparing for the real-world with parents’ guidance.”	10th - 12th Grade	In this phase, parents use their discretion, according to their personal knowledge of their child and their instincts, to prepare children for independent use of technology after graduation. Consequently, the approaches that different families take will vary widely.

VI. PATHWAY – SPECIFIC TECHNOLOGIES IN EACH PHASE

This table is in line with the general phases in the previous section. In this table, however, we are more specific about apps that may or may not be included in each phase. The recommendations in this table come from the information included in the “Information about Social Media” section. We include the recommendations of research and the focus groups on when certain apps should be introduced.

PHASE	AGES	SPECIFIC
<p>Phase 1 Simple Plan: “Keep it simple.”</p>	<p>4th - 6th Grade</p>	<p>Included: Simple phone devices, such as Gizmo watches or Gabb phones, that only allow calling and texting. No apps and no exchanging pictures and videos.</p> <p>Excluded: Smart phones All social media</p>
<p>Phase 2 Slow Foundations: “Slow, age-appropriate introduction.”</p>	<p>7th - 9th Grade</p>	<p>Included: Be Real (not before 7th grade) Smart phones (not before 8th Grade) Internet browsers with strictest parental controls (not before 8th) YouTube Kids (until 9th grade, then possibly regular YouTube) Instagram (absolutely not before 9th grade, and 10th grade may be better)</p> <p>Excluded: Snapchat, TikTok, Discord, Twitter</p>
<p>Phase 3 Finishing Touches: “Preparing for the real-world with parents’ guidance.”</p>	<p>10th - 12th Grade</p>	<p>Parents can consider at this point, based on their child’s maturity and their own instincts, how to prepare their kids for independent use when they finish high school.</p>

VII. TECHNICAL SKILLS FOR PARENTS

We heard frequently from parents that they do not feel confident in their ability to utilize child protection / parental control features on their child's phone. The following are recommended skills that enable parents to set up their child's phone in a safe manner. This list does not actually offer the technical direction on how to use them; our current hope is that you can educate yourself via online resources. MB Plugged In thought it would be helpful to list some basic technical competencies that will empower parents, with the hope that we can provide more guidance in the future. One can find a tutorial for most of these functions via YouTube.

1. Set up a restrictions code for parental controls.

The parental controls section under Settings (often labeled Screen Time) on a smart phone enables a parent to restrict content and various functionalities. In this section, a parent can set the content restrictions to most strict, can restrict a child from downloading apps, etc. It is imperative that the phone has a restrictions code that prohibits the child (who is the user) from getting into the parental controls. If there is not a restrictions code, then the child can access the parental controls, turn off the filters and restrictions, and switch them back on when they are around their parents. Thus, the parental controls have no impact unless a restrictions code is set up.

2. Restrict a child's ability to download apps.

Equally as important as a restrictions code is turning off the option to download apps. If a child can download apps, then they can get any app they want, set up an account, use it, delete it when finished with a session, and re-download when they want to use it again. As cumbersome as this may sound, kids will do this routinely throughout a day to access apps that they want.

3. Set limits on apps.

If a parent wants to put a limit on the amount of time that a child can spend on a certain app, this functionality does exist on most smart phones and, for iPhones, can be found under "App Limits" under the Screen Time section of Settings. These limits can include a duration of time (ex: 30 minutes per day), or set specific times after which or during which the app cannot be accessed (ex: turn off a certain app after 8:30 p.m.). This regulating tool can be found under "Downtime" in the Screen Time section of Settings for an iPhone.

4. Turn off notifications.

A child's phone can buzz constantly when they receive messages, comments on a post, etc. Notifications can be an ongoing distraction throughout the day and night. In the documentary, *The Social Dilemma*, the top recommendation made at the end was for people to turn off notifications. Preemptively turning off notifications can help protect a student from these distractions.

5. Restrict MMS messaging on their phone.

MMS stands for multi-media messaging, which means a text message that includes a video, picture, or weblink. When a child first receives a smart phone, a wise move is to turn off MMS messaging to prevent them from sending or receiving pictures or videos with inappropriate content. This means that if they are in a group text and a student sends a pornographic image to the group, your child will not receive it if they have MMS messaging off.

6. Download a third-party monitoring device.

Many parents have found value in downloading a third-party monitoring device, such as Bark or Aura, to monitor activity on their child's phone. These devices often alert the parent if profanity or inappropriate material comes across a child's screen. Parents are advised to research options and talk to other parents about what has worked best for them.

7. How to block specific websites.

In parental controls (again often found under the "Screen Time" tab, you can block specific websites. You will want to do this, particularly for the websites of apps that you intend to prevent your child from accessing. For example, you may not want your child to access Twitter, so you do not allow them to download that app. However, your child can access Twitter all the same via an internet browser. Therefore, you would want to block www.twitter.com in parental controls where you are given that option. (On an iPhone, one can get into the parental controls to block websites with the following path: Settings → Screen Time → Content & Privacy Restrictions → Content Restrictions → Web Content.)

VIII. SKILLS AND PRINCIPLES FOR KIDS TO LEARN

The following are a few principles that people mentioned during the focus groups that may be helpful for parents to teach their children.

(1) Keep social media accounts private, not public.

Keeping your account private prevents strangers from seeing your content online. It can protect you from unwanted attention and interaction.

(2) Never accept a friend request from someone you do not personally know.

When you join a social media platform, you will receive frequent friend requests from people that you do not know. Many of these people will appear to be attractive and perhaps to be peers in your area. Often, people with bad intentions craft such accounts to exploit people.

(3) Feel free to turn comments and “likes” off on social media, particularly Instagram.

The female college students remarked that after high school they had turned off comments and likes on Instagram so that they could look at pictures but avoid drama and stress. They encouraged young women to consider this when they get on Instagram.

(4) If you come across troubling content online, talk to someone, ideally a parent.

Viewing inappropriate content can be traumatizing for a young person. It is critically important to talk to someone and process it in order to heal the effect of the exposure.

(5) Do not ever send a nude picture. Do not ask for nudes.

It is common (and unfortunately universal) that young women are solicited for nude pictures. No matter how much the boy promises that he will not send it to anyone, presume that the photo will be circulated to everyone in the school. For that reason and many others, never ever send nude pictures. If the person threatens you, tell someone. For boys, if you ask a girl for a nude, she likely will tell her friends and the word will travel around that you are the kind of guy who asks for nudes. You will get a bad reputation with girls in the grade.

(6) Know what sextortion is and avoid it.

First, if a person that you do not know personally sends you a friend request, decline it. If, however, you do end up with an unknown friend on social media, and they start trying to build a friendship with you through direct messages or snaps, be suspicious. If they ask you to send nudes, drop them as a friend. If they make threats, drop them as a friend. This person is likely trying to get compromising content from you, so that they can extort you for money.

IX. GET PLUGGED IN!

This report can understandably create some fear and anxiety for parents. While the issue of technology and our kids is scary, this information can help you become increasingly empowered, calm, and confident in guiding your children through this territory. Furthermore, a hope of MB Plugged In is to help parents feel a sense of support and solidarity, such that they are not taking this journey alone. The Plugged In Pledge can help fortify you and other parents along the way.

You can help create a sense of solidarity and support among tech-healthy parents by pledging to be **Plugged In!**

My family is committed to being.....

- (1) Plugged In to technology education: we will make a reasonable effort to stay informed about safe, healthy technology use for our child.
- (2) Plugged In to a healthy pathway for technology: we will make a reasonable effort to follow a healthy pathway for technology adoption.
- (3) Plugged In to my community: we will make a reasonable effort to promote safe, healthy technology use in our community.

In addition to signing the Plugged In Pledge, you can help make our community more tech-healthy and aware by putting an MB Plugged In bumper sticker on your car or by posting a yard sign.

Click [here](#) to sign the pledge.



APPENDIX: FOCUS GROUP NOTES

A critical source in creating this report was to conduct focus groups with people who have authoritative knowledge on technology and the experience of kids. These groups included professionals, like counselors, pediatricians, youth pastors, and therapists, as well as older, mature students. The following section is a short summary of observed themes and soundbites from each of these focus groups. In creating the pathway and other recommendations in this report, we integrated information from all these groups, as well as a substantial number of studies and articles.

COLLEGE STUDENTS

Themes

- Expressed significant concerns over middle school children having access to Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and Snapchat.
- Talked about how much comparison occurs on Instagram for boys and girls alike. Said that it feeds insecurities and anxieties, especially when they see they have been left out.
- Warned about bots on Snapchat that will ask to “friend” a person and then will send pornographic images to the user, trying to get them to access their website.
- Felt very uncomfortable with kids in general being on Twitter. Said there is lots of access to pornography and there is also much more dark, toxic messaging that could negatively influence kids.
- Looking back, they realize the intense demands on their time in junior high and high school. They felt like they really needed to manage time well to get everything done. They said unlimited technology is distracting and drains lots of time that middle and high school kids do not have. They pointed to TikTok as a massive time drain.
- Said in their experience that girls will start getting asked for nude photos around the eighth grade and that Snapchat is the primary avenue through which this happens.
- Felt like Be Real is the safest first app for a child.
- Stressed how critical it is for young people to have only private accounts on any social media, particularly Instagram. (Private account means that only your approved followers can see your posts and content.)
- Stressed the need for slow introduction to apps and social media; unanimously said “one-at-a-time.”

Notable Quotes

- *“I would preach, preach, preach private accounts on everything.”*
- *“Those first six months are critical for monitoring.”*
- *“One app at a time.”*
- *“Privacy to the world but transparency to people who care about you (like your parents).”*
- *“If you’re going to implement, do it one at a time. It’s a lot easier to train and monitor one at a time.”*
- *“Teaching not just against bad people out there but avoiding bad practices.”*
- *“Train your kids on how to use [social media] in a safe and responsible way. Incredibly important. Prepare them for independent use.”*
- *“Parents must work as a team. Be on same page. Both must buy in to the process.”*
- *“Approach them in a way that is loving.”*
- *“Having the tough conversations is so important. Not just ‘don’t send nudes’ but ‘here’s why.’”*
- *“Err on the safest side process. Once you think your kid is ready, wait a little longer. Don’t make decisions so that your kid will like you.”*

HIGH SCHOOL BOYS

Themes

- Hate the Life360 app where parents follow where their child is. Feel like it communicates mistrust and shuts down communication.
- Warned about Twitter and Reddit being unregulated and featuring access to porn and lots of harmful, toxic messaging.
- Said if a parent totally shuts out a child from any form of technology, the child will be totally isolated socially. Parents need to not be so strict that they alienate their child.
- Explained what “Sex-stortion” is, where a person with a fake account fraudulently builds a friendship with a boy via Instagram direct message. Then they move the conversation to Snapchat, where they send the boy “nudes.” Then they ask the boy for one nude. Then they extort the child by saying they’ll send the nude to all their Instagram followers if they do not pay them. The boys said frauds on Instagram engage boys frequently in this way. Boys need to be warned and given tools to recognize when a person who contacts them is seeking to “sextort” them.
- Explained the dangers of Discord, an app primarily used for playing video games with people on other computers. Said there’s lots of vulnerability for boys to interact with adult men who may have bad intentions. They were adamant about middle school boys not having access to Discord.
- Suggested that parents of girls be very honest with their daughters about how some boys can operate when it comes to nudes and sex. Let them know that boys will always pass on nudes that they receive from a girl to their buddies.
- Stressed slow introduction of apps. Said parents need to monitor and guide kids. It is impossible to do this effectively when a child gains access to multiple apps at one time.
- Talked about how overwhelming it was to get a smart phone and have unfettered access to pretty much any app they wanted. Said it was a terrible experience and wished their parents had slowed it down.
- Said parents need to be wary of letting a middle school child have access to technology where they can interact with adult strangers.

Notable Quotes

- *“Don’t add anyone that you do not know. Period.”*
- *“Best thing to do is to build trust with your kid. You need to warn them of the dangers.”*
- *“Should not be a dictatorship. Needs to be a relationship.”*
- *“Better to talk about this early. Know what is out there now. Fully explain it to your kid. Let them know your expectations before they get a phone or apps.”*
- *“Your entire life cannot be on the phone. It needs to just be an accessory.”*
- *“Your phone is there for your convenience, not for other people.”*
- *“Never let a child join any apps where a middle school child can meet people (i.e., adult strangers.)”*

HIGH SCHOOL GIRLS

Themes

- Like the high school boys, felt very negatively about Life360. Felt like it creates mistrust between parents and children and makes kids sneakier and more dishonest.
- Major theme: a desire for parents to be educated on social media, so that they can guide kids. Said when parents are not informed, they tend to write everything off out of fear without seeing how certain types of technology can be fine and beneficial. Would like for parents to take an approach of teaching students about responsible use.
- Instagram use becomes less frenetic and obsessive in high school compared to high school.
- Expressed concerns about TikTok and Twitter both having radical and toxic political and social messaging, as well as porn and soft porn. (Could not believe how much porn is on Twitter.)
- Said that if a girl sends a nude and it is passed around, it can ruin their entire middle and high school experience.
- Boys who ask for nudes get labeled as “bad guys” among the girls and are viewed as “sketchy.”
- Admitted that no matter how short a session on TikTok may be, they have trouble focusing on schoolwork after using it. Felt as if TikTok negatively affects their sleep too.
- Communicated grave concerns about young girls on TikTok largely due to diet and fitness influencer content that is constantly sent to girls. It really inflames anxiety around body image.
- Said as high school kids there is a responsible way to use Snapchat; it is not all bad.
- Strongly encouraged teen girls to turn off the location feature on Snapchat and other social media, which allows them to see where all their friends are.

Notable Quotes

- *“Some parents genuinely don’t care, and I don’t think that’s right. It’s okay for a parent to know what’s going on on their child’s phone.”*
- *“I feel like parents only focus on the bad things; they need to know the good things too.”*
- *“Every kid is different, and every parent should know their own child.”*
- *“Parents should lay out rules and expectations before they give their child a phone.”*

YOUTH PASTORS

Themes

- Expressed a unique amount of concern regarding YouTube compared to the other groups. Said students waste a great deal of time on it. Girls follow Vloggers (video bloggers) about weight loss, skin care, and all things related to body image. Some boys try to create channels and gain a following. Characterized as less menacing but like TikTok in terms of addiction and time-waste.
- Identified Discord and Reddit as places where kids could interact with adults that parents do not want engaging with their kids.
- Identified a trend of boys in 11th and 12th grade downloading gambling apps (such as MGM, Bavaro, Draft Kings, etc.), lying about their age and zip code, and getting into gambling this way.
- Explained that many kids have multiple Instagram accounts, one that their parents see and one for friends.
- Described a phenomenon among kids where they will not personally interact with certain people at school but will have a Snapchat relationship with them. They never acknowledge each other at school but may talk regularly via Instagram direct message or Snapchat.
- Hear kids express anxiety and stress over keeping up with Snapchat streaks and Instagram likes. Streaks are a score of how many consecutive days two friends have snapped (messed) each other on the app. Students waste lots of time going through their snaps each day just to keep their streaks alive. Girls in particular feel pressure to like all their friends' posts. If they do not, they fear that their friend will be mad at them.
- Emphasized taking a gracious approach as a guide and not the police. Think about a phone similarly to how we teach a child to drive a car. We are patient and knowledgeable.
- Viewed building trust with your child in this area as centrally important.
- Warned that children who struggle socially often find belonging online in places parents do not want their children hanging out if they are not regulated.
- Suggested that written contracts regarding phone and social media can be a good way to establish clear expectations and to ensure that both sides are seen and heard.

Notable Quotes

From female youth pastors

- *"Students should not be able to download apps. They can get apps that allow them to hide nudes."*
- *"The goal is to learn how to use this for good together."*
- *"A lot of parents will feel like they missed the boat, it's too late; your child probably has a lot of shame wrapped up in what they do on the internet. Be their advocate. Be their ally."*

From male youth pastors

- *"We have to learn how to disciple our kids through these things, not just discipline."*
- *"Technology is not the ditch to die in, to the extent that you ruin your relationship with your kids."*
- *"Parents be the biggest influence on your kid's life: Model, coach, monitor."*
- *"Letting your child take their phone to the room at night is like letting them sleep with a pedophile."*
- *"As a society it is somehow normal that we have billion-dollar industries built to exploit children."*
- *"A seventh-grade boy should not have to worry about getting addicted to porn and having their life damaged."*
- *"One day they're going to have it without you. Train them how to use it."*
- *"Teenagers are going to be the best teachers."*
- *"Parents don't need to feel like they must be experts, but they have every ability to love their kids where they are. Your ability to engage, love, and nurture is your greatest asset."*
- *"Parents and kids alike need to have a sense of how sketchy and stigmatizing it for a person to have Snapchat in the real world. People assume that you're sketchy if you're a 27-year-old adult who uses Snapchat."*
- *"Be an expert in knowing your child."*

SCHOOL COUNSELORS

Themes

- Less concern about the risk of predators on social media; more concern about peer-to-peer drama and stress.
- Agreement that no child should have any social media apps at all before seventh grade, including Be Real, which is viewed as the safest and best starter app.
- As was the case with youth pastors, college students, and high school kids, school counselors expressed serious concerns about the impact of social media on girls' anxiety over body image.
- Have serious concerns about how addicting TikTok, gaming, and social media are in general. The addictive nature of technology was a major theme among this group.
- Admitted that teenagers consider Snapchat indispensable for communication.
- Probably need to do less preaching, less talk about dangers, even about predators, on the theory that kids seem to be saying they have heard it all.
- If we tell kids our "door is open" to talk about bad things they encounter via technology, we must be willing to not overreact (with punishment, particularly taking away technology) when they do.
- A concern that well-intentioned "tough stance" by parents tends to undermine trust, push kids to be more secretive. Talked about the fear of having their technology taken away encourages secrecy.

Notable Quotes

- *"Kids have always been capable of finding other things to do than, say, homework or studying, but this is a whole new level of seductive and habit-forming content and play."*
- *"Please do not give kids Be Real before seventh grade."*

PEDIATRICIAN FOCUS GROUP

Themes

- Expressed strong concern for loss of sleep due to access to phones in the bedroom and overstimulation of social media. They emphasized the importance of sleep for teenage health and wellbeing.
- Expressed the need for kids to “put their phone to bed” for a good period of time before bedtime.
- Mentioned the negative impact of phones and social media on kids’ ability to hold attention.
- Lack of real, true community and connection.
- Identified problematic behaviors of parents around their kids: (1) texting and driving, (2) asking children to do something so they can post it on Instagram, (3) having phones at the dinner table and other family events.

Notable Quotes

- *“I cannot overstate the correlation between teen and pre-teen use of social media and anxiety. It is simply striking.”*
- *“I am also seeing a striking rise in late teens (high school age) coming to me seeking a diagnosis of ADHD (something that typically manifests at a younger age). In the vast majority of these cases, the person sitting on the exam table trying to tell me he is having problems with attention has his phone in his hand and looks at it more than a dozen times during his one- or two-sentence attempt at describing his problem to me, often swiping side to side to make a new image appear that he is not even looking at. It is heartbreaking. We are allowing our kids and teens to literally cripple their ability to hold attention. And worse, we are crippling both their ability and their desire to maintain eye contact and hold a face-to-face conversation.”*
- *“In my opinion, the single most important guiding principle for parents is intentionality. We may not make all the right decisions, but having conversations about why this is an important discussion and why boundaries are important is a good starting point.”*
- *“With limited time in well check-ups with pre-teens and teens, I usually give this one piece of advice relating to phone use: ‘Give the phone a bedtime that is earlier than your bedtime and put it to bed in a room that is not where you sleep.’ I give this advice directly to the pre-teen or teen with the parent listening to allow them to feel like this is a good decision that they are empowered to make for themselves, even if the parent hasn’t set this limit. Adopting this simple habit solves a whole host of technology-related woes.”*
- *“One of the most prevalent consequences I see as a pediatrician is simply loss of sleep. Many teens and even kids are given a personal device without boundaries or even basic time limits. A teen may lose hours sending Snapchats or lost in TikTok land before finally deciding to put the phone down. Even after the phone is put down, sleep may still be impacted due to fear of missing out, overstimulation, the effects of blue light inhibiting the body’s natural melatonin production, or all the above!”*
- *“Knowledge of these risks is important, but there can be a POSITIVE approach to our children’s relationship with technology. There is a healthy way to interact with technology if appropriate guidelines are followed. Talking to children about how to use technology safely provides an opportunity to foster trust and communication. Children are most likely to be ready for a device, and prepared to use it safely, when parents are ready to set a healthy example and to spend time developing a relationship with them around technology.”*

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