

Digital age is a new frontier for parents

Adults can help kids learn to use devices responsibly, maintain balance in their lives

By Pamela Lannom

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Managing teens and screens could be a full-time job, with the unlimited number of apps and sites that can be accessed from any smartphone.

"Nothing prepared any of us for parenting in the digital age. It's really hard," said filmmaker Delaney Ruston, whose documentary, "Screenagers" was shown this week at The Community House as part of the Community Speaker Series presented by Districts 181 and 86.

In the film, Ruston shares her struggles after giving her 13-year-old daughter, Tessa, an iPhone for her birthday. The gift was accompanied by a five-page contract Ruston and her husband, Peter, crafted.

Looking back, Ruston wishes she would have included Tessa in the process.

Involving kids in drafting such an agreement is key, said Dr. Cara Hurley of Hinsdale, a licensed clinical psychologist in private practice.

"When I work with teens and parents, one of the things I say is, 'Whatever your rules are, you've got to sit down with your kid,'" she said. "No adolescent is going to want to listen to their parents who are being dogmatic and saying, 'This is what you can and cannot do.' You have to collaborate with your kid in coming up with it."

Determining how much time kids should be allowed to use their devices can be a challenge. Hurley believes there's no one right answer.

"What is the best thing? Is it 30 minutes? Is it nothing during the week? How much is too much? I think you need to observe what is your child like afterward," she said. "Is the child having difficulty turning it off?"

Ele Santini, a licensed clinical social worker at Clarendon Hills Middle School, agrees.

"Parents really have to follow what feels right to them," she said. "Kids are really good about conning us. Parents have to really follow their gut on things and what they feel their child is ready for."

Hurley believes parents should talk to their kids about



Filmmaker Delaney Ruston was in Hinsdale Tuesday and Wednesday to answer questions after her documentary, "Screenagers," was shown as part of the Community Speaker Series. Kettering Hall at The Community House was packed Tuesday night with parents and some students interested in learning more about how families are coping in this digital age. (Jim Slonoff photos)

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the addictive nature of video games and help them learn to set boundaries with technology.

"Kids should not be having their phones in their rooms at night," Hurley said. "Nor should parents, in my opinion. There should be family rules around things."

Hinsdale police officer Mike Coughlin concurred.

"Once they get to middle school age — seventh and eighth grade — not every parent keeps the phone at the kitchen table at night," he said. "They let their kids have it. The parents have to be in charge or in control of that phone."

He suggests parents take advantage of different settings on the phone and software that prevents kids from accessing certain things after a certain time.

Peggy Furlong, parent of a 15-year-old freshman at Hinsdale Central and 13-year-old twins at Clarendon Hills Middle School, said technology has prompted changes in how her family approaches their daily schedule.

"This has kind of almost forced me and my husband

to almost go back to have the kind of routine that we did when our kids were toddlers and young grade schoolers," she said.

Having a routine helps establish good habits about when certain things are done around the house (homework, chores, eating, sleeping, etc.) and when digital devices can be used.

"It doesn't hurt adults and the whole family to kind of have a routine," she said.

Parents also can play an important role in helping kids navigate hurt feelings that can result from visits to Instagram or Snapchat, Santini said. Kids typically feel left out if they see photos of their friends out doing something fun while they are at home.

Parents understandably don't want to see their kids get hurt, she said, but they need to stay off the emotional roller coaster and maintain perspective.

"I think parents who set really good examples have kids who are more resilient," she said.

As much as it seems parental advice goes in one ear and

out the other, mom and dad are a significant influence on their children, educators at the Robert Crown Center for Health Education said.

"Talking is still one of the best ways to protect your kids and know what's going on," said Kris Adzia, director of education. "You are a huge influence on your child's life, despite all the things that seem to show the contrary."

That is important to remember given the messages that teens and pre-teens are exposed to, especially regarding sexuality, educator Rose Tenuta said.

"One of the things that we want to stress for parents is that messages about sexuality are everywhere in our culture now — music, videos, phone, Facebook, everywhere," she said. "As a parent, what I want to ask myself is, 'What do I want for my child in the future? What message do I want to give them?'"

"If we don't sit down and talk with our kids — and it isn't really one talk, it's many talks over many years — they are going to get information, but it may not be the information we want them to get."

■ DIGITAL LIVING

This is the last in a four-part series on the digital age and how it affects young people's mental health.

Another way to decrease the influence of devices is to make sure kids are leading full lives. Santini suggests parents encourage their kids to explore other interests, join clubs, connect with adults other than parents who are positive role models and keep their minds and bodies active.

"I think the best we can strive for is balance," she said.

Ruston, who acknowledges that she too can spend too much time on her computer, said adults don't need to be perfect. Their own struggles can be wonderful teaching opportunities.

"I hope that one of the big lessons we teach our kids is to have a growth mindset, to know that none of us are fixed in any personality trait we have or any endeavors we want to be better at," she said. "We're OK to say, 'Hey, I can get better at this.' That's what we want to show our kids."

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Advice for parents

Several sources shared their insights for this four-part series on the digital age and its affect on the mental health of adolescents and teens.

These pieces of advice are excerpted from conversations with the following individuals:

- Mike Coughlin, Hinsdale police officer
- Dr. Cara Hurley, licensed clinical psychologist in private practice
- Ele Santini, licensed clinical social worker at Clarendon Hills Middle School
- Delaney Ruston, physician and filmmaker of "Screenagers"

• Avoid being negative and fearful toward technology

Ruston recommends parents acknowledge that devices have benefits.

"I think that as parents we're overly concerned and that the students, our kids, are feeling like we don't understand them because we're not talking enough about the incredible positives and why it makes sense for them to want it so much."

• Explain your own use of technology

For parents whose kids who say, "Well, Daddy is on his phone all the time," Hurley suggests the following.

"Parents can say, 'Hey, I am going to take some time now and do some work. I'm using my phone do some work,' so it doesn't give the impression you are mindlessly looking at your phone or compulsively checking social media."

• Schedule technology-free family time

Hurley likes setting aside time for an activity like family reading every night.

"I think families can absolutely benefit from taking a holiday. I'm for the whole family taking a holiday, not just kids, having a tech-free weekend or even tech-free time."

Ruston and her family participate in Tech Talk

Tuesday (she will email weekly subject ideas to parents who sign up).

"It's setting up a system by which first we say something positive about technology in our lives," she said. "Then we say something about how technology is going in our eyes."

• Consider your response to rule violations

Ruston said she used to enforce smartphone rules with her daughter, Tessa, with the "stab and grab."

"I stab Tessa with my eyes and I grab her phone," she said. "Completely ineffective — but amazing how good in the moment it felt."

Anger elicits one of two responses, she explained — the desire to flee or more anger. That leaves no room for changing perspectives or learning.

• Think about how much you photograph your children

Parents who photograph every moment of their child's life shouldn't be surprised if that child constantly takes selfies when she gets her own phone, Hurley said.

"If they are used to getting their picture taken all the time, what's the difference once they get their own device to be taking their pictures all the time?"

• Accept that you won't always know what kids are doing

Parents simply aren't going to be able to keep up with all the apps and sites their children are using, Santini said.

"There are times that you are just going to have to trust your kid, too, and that's when you have to teach them to be a good person out there about the world of online."

• Put down the phone

For teens who are so worried about missing out on what their friends are doing or making sure they document what they are doing, Coughlin suggests simply putting down the phone.

"Go out and enjoy life without taking a picture."



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