The Hangout Spot

Less Emojis, More Emotions:
Transitioning from Technology Time to Social Time
A Parenting Guide Brought to You By: The Hangout Spot, LLC.

Like it or not, technology is here to stay, and children are inundated with it from a very early age. While technology has its benefits, too much technology may have a detrimental impact on a child's wellbeing, including school performance, cognitive functioning, sleep, physical growth, addictive behaviors, and obesity (Wolf et. al. 2018). On average, children between the ages of eight and the teenage years spend anywhere from five and a half to nine hours per day on the internet (Gushee. 2018). That's a lot of screen time exposure for a developing brain. Other studies found that 8.5% of children living in the United States are addicted to video games (Zamani et. al. 2010) and that texting is the primary mode of communication for teens and preteens (Parr. 2010)! It's no wonder that when children are asked to come away from technology, parents are often faced with a grumpy attitude, outright refusal, and other collateral behaviors. How do we tackle the overwhelming effects technology has on our children in a way that promotes healthy social development? How do we get less emojis and more emotions?

1. <u>Set technological boundaries.</u> Boundaries are incredibly important, and when children have a clear understanding of the expectations, they are more likely to follow along. Sit down as a family and create technology rules together. Incorporating your child in the process of rule development will increase understanding and buy-in. For younger children or children with limited verbal repertoires, create a visual schedule that clearly displays what devices are accessible throughout the day. Consistently review the family rules with your child before technology time to ensure that the expectations remain clear.

2. <u>Model responsible technology usage.</u> Walk the walk; don't just talk the talk. Children learn by observing other people. The surest way to blur the boundaries is to break the family rules right in front of them. Children are mirror images of those that they spend the most time with, for better or for worse. If the rule is *no technology during dinner time,* and you respond to texts or answer calls while eating, enforcing technology rules around the table may become more difficult. If, for some reason, you have to break the family rules in front of your child, for example to accept a call from the doctor, then state the rationale so your child understands that it is an exception and not the rule. Keep in mind, exceptions should be limited.

3. <u>Pair people with technology.</u> Identify the technology-based activities your child finds the most reinforcing. Is your child always playing video games? Scrolling through social media on his or her phone? Watching videos on YouTube? Figure out what the favorite is, and then actively engage with your child in that process. Become player two, check out the latest Instagram sensation, and get lost in the never-ending library of videos the Internet has to offer. By sharing in the experience, you can make it more fun, thereby

encouraging social technology play over solitary technology play. You will also gain a better understanding of how your child spends his or her time on technology, noticing if there are any etiquette or safety lessons that need to be addressed along the way.

4. <u>Shape social technology use.</u> Say "yes" to technology use when it is social, active, and play-oriented more so than when it is not. Encourage games with the potential to include multiple players, like Guitar Hero, Dance Dance Revolution, and Wii Fit. Use these opportunities to teach important social skills, like turn taking and good sportsmanship. This is also a fantastic way to pair yourself with technology in order to show that people play is just more fun.

5. <u>Quell the technological thirst!</u> Let's be real; there are going to be times when technology use is either socially inappropriate or not feasible. For example, your family may not welcome cell phone use at the dinner table, television time may be restricted before bed, and "Facebook stalking" during class is just not allowed. If your child struggles with time away from technology, build in screen time prior to periods when access is restricted. For example, allow your child to send that text, finish that show, or make that post before you require them to shut down and move on whenever possible. This will help satisfy your child's technological desire when access is not allowed, thereby making that technology-free quality time significantly more social.

6. <u>Beware of boredom.</u> When technology is restricted, parents often hear their children claim that there is simply nothing to do. Recognize that free time for children who often fill their schedules with technology-related compulsions can feel challenging. Be proactive by providing your child with an activity schedule for "non-technology time." Even more powerful, have your child help brainstorm activities to gain the ultimate buy-in. Make a list of alternate leisure activities your child enjoys that he or she can easily engage in whenever the urge to login strikes. Avoid statements like, "find something to do" and "you have plenty of toys to play with." Instead, have concrete options ready, and be prepared to support your child in structuring a new and improved downtime routine.

7. <u>Use Grandma's Law.</u> Grandma's Law, otherwise known as the Premack Principle, requires a child to first engage in a non-preferred task to gain access to something much more exciting, for example, "first, eat your broccoli, and then you can have dessert." Or, "first do your homework, and then you can go play." Parents (and grandmas) use this rule all the time, but we sometimes forget to apply it to technology use. Set up the expectation that first, your child must engage in a social activity in order to gain access to their device. Try, "first, let's go for a bike ride, and then we can watch Netflix," or "first, let's finish our board game, then we can play MarioKart." In doing so, you will decrease the likelihood of problem behaviors occurring when requiring your child to engage in a screen-free activity.

8. <u>Use technology to assist with technology.</u> Many apps, a significant number of which are already built into the devices you use, can track and limit technology use. For example, phones, tablets, and computers can monitor screen time and where it is allocated. Features, such as guided access and screen time limits, can transform the device itself

into a digital babysitter. This way, when your child's time is up, the device turns off, removing the burden of adult-mediated transitioning.

9. <u>Self-monitor as a family.</u> Have you ever received that pesky Screen Time notification on your iPhone, which provides a detailed report about how your family's devices are used, apps they've opened, and websites they've visited? Instead of swiping away, pay attention to this information, and use it to inform technology-related decision making in your home. Is your family stuck in a pattern of excess screen time or does your daily average seem "just right?" Do social media applications rank at the top of your family's "most used" list, or is their technology time consumed by solitary activities? Notice when technology is reached for most often, and adjust your family's schedule accordingly. Is Saturday a particularly technology-driven time of the week? If so, make a concerted effort to fill the start of your weekend with social activities instead. You might even consider making a family graph to track your performance. Sometimes, even just an increased awareness of technology use yields a significant improvement over time.

10. <u>Reinforce responsible technology use.</u> Be on the lookout for technology-related success, like putting away a device before time is up, transitioning away without problem behaviors, and accumulating less screen time than before. When you notice these moments, provide behavior-specific praise. Instead of "nice job," say "nice job shutting down before the time was up!" The more you point out appropriate technology use, the more often it will happen in the future. Turn this into a family competition. Create a daily or weekly check in, depending on your child's needs, to reinforce meaningful progress. Keep track of each family member's average daily technology use with the Screen Time feature previously described, set goals for percent decreases over time, and reward achievements along the way. For example, treat the family to a special dinner out when everyone's daily average is 10% lower than last week's. Create a motivation to improve and use your device's data to help you track progress. Remember, rewards don't have to be huge to be meaningful, and different motivators will be reinforcing to different children.

Yes, the reality is that our world will continue to revolve around technology in the future. Every job will require technology competence. Communication will evolve in accordance with the latest electronic advances. And, opportunities for screen-related leisure will continue to expand. As such, parenting responsibilities now include helping children build a positive relationship with technology while continuing to consume it every day. By embracing these healthy habits, parents can help their children avoid digital dangers, capitalize on the benefits technology has to offer, and achieve critical social development, not forgetting to logout and shutdown along the way.

About the Authors

Justyna Balzar, M.Ed. BCBA LBA (CT) and **Meghan Cave, M.Ed. BCBA LBA (CT)** are the Co-Founders and Chief Executive Officers of The Hangout Spot, LLC, coming soon to

Fairfield County as Connecticut's first center using the **fun**damentals of science to foster social smarts by providing instruction in a safe, fun, inclusive "home away from home" environment. The Hangout Spot is a behavior analytic social skills development center where we believe that all children have a right to meaningful relationships with others. We strive to eliminate barriers to friendship and empower children to be socially successful across the lifespan using the principles of Applied Behavior Analysis. Everything we do is rooted in research, empirically validated, and proven to work. We conceptualize critical, previously considered "tricky to teach" skills through a scientific framework. In doing so, we achieve socially significant change for our clients, by providing the support they need to develop real connections with other people beyond our walls.

To learn more and follow our grand opening, visit www.thehangoutspotllc.com, and connect with us on Facebook or Instagram @thehangoutspotllc.

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