

A Family Media Plan would have saved a lot of trouble.



My daughter worked hard in high school. She finished her homework went to bed at a reasonable hour. Sometimes she had trouble sleeping, so we put a soothing app on her phone so she could listen as she drifted off to sleep. For awhile this worked well. But in her junior year, things changed. Some days she could barely wake up, and it was a stretch for her to get to school on time. She took long naps after school, stayed in bed until almost noon on the weekends.

It wasn't until she was in college that she confessed: a good friend was calling her in the wee hours of the morning for boyfriend. Sometimes they'd stay on the phone for hours, or the friend would call multiple times.

Teen culture was that if you don't respond immediately, it's a sign that you don't care about the person who's calling or texting. So it's rare that a high school student has solid-enough boundaries to say No to a conversation at 2:00am.

### **Why you need a Family Media Plan**

As a parent, it's sometimes hard to fathom how pervasive are the effects of phones, computers, and social media.

Sometimes it's difficult to balance. On the one hand, students these days use media to help them get things done. They complete homework, plan group projects, and get help with tough subjects from their friends.

On the other hand, technology can increase procrastination, multitasking, and level of distraction.

But when you try to set limits, it can lead to conflict.

The most effective way around this dilemma is to create a Family Media Plan early in middle school, and before students have access to their first phone.

By setting clear guidelines in advance, you'll be able to avoid tension in later years. Everyone will know what's expected, and it will simply be part of your normal routine.

Creating a Family Media Plan isn't rocket science, but it does require some thought. Here are a few strategies that to help you get started.

## Strategy 1: Monitor Your Own Media Usage

More than half of parents who responded to one survey think that teenagers are “addicted” to their devices. There is some truth to this — statistics show that 50% of teens *feel* addicted to them. Teens apparently spend an average of about seven hours a day with phones, computers, and televisions.

Even worse, about 30% of families say they have daily arguments about screen time. Clearly digital devices have a significant impact on family life.

With teens, you have a lot more credibility when you lead by example. Start by monitoring your own usage. How much time do you spend on the phone, on social media, or surfing the net? Do you answer your phone during mealtimes, or when you’re already in a conversation with someone else.

Would you be comfortable if everyone in the family followed your example? Consider whether or not there are some changes you’d like to make.

## Strategy 2: Set some hard limits for screen time

There are times when it makes sense to unplug.

Dinner time, for example, is a great time for family conversation and to learn about upcoming events, accomplishments, and frustrations. Texts and phone calls put a damper on family conversation.

Limiting media use after bedtime promotes good sleep (and good grades). And of course texting while driving is dangerous...and illegal.

But knowing this, even if you and your teen agree that this makes sense, isn’t enough. If teens have access to phones and computers in the middle of the night, there’s a good chance they’ll connect.

But what if in your family, the norm was to keep phones and computers in the parent’s bedroom at night? What if at some hour, like 10:00 pm, all devices (even yours) went into a “technology box” and disappeared until the morning?

By the time students are in high school, taking away a phone or computer is often not worth the arguments that would result. But when the plan starts as soon as they have access to a phone, it feels normal.

## Strategy 3: Consider some soft limits for screen time

Simply because one of your family members is focused on a digital screen doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s a bad thing. Devices can be incredibly useful for homework, college applications, and even staying in touch with friends. Moreover, many teachers these days require students to turn in homework electronically.



Moreover, screen time can help them relax, find resources, and even explore new interests. But how do you know when it’s useful and when it’s not?

One possibility is to create a computer zone, like a desk in the family room or another corner

of the house that is public. As you walk by, you can see what they're working on...or if they're working at all.

It's also effective to use parent controls and block particular sites, or kinds of sites, you'd rather they not use.

Finally, consider making it easy for you (but not for your students) to turn off your wifi. If you're more tech savvy, you can block the wifi to specific machines (those of your student), while leaving other machines connected.

My is now a college senior and doing well. But I wish I'd understood back in those high school years how important it was to monitor media, and that even a responsible and compassionate teen getting good grades get pulled into things that aren't good for her.

My insight? Recognize the benefits, but also the power of social media, and set limits early. Create a family media plan for your family.

If you'd like more tips and guidance on implementing a Family Media Plan in your own family, please don't hesitate to contact me. I'd be happy to help you think through some routines and strategies that would be appropriate for your family, so that you all feel closer and more connected.