Extension Education

Tasha Killian News Column

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Parents: The New Media Mentors

By Tasha Killian

Being a parent means that you hold many roles. You are not only a caregiver, but also a cook, teacher, nurse and much more. One of those roles includes being an example. Children are often described as being like sponges, able to absorb and learn things that are and aren’t explicitly taught. One of those things is how media is used in everyday life. There are may different opportunities for parents to show children how to be a good digital citizen. Digital citizenship is how we act and how we use technology in our lives. Being a good digital citizen means that we can first, act civil online. That means talking to others with respect when using technology, especially on social media sites. Digital Citizenship includes sharing and respecting those who have differing positions and ideas. It also means being respectful with how technology is used in public and open spaces. Below are some tips to help you become a media mentor and provide an example of digital citizenship for the children in your life.

**Model balanced media habits**. Balance can be difficult to obtain in any section of our lives. From determining what activities to participate in after a long day of work to figuring out how to eat a balanced meal, we seek to find balance in all that we do. One of the things that needs balance the most is the way in which we consume and use media. This balance can be found by fostering media awareness. This includes looking for opportunities to unplug and to keep your focus on your relationships and those around you in person. It also includes a balance of the type of media consumed and the type of technology used as well as consuming media as a family. Balance in media use shows children the importance of focusing on being present and allowing media use to become something more than just mindless scrolling or watching.

**Co-engage with media**. One of the best ways that parents can teach media habits is to consume media together with your children. This includes, but it’s not limited to watching TV with your children, asking them questions about their online activity, playing video games with them, etc. Co-engaging with children can help them learn skills like how to mediate what is real in the media and what is not. For example, a young girl who is watching a romance movie with her mother can engage in conversation about how the expectations for the relationship are not real or body image issues. Co-engaging in media allows for parents and children to have conversations they may not have otherwise and can be the best way to model healthy media habits.

**Discuss media related best practices.** Parents help children learn what is right and what isn’t by talking to them about it. The same way a child learns that they should say please and thank you is the same way children will learn media related best practices. These practices have general rules and guidelines but are enforced and different for each family. Some examples of best practices might be: Talking to someone who is face to face with you is more important than answering a text message. Don’t talk to strangers online, and if anyone makes you feel uncomfortable report it. Being respectful of others’ opinions, even if they aren’t the same as yours. Although this is not an inclusive list, it gives an idea of what parents might choose to set as best practices for media usage in their family.

**Set limits on how/ when/ where technology & media are used.** Following up with the best practices for media is the practice of setting limits for children about the media that they use and where they use it. This is very unique to each family. For some families it may mean limiting media use to certain places in the home and for others it may be limiting time. Whatever limits are set, make sure that they are followed by parents. It is hard for a child to learn what an appropriate limit is when they see one thing, but are told to do another.

Becoming a media mentor can seem like a big task to take on. The most important thing to remember is that it starts with being an example. To become a media mentor means to show that you, as an adult, are practicing good media habits. Children learn from what they see, so take a minute to become more self-aware about how you are currently using media, and resolve to be an example for those around you, especially your children.