Electronics: Creating a balance

Technology lets middle graders do research with the touch of a button or video-chat with relatives who live far away. Too much technology, however, might cause your tween to feel isolated and to sit still much longer than is good for her. Consider these ways to keep her usage in check.

Set the stage
Encourage face-to-face interaction by putting away devices (including yours) at established times, such as during meals, family outings, or a sibling’s lacrosse game. When you’re using a device and your child interrupts, switch your attention to her. She’ll see that the person in front of you is more important than what’s on the screen.

Wait for social media
Most social media sites require users to be 13 or older, yet some children are using fake birth dates to create accounts. Let your middle schooler know she must be old enough and get your okay to join. Consider setting up a family account, but keep the password to yourself. She can send you photos or links to post.

Harness the good
Suggest that your tween take advantage of technology to connect with family members or to do research. She might play an electronic version of a board game with a cousin in another town. Or if she’s stumped on a craft project, she could look up instructions online. Also, let her use the internet to research extracurricular activities or summer programs.

Tinker with engineering
STEM activities are popular with tweens these days. Encourage your child to explore the “E” in STEM with these engineering ideas.

Take apart. Have him disassemble—and then reassemble—simple mechanical objects like a pen or flashlight. In the process, he can figure out what each part is used for and how it works.

Design. Let your middle grader draw an invention to solve an engineering problem. He might sketch a more efficient system for delivering clean water to areas that lack it, for instance.

Build. Suggest that your tween use household materials to engineer projects related to what he’s studying in class. If he’s learning about thermal energy, he could make a pizza-box solar oven.
Funny—or not?

Joking around is a good way for tweens to let off steam and bring people together. But humor may also hurt people’s feelings—or even be considered bullying if it’s done repeatedly to make someone feel bad. Here’s how to help your child draw the line.

Demonstrate differences. Show your middle grader that a joke that’s funny to one person might not be funny to someone else. Let him and friends or family members list types of jokes they think are humorous (such as knock-knock jokes) on one piece of paper and those they don’t (like practical jokes) on another. Then, share lists. Your tween may be surprised if what appears in his “funny” category falls into another person’s “not funny” one.

Think it through. Before your child tells a joke, suggest that he consider how it will affect those around him. Is the topic one that somebody might be sensitive about, such as weight? Could the joke come across as a put-down? If so, he should avoid it. Tip: If he’ll feel the need to say “Just kidding” or “No offense” afterward, that’s a sign the joke may be hurtful.

Facts about opioids

The opioid epidemic is making headlines everywhere. Take steps now to protect your tween from these highly addictive, and potentially deadly, drugs.

Be informed

Opioids include prescription pain relievers such as Vicodin, oxycodone, and fentanyl. Heroin is also an opioid.

Be cautious

Middle graders may be prescribed painkillers after a sports injury or a wisdom tooth extraction, for example. Ask the doctor or dentist about alternatives to opioids. If your child is given medicine, dispense each dose to her. Keep it locked up between doses, and discard any leftovers.

Be observant

If you notice that your tween has mood swings, withdraws from family and friends, or loses interest in favorite activities, talk to her pediatrician.

Q&A

Q My son was just diagnosed with a learning disability. What can I expect at our first IEP meeting?

A An IEP (Individualized Education Program) meeting lets you talk with an entire team about how everyone can help your son learn. Before the meeting, write down questions and concerns. Get your son’s input, too. What does he feel he’s doing well? What is hard for him? What goals would he like to set? This meeting can be emotional for you as a parent, since you’ll hear about what your child struggles with. There will also be a lot of information to absorb. Consider taking along a spouse, friend, or relative to provide support and to help you remember what was said.

Also, remember that you’re a key part of the IEP team. If there’s an accommodation you think could boost your son’s success, such as keeping one set of textbooks in his locker and another at home, it’s important to speak up.
Social summer learning

Summer alert! Did you know that students can lose up to two months of skills during the break from school? Keep that from happening to your child with these suggestions for learning the tween way—with friends.

Reading exchange

Let your middle grader create a shared document online where he and classmates list books they have read and share recommendations. They could summarize the books, rate them from 1 to 5 stars, and explain their opinions. They might even read together at a park or at each other's homes.

Baseball math

Play ball—with a math twist. During weekly get-togethers, friends can pitch to each other (three pitches per turn) and tally swings, hits, and misses. Have them calculate stats. What percentage of the time did players hit the ball (total hits + swings x 100)? Who had the best “batting average” (hits + at-bats)? Let them graph their progress over the summer.

Map making

Encourage your child to turn a trip to the park into a geography expedition. Suggest that he and his friends each make a map, using a compass to label it north, south, east, and west. They could add landmarks like a basketball hoop, a slide, or a trail. Then, they take turns secretly choosing a landmark and using their maps to guide others to it. (“Walk north to the pond, then turn east.”)

1-2-3 Kindness

Being a kind person helps children form strong relationships and enjoy a greater sense of belonging at school and at home. Try these steps to encourage kindness.

1. Develop ideas. Together, brainstorm ways to show kindness. Examples: Ask an older relative to tell a story from his past. Send an inspirational quote to someone who’s struggling.

2. Track actions. Divide a sheet of paper into boxes, and write an idea in each square. Now look for opportunities to perform these acts of kindness. For each one completed, “x” it out.

3. Repeat. When the sheet is filled, make a new one. There are always more ways to be kind—and discovering them will help your youngster make kindness a regular part of her life.
Home safe

You may not always be home while your child is out of school. Consider these ideas for handling summer supervision.

Stay alone? Decide whether your tween is ready to be home alone. Think about how responsible and resourceful she is—and whether she would be comfortable by herself. You’ll want to get her input, too. Note: Check your state’s age guidelines for leaving kids alone.

If an elephant brushed its teeth...

This science activity creates foam that looks like toothpaste the size an elephant would need! It also demonstrates an exothermic reaction, or a chemical reaction that releases energy. Share these directions with your middle schooler.

Mix

Place an empty 20-oz. plastic water bottle in the sink. Pour in \( \frac{1}{2} \) cup hydrogen peroxide and \( \frac{1}{4} \) cup dishwashing soap. (Tip: For colorful “toothpaste,” he can add food coloring.) Gently swirl the mixture around, being careful not to create too many bubbles.

Combine

In a separate cup, mix \( \frac{1}{4} \) cup warm water with 1 packet (about 2 \( \frac{1}{2} \) tsp.) dry yeast. Stir until the yeast dissolves. Pour the solution into the bottle. What happens?

React!

The yeast acts as a catalyst, causing the hydrogen peroxide to break down faster than normal. Oxygen is released and combines with the dish soap, resulting in overflowing foam.

Parent to Parent

A positive outlook

My employer recently brought in a motivational speaker who said a positive attitude could help us perform better. As I was listening, it dawned on me that trying her tips with my son might help him, too.

I shared what I learned with Ben—when your attitude is “up,” your brain is more creative and productive. We tried two exercises the speaker had suggested: First, we stared into each other’s eyes. Then, I broke into a big smile while Ben had to try to keep a neutral expression. It’s almost impossible! We both ended up laughing. Next, we each wrote about a positive experience from the last 24 hours. Reliving it brought back the good feelings.

Now, we’re going to try another activity—choosing three things we’re grateful for each day. I’m hoping it will help to keep both of our outlooks bright.

Q&A

My daughter has set goals in the past and then forgotten about them in a few weeks. How can she stay focused and see them through?

When your daughter sets goals, it’s important to make them specific and measurable so she’ll be able to tell if she has reached them. Giving herself deadlines for each one will help her keep moving toward them, too.

For instance, instead of saying, “I want to get in shape,” she could say, “I want to be able to run 5 miles by September.” Then, she needs to name specific steps to take each week, such as, “First week: Alternate walking 1 minute and running 1 minute for 1 mile.”

At the end of each week, suggest she look over the steps to see how she did. If she didn’t follow through, encourage her to make revisions if needed, recommit to her goal, and keep going.