

Keeping Pace in an Online World

Speaker: Erin Walsh, National Institute on Media and the Family

Erin Walsh began by illustrating the power of the media: when the Happy Days television show showed Fonzie getting his first library card and checking out books, the rate of books checked out in libraries across the nation jumped by 40%. The media in our lives have tremendous power to shape our behavior, both for good and for bad.

Then she alerted parents to the rapid pace of the media revolution. The quality and quantity of media “screens” coming into our children’s lives are changing so fast that if you blink, the medium will change. Some of the new media are: instant messaging, chat rooms, web pages, message boards, e-mail, text messaging and high definition television. The media are expanding and interacting among their functions.

Media also are everywhere. Studies show that 28% of babies under two have televisions in their bedrooms. Kids are spending an average of 44 hours of leisure time in front of a screen. The only thing they do more is sleep.

Media represent opportunities for our kids to teach, entertain and inspire. Kids can use all the new media available for research, news, homework helps, interest areas, fun, job skills, academic skills and making connections.

However, as parents, we need to be aware of the risks involved in the new media. Kids tend to equate time with trust, so cyber predators will make friends with a child, chat about their shared interest for months before ever suggesting they meet. Another risk is that a child may post information electronically that they may later regret, like revealing photos or personal information. Also, cyberbullying is possible when children say things electronically they would never say in person.

Parents have tools to help kids avoid these risks. We can teach them that time does not equal trust with online relationships. Kids need to think before they post something. If you wouldn’t say it in person, don’t say it online. What if that picture were made widely available to people you don’t like or trust? Parents can also ask their kids where they go online, just like where they go after school. Parents can teach “netiquette” and review the profile a child creates for a social site. Also, parents can use software to limit the online world a child can visit or to track where the child goes online. The oft-repeated advice of keeping screens out of a child’s bedroom and keeping up connections between kids and their parents still apply.

Erin Walsh then ended her talk by focusing on the promise of media for good that is only beginning to be realized. Facebook gives kids tools to make friends at college or on teams. Media connections extend friendships by giving kids new ways to hang out together. Media give kids ways to extend their interests beyond what is available in their local community or school to what is available across the world. Media allow kids to shift from peer-based learning to interest-based learning.

With guidance from adults, children have the capacity to learn 21st century skills such as competency in core subjects, decision-making, leadership, responsibility, becoming lifelong learners, and civic engagement. Video games can be excellent teachers, so parents should review what type of media children are engaging so they know what lessons are being taught. Ms. Walsh concluded that time and content are key to using media wisely.

In the question and answer part of Ms. Walsh's presentation, she gave parents some rules of thumb for media use: limit recreational screen time to two hours per day. The younger the child, fewer hours are better. If this is a big change for your family, try tracking screen time and cutting it down slowly, or using screen time tickets to "pay" for screen time. Another tip: support school policies on cell phone use so they do not interrupt learning. Also, try to watch out for multitasking with media because our brains are built for one thing at a time.