By Jan Pinborough
Church Magazines

Keeping Safe & Balanced

in a Google-YouTube-Twitter-Facebook-iEverything World

There are "apps" for everything—and also ways to stay spiritually grounded in a digital world.

Computer tablets, gaming systems, smartphones, and handheld devices—digital technologies are proliferating faster than you can say, "There's an app for that." And, like a nuclear reaction that can power whole cities—and level them—they have vast powers for good and ill.

They can keep us in touch with loved ones far away—and isolate us from those in our own homes.

They can save us time in paying bills and reading the news—and consume it in answering e-mails and posting status updates.

They can help us study and share the gospel—and cause us to idle away our time and drive away the Spirit.

They can mobilize us to serve others—and keep us self-absorbed, focused on an unending stream of meaningless minutiae.

They can educate, energize, elevate, and inspire us—and they can distract, enervate, addict, and destroy us.

Around the Church, members are using digital technologies in innovative ways. They show Mormon Message videos in family home evening, reach out to ward members via social networks and text messaging, and work on family history via the Internet.

So how can we harness technology's awesome potential while protecting ourselves and our loved ones from its potentially devastating ill effects? Here are some key concepts and strategies.

Safety First

We don't allow teenagers to drive a car until they are old enough to be able to follow the rules designed to keep them safe on the road. But even a young child can, with a few small clicks, unintentionally steer a computer or a smartphone app from the newest Mormon Message to an image created by man's darkest imaginings. An essential part of safety is making sure children have access to digital devices only when they are old enough to use them responsibly. Additionally, several technological tools can help us keep ourselves and our families safe:

- **Internet content filters.** These are as important to your family's spiritual well-being as a child lock on a cupboard full of toxic cleaning supplies is to a toddler's physical safety. Content filters come in three basic types:

  Filtering software—Download it from the Internet or buy it in a store and install it.

BE CAREFUL IN CYBERSPACE

"I raise an apostolic voice of warning about the potentially stifling, suffocating, suppressing, and constraining impact of some kinds of cyberspace interactions and experiences upon our souls. . . . I plead with you to beware of the sense-dulling and spiritually destructive influence of cyberspace technologies that are used to . . . promote degrading and evil purposes."

Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, "Things as They Really Are," *Ensign,* **June 2010, 20.**

Hardware filters—Your cable modem or DSL router may have built-in software that can filter Internet content.

Internet proxy filters—Check to see if your Internet provider offers a filtering service.

Caution: be aware that anti-virus and anti-spyware software does *not* filter content.

- **Safe-mode add-ons.** Available for computers, tablets, and smartphones, add-on applications allow you to select safe content for your child, review how much time he or she spends on different activities, and restrict him or her from viewing objectionable content such as pornography. To find a safe-mode add-on, do a web search of "kids safe mode." You can also set Google, YouTube, Yahoo!, and other search platforms to filter inappropriate content.

Setting Boundaries

One study estimates that among children between eight and eighteen in the U.S., the average amount of time spent each week using entertainment media is about 53 hours.[1] Another study suggests that nearly one in ten young people who play video games show classic symptoms of addiction.[2]

One reason it's so easy to overuse digital activities, says Ken Knapton, an Internet safety expert, is that they lack the kind of natural boundaries that help us moderate other activities. A child stops playing softball when his or her arm gets tired or when it gets too dark

to see the ball. It's much easier to ignore the subtle cues that tell us when it's time to stop watching funny animal videos, looking at friends' Facebook photos, or beating the next game level.

It takes careful monitoring to make sure we're not allowing our technology use to numb our minds and consume much of the precious time God has given us. An important element of parenting in the digital age is helping children establish firm limits for digital use. Children also need guidance in learning to wisely balance digital activities with reading, outdoor activities, physical exercise, creative play, service, work, and time with family.

Digital Rules

No piece of software or hardware is failsafe. Individuals and families need rules that will help keep them safe and balanced.

Recently the *Ensign* posted a question on its Facebook page:

See this month's *Friend* and *New Era* for stories to help children and youth use technology wisely.

"How do you live a well-balanced life, using digital technology without letting it take over?"

Within hours, dozens of people had shared their struggles and solutions. Each family has to decide what works best for them, but here are ways some of the respondents keep digital media in balance:

- Regularly teach children how to use digital devices wisely. For example, teach them what is appropriate to post on social networking sites and how to handle cyberbullying or inappropriate texting.
- Let children know that iPod players, cell phones, and other devices are subject to unannounced parental spot-checks. If you have older children who use social networking sites, become a "friend."
- Keep the computer in a public area of the home.
- If you decide your child is old enough for a cell phone, don't enable the Internet on it. You might consider a cell phone that can block all incoming and outgoing numbers except those selected by the parent, making the phone for emergency use only.
- Set up a family recharging station where children plug in cell phones each night at bedtime.
- Establish acceptable times and firm time limits for technology use. (See "Unplugged" on page 10 of this month's *Friend* to see how some families do this.)
- Set a regular time each day or week when the family "unplugs" from digital devices. Some families also establish technology-free zones in certain areas of the home.
- Block peer-to-peer or "sharing" applications, many of which encourage stealing and open a portal to unfilterable content.

SOME OF THE CHURCH'S DIGITAL PRODUCTS

Here's a look at some great digital products the Church has created for you and your family:
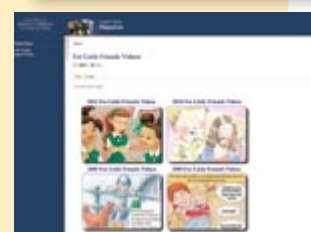
YOUTH

- Visit youth.lds.org to download Mormon Messages for Youth videos and dozens of songs from the youth music library. You'll also find articles to help youth in their everyday lives.
- If you have a mobile device, use the app store to download the LDS Youth app for quick access to new youth videos, Mormonads, articles, and music.
- Visit dutytogod.lds.org and personalprogress.lds.org to use an interactive version of your *Duty to God* or *Personal Progress* booklet.
- Use the scripture mastery tools at seminary.lds.org/mastery.

ADULTS

- Follow the ministry and messages of the living prophets at lds.org/study/prophets-speak-today.
- Find out the latest on what's happening around the world in the Church at news.lds.org.

CHILDREN

- Memorize the articles of faith by playing Articles of Faith Memory Quest at lds.org/friend.
- Listen to *Scripture Stories* at radio.lds.org. This radio series features children sharing their scripture insights and experiences, along with music and readings of scripture stories.
- Find stories, activities, coloring pages, and videos to create or supplement lessons for children at lds.org/friend.
- Meet Primary children from around the world. Go to lds.org/friend and click on "You Are One in a Million."

- When children tell you they have encountered inappropriate content online or on a cell phone, keep your focus on how to prevent future problems. The child may already feel worried and ashamed, and your calm approach will help him or her feel confident enough to approach you in the future.

Using Internal Filters and Seeking the Best

By far the most important and effective type of filter is inside the mind and heart of the user. These five filter questions can be a good first step to staying in tune and in balance:

1. Am I using this technology to learn or to teach?
2. Am I using it to build faith and testimony in myself and others?
3. Am I using it to entertain in uplifting ways?
4. Am I giving enough undistracted in-person time to family and friends?
5. Am I devoting enough time to work, school, Church callings, and physical exercise?

With these guidelines firmly in place and with the Holy Ghost as our guide, we can use digital media to exponentially expand our search for things that are "virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy" (Articles of Faith 1:13). ■

NOTES
1. Victoria J. Rideout, Ulla G. Foehr, and Donald F. Roberts, "Generation M^2: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-Year-Olds" (a Kaiser Family Foundation study, January 2010), 2, kff.org.
2. Online survey of 1,178 U.S. children and teenagers, conducted by Harris Interactive, January 2007. See http://www.harrisinteractive.com/news/allnews bydate.asp?NewsID=1196.

10 SIGNS OF DIGITAL OVERLOAD

1. Slipping away from activities with people to check e-mail or social networking sites.
2. Checking the same sites repeatedly within a short period of time.
3. Spending little time outside.
4. Finding it hard to complete a task such as writing a report without frequently breaking away to check e-mail or unrelated websites.
5. Spending little time in face-to-face interactions with friends.
6. Going online or using a digital device when you feel stressed or want to avoid an unpleasant task.
7. Family members spending most of their time at home in separate rooms interacting with screens.
8. Frequently using digital devices to entertain a child instead of talking, singing, playing, or reading with him or her.
9. Checking the computer first thing in the morning, or getting up during the night to use digital devices.
10. Spending long stretches of time surfing for content, often viewing content that is inappropriate or borderline.

10 WAYS TO CUT BACK

1. Check and answer e-mail only once or twice a day, at scheduled times.
2. Use social networking sites only at scheduled times and for a set number of minutes.
3. Practice a "digital Sabbath"—setting aside one or two days each week to "unplug."
4. Leave your cell phone in another room during time with family or friends.
5. Call instead of texting.
6. Invite children to help search the house for supplies that can be used in nondigital activities: children's books, board games, art supplies, and equipment for outside play.
7. Organize a talent show, art show, or service project with family or friends.
8. Use Internet-blocking software to keep on task while working.
9. Limit recreational surfing; watch TV and videos selectively and intentionally.
10. Keep a gospel-centered perspective, using technology to uplift yourself and people around you.