



GROWING A HEALTHY TECHNOLOGY GARDEN

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Church Magazines

Are you a digital immigrant? If you can remember a time before Facebook, the answer is yes. It would take a pile of objects from 20 years ago to do what a single smartphone can do today. Which is awesome! But let's be real: this journey to the "digital age" has been a rough one in some ways. We've had to learn new skills, new lingo, and new social rules. And when you add kids to the mix, you get a whole new level of anxiety. How can we help our families stay safe and develop a healthy relationship with all of this technology?

The purpose of this article is to explore the answer to that question with an analogy that will help us talk about and remember ideas in a non-intimidating way—by comparing them to gardening! Gardens can be beautiful, relaxing, and practical, which is what our relationship with technology can be as well.

Idea One: Create a Plan

If you wanted to grow a garden, you wouldn't toss a bunch of seeds into the air and hope they grew perfectly. You'd do at least a little planning—maybe thinking about what sunlight is available, how much maintenance you can handle, and how many pounds of zucchini you can pressure neighbors into taking. Do we put similar effort into

thinking about how we use technology? Or do we just click away and hope everything ends up OK?

If you don't already have a plan, the good news is you don't have to create one from scratch. Search online for a "family media plan" and you'll find several examples from nonprofit organizations to use. Or start by answering guiding questions like these:

1. *When is using technology OK, and for how long?* Does your family have any designated technology-free times? For example, some families collect cell phones before dinner and put them in another room so they focus on each other during the meal. When technology is allowed, are there time limits? If you're looking for guidelines, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends a limit of one to two hours of high-quality entertainment media per day for children (compared to the current average of seven hours!).

2. *What is acceptable and what isn't?* Most video games, shows, and movies come with some sort of rating. Do family members understand what is off-limits? You could use family home evening to role-play situations where you might need to turn down invitations or request new entertainment. Practice saying things like, "Sorry, I don't play games rated M for Mature. Can we play another game?"

3. *What level of monitoring will there be?* Decide how



much digital privacy is healthy for your family. Do you and your spouse have separate email accounts or share one? Do you know your children's passwords? One couple collects all their children's smartphones to charge in their bedroom overnight. This gives them an opportunity to periodically check browsing history and read text messages, which they feel is a healthy level of monitoring for their kids. Maybe you don't agree, but that's OK—different families, like different gardens, will thrive with different maintenance plans.

4. *What are the consequences when rules are intentionally broken?* In addition to clearly explaining to our children what the technology expectations are, we need to make sure they know there will be consequences if they intentionally break the rules. At the beginning of the school year, some teachers have children brainstorm and agree upon consequences for bad behavior and then hold them to that standard for the rest of the year. Perhaps something similar could work for your family.

5. *What is our turn-away plan when we accidentally encounter bad media?* Accept the fact that your kids will almost certainly accidentally encounter bad media at some point in their lives. We shouldn't punish them for stumbling upon it, but we can equip them to handle the situation. One family's turn-away plan was printed in the June 2011 *Friend* magazine in an article called "Crash and Tell." In the story, a boy gets away from an inappropriate pop-up ad by (1) turning off the computer and (2) telling an adult right away. Because his family has already talked about a plan, he knows what to do.

6. *How will we record our plan?* One mother wrote a "technology contract" for her son when he received his first smartphone. Another family wrote their media plan on a poster in the kitchen. What will help your family?

Idea Two: Pull the Weeds and Water the Flowers

Once we've planned and planted our garden, it's exciting to see sprouts appear. But our work isn't over! Now comes the ongoing challenge of pulling weeds and watering flowers.

Pull the Weeds

Wouldn't it be awesome if we could just do a thorough weeding at the beginning of summer and then, brushing dirt off our knees, say, "Well, I'm glad I got that over with!" and never weed again? Unfortunately, weeds spring up over and over again, and so do harmful media messages. We can prevent some of the bad language, crude images, cyberbullying, and violence with internet filters and good choices. But there will always be stubborn weeds that pop up in unexpected places.

Pornography is perhaps the most stubborn of media weeds. It seems to be popping up everywhere! And because pornography can be tricky to talk about with children, we may be tempted to treat it like a one-time situation. "Well, I had 'the talk' with Bobby, so he should be fine." In reality, kids will certainly encounter confusing and unsavory content more than once in their lives. That means we need to step up and have ongoing, age-appropriate discussions about media with our children—including about the tough stuff.

This doesn't mean we have to use the word *pornography* around the dinner table, although some families are fine with that. If you feel that your family needs a milder approach, ask your kids if they saw anything that made them feel uncomfortable that day, or if they heard any words they didn't understand. If we provide them with safe, open ways to get information, they're less likely to turn to the internet for answers and more likely to tell us about their media experiences.



If the thought of talking about pornography still gives you the nervous-parent sweats, here are a few resources that can help you communicate lovingly, boldly, and with confidence:

- **OvercomingPornography.org.** Here you'll find ready-to-go family home evening lessons about bodies, sexual intimacy, and related topics. Click "Resources" at the top of the page and then "Family Home Evening."
- **LessonHelps.lds.org.** This is a collection of child-friendly, Church-approved stories, activities, and media. If you click the topic "Media," you'll find *Friend* articles you could use to start a conversation.
- **EducateEmpowerKids.org.** This nonprofit organization is not affiliated with the Church but was founded by and continues to be directed by Latter-day Saint professionals. On this website you'll find several age-appropriate resources for talking to children about pornography as well as sexual intimacy.

Water the Flowers

What positive media habits do you want to grow? You could fill a garden with endless possible combinations of vibrant flowers and delicious vegetables. Similarly, there are countless ways your family can serve others online. For example, you could decide that before you scroll through your social media feed, you'll write three positive comments on other people's statuses. Or you'll send an uplifting meme to someone each week. Perhaps you could add these ideas to your family media plan. Medialibrary.lds.org has plenty of inspirational content ready to share.

Idea Three: Don't Let the Garden Take Over

Now, even if a garden is full of good things, it can still become hard to enjoy or manage if it gets overgrown. The

same goes for technology—even good technology use can get out of hand. We need to remember that technology exists to serve us, not the other way around.

Some professionals suggest a periodic "media fast" to help us release our grip on technology. BeautyRedefined.org, a media literacy nonprofit organization founded and run by Latter-day Saint professionals, recommends choosing a period of time—three days, a week, a month, or whatever feels right for your family—and avoiding as much media as possible. Doing so will remind us that it's not the end of the world if we don't check our social media accounts multiple times a day. It also gives our minds the chance to become more sensitive to messages that don't mesh with truths we experience in the real world. When the time comes to reconnect with media, sit down as a family and reevaluate your habits. What uplifting media did you miss? Are there harmful messages you should stay away from?

Idea Four: Every Garden Is Different

The last idea is simple but important: Every garden is different. Some people grow flowers; others focus on veggies. Some gardens are meticulously pruned, while others are kind of wild. Different plants are susceptible to different bugs and grow well under different conditions. Every family is different, too. Your media use will be unique to your circumstances and your family. The important thing is that we take the time to understand the strengths and weaknesses of our family members, craft a media plan, and then weed, water, and cut back in a meaningful and ongoing way. That way we can grow a healthy media garden that will be useful and inspiring to every member of the family, whether they remember a time before Facebook or not! ■

From a 2016 Brigham Young University Women's Conference address.