6 Strategies for Family Media Safety

Ideas for helping our children safely navigate this digital world.

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Here's a question to think about: If you could magically erase media from your children's lives completely, would you?

We frequently hear from parents who answer "Yes!" Their concerns reinforce the idea that raising children in this digital landscape can be overwhelming at times. However, media, when used appropriately, can be a wonderful blessing. Like any tool, it can be used for destruction and devastation or to create and build.

Stephen W. Owen, former Young Men General President, taught: "Modern technologies bless us in many ways. They can connect us with friends and family, with information, and with news about current events around the world. However, they can also distract us from the most important connection: our connection with heaven."[1]

We can help our children gain the skills necessary to be spiritually healthy users of media—able to access the best that media has to offer while hearing and heeding the voice of the Spirit in an increasingly noisy, loud, and contentious world. Following are ideas for both short-term and long-term strategies your family could consider.
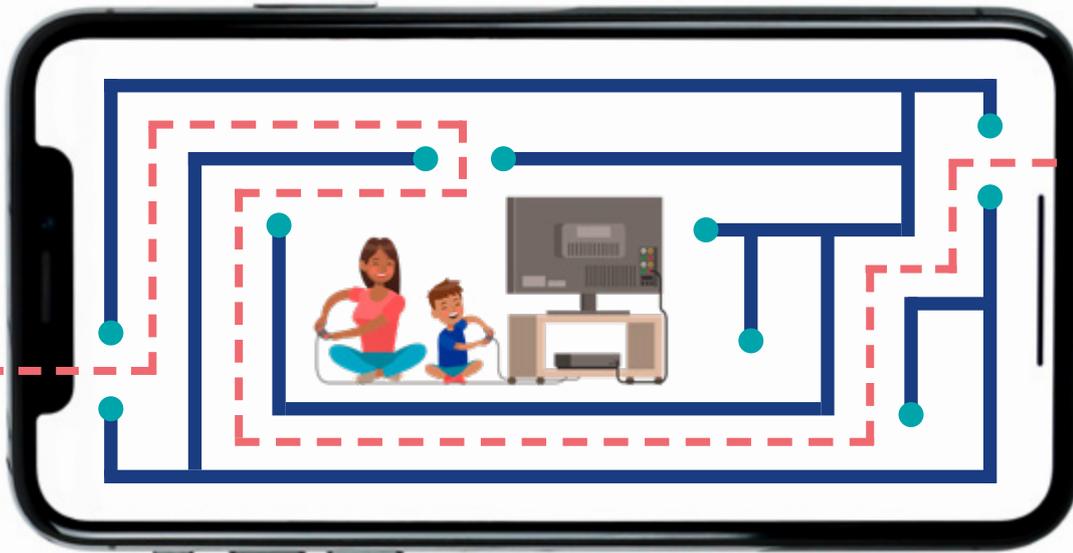
Short-Term Strategies

Here are two steps parents could take right away.

1. Use filters, ratings, and websites

One of the most effective things parents can do is to have appropriate internet filters. The importance of these filters cannot be overstated. If you don't have an internet filter, please get one!

We can pay attention to ratings, which exist to help parents navigate the content of television, movies, music, and video games. They can be a powerful tool to help parents

understand minimum age recommendations, and yet studies suggest many parents don't regularly consider them. There are also websites that provide detailed information about content and include suggestions for what is age appropriate. One of our favorites is commonsensemedia.org. These tools are not perfect, but they can be valuable safeguards from the most damaging content when we can't preview everything our children see.

Some families encourage older children to do this media research for themselves. For example, when our older children ask whether they can watch a new movie, we ask them to research the content. Then we talk about whether the movie seems appropriate. This gives our kids some autonomy and encourages them to learn to make their own choices, with our input. Our job as parents is—to modify a classic quote—to teach older children correct media principles so they can govern themselves.[2]

2. Create a family media plan

The American Academy of Pediatrics has recommended that every family use a "family media plan,"[3] which sets up general rules for how each family member will use media. We recommend involving your children as much as possible in creating these guidelines so that they can feel some ownership in the plan. These questions can help you get started:

1. What are our family's goals regarding technology use?
2. How can we use technology to bring us closer together?
3. What do we do with cell phones at certain times (family meals, family activities, car rides, sacrament meeting, etc.)?
4. How should we deal with media privacy concerns, such as password-protected apps, text messaging, and email?
5. What other rules would be good for helping us (both parents and children) manage technology use?

Long-Term Strategies

Here are four ideas for helping kids develop an internal filter for making media decisions. As Sister Linda S. Reeves, former Second Counselor in the Relief Society General Presidency, said, "Filters are useful tools, but the greatest filter in the world, the only one that will ultimately work, is the personal internal filter that comes from a deep and abiding testimony of our Heavenly Father's love and our Savior's atoning sacrifice for each one of us."[4]

1. Remember developmental progression

One of the biggest mistakes parents make is giving children technological devices too early. Learning how to use media in healthy ways is developmental, and most early adolescents are not ready to have unfettered access to the internet. So we recommend easing into technology little by little. For example, when our older children asked for phones, we first gave them flip phones that could not access the internet. When they showed us they could be responsible, we moved on to a restricted smartphone. The plan is to remove restrictions as our children grow and develop. By the time they leave our homes, we hope

our children will be smart, effective users of media. Just like helping them learn to drive a car, we know that this will take patience and a careful process.

2. Teach self-regulation

We should help children slow down and think when they are feeling frustrated, angry, or overwhelmed. The parts of the brain associated with regulatory control are not yet developed in teens, so it can be difficult for them to stop, breathe, and react thoughtfully instead of impulsively. Sometimes that means that you as the parent need to set an especially good example of emotional regulation.

One of our children struggled with disconnecting from video games. He would get upset whenever it was time to transition to the next activity. To help him learn to better regulate his media use, we created a stoplight system. He would be on "red" during a day when we had to tell him to stop playing video games and he refused or threw a fit. He would be on "yellow" when we told him it was time to be done and he was able to effectively transition. Finally, he would be on "green" if he was able to regulate his own use and recognize when it was time to be done playing. We used this stoplight activity (which included various incentives) for several weeks, and tantrums decreased substantially as he strengthened his media-related self-control.

3. Encourage talking

As parents, it's our job to create a safe environment where we have regular discussions with our children and they come to us with questions, including about media. Our research has found that when parents actively discuss media content, it tends to diminish the negative effects of harmful media and increase the positive effects.

This principle is especially important for social media, which can be a wonderful tool of connection but can also be destructive. Research suggests that the amount of time spent on social media is less important than the way it is used.[5] Adolescents who avoid comparing the best in others with the worst in themselves, and who are mindful and purposeful in their use, tend to fare better than other adolescents. As parents, we play a vital role in helping our kids learn to moderate social media use, including taking a break completely from time to time.

4. Model appropriate use

Parents set the tone for their family's media habits and attitudes. We've done a lot of research about "technoference," a term used to describe when technology interferes with relationships. Our studies have found that many adolescents report that their parents ignore them in favor of mobile phones. These teens feel less connected with their parents and report technoference elsewhere in their lives.

Along the same lines, one of us recently realized that nights were being spent sitting next to a spouse playing on our mobile phones. We were physically in the same space but were worlds apart. Now our family has a check-in basket where our phones go at home. It's a beautiful thing to spend uninterrupted and focused time with the people you love.

We hope these ideas help you evaluate, and perhaps adjust, your own media use as a family! ■

NOTES
1. Stephen W. Owen, "Be Faithful, Not Faithless," *Ensign,* Nov. 2019, 12.
2. See *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 284.
3. See "Media and Children Communication Toolkit," American Academy of Pediatrics website, aap.org.
4. Linda S. Reeves, "Protection from Pornography—a Christ-Focused Home," *Ensign,* May 2014, 16.
5. See César G. Escobar-Viera and others, "Passive and Active Social Media Use and Depressive Symptoms among United States Adults," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking,* vol. 21, no. 7 (July 2018), 437–43.