

How to Manage Digital Devices and

Get Your Family Back

By Geoff Steurer

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist

Picture the following scenarios:

- A family sits at a restaurant, waiting for their food, but rather than talk to each other, everyone stares at their smartphones.
- A teenager feels inadequate and alone as she scrolls through the carefully curated performances of her peers on social media.
- A little girl at the park tries to get her father to look up from his phone and pay attention to her.
- A husband keeps checking sports alerts on his smartwatch while his wife is talking to him.
- A young man is constantly texting throughout the home evening lesson.

Each of these examples—and dozens of others you have no doubt experienced—are little tragedies. Smartphones and other digital devices are both a blessing and a curse. They connect us to an amazing world of information. They help us to do family history, study scriptures, and speak with family across vast distances. But when not managed properly, digital devices can also disrupt family relationships and impact our mental, spiritual, and physical health.



Here are seven tips to ensure that digital devices are our servants and not our masters.



PHOTOGRAPH FROM GETTY IMAGES

The Irony of Technology

In my practice as a marriage and family therapist, I witness the ever-growing challenge of earnest people competing with screens for the attention of their loved ones. It's a great irony. The very devices that were supposed to help connect us to each other and improve our relationships have, in some cases, made relationships shallower and left people feeling insecure. In fact, many researchers are discovering that rising reports of depression, anxiety, bullying, and suicide have a connection with the epidemic of loneliness, brought on, in large part, by the widespread use of personal electronic devices.¹

In our homes, even though everyone may be physically together, when devices are out, they can instantly create feelings of loneliness and disconnection. If we are to create oneness and connection in our family relationships, we must recognize the splitting of attention that happens when devices infiltrate our family gatherings.

We don't need to overreact and completely eliminate technology from our lives. Instead, we need to put technology in its proper place so that it serves our relationships instead of eroding them.

The Trappings of a Virtual World

Immersing ourselves in our devices minimizes the physical world around us—with all of its sounds, textures, visuals, and countless other sensations—and trades these for a virtual world that doesn't connect us as deeply to our bodies and our environment. As a result, we may miss important physical signals that tell us what we need in order to be healthy. For example, excessive screen time can prevent us from noticing that we're tired, hungry, or stressed.

Such disconnection from the physical world can also undermine our sense of joy. There is a significant difference, for example, between receiving a laughing emoji on a screen and personally experiencing the joyful laugh of a loved one.

The Need for Digital Stewards

Digital devices are engineered to be irresistible and hard to put down. In fact, many software and phone developers intentionally target our human vulnerabilities to keep us checking and scrolling through endless feeds of information.²

This dependency on devices is so common that it's easy to ignore how it's affecting us. Young people, therefore, need

adults who can model the appropriate use of these devices and can educate children about their effects.

As President M. Russell Ballard, Acting President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, taught, digital devices “need to be our servants, not our masters.”³

With that in mind, here are seven tips for how to manage our digital devices:

Be like the Savior: give undivided attention.

The Savior showed us what it looks like to truly be with others without distraction. Throughout His ministry, He always focused on the individual: the woman with an issue of blood, the blind, the leper—Christ gave his full attention to them all. When He showed the Nephites His wounds, He didn't rush the process. Rather, the people went “forth *one by one* until they had all gone forth” (3 Nephi 11:15; emphasis added).

As we model this practice, we **teach our children how to truly be in one place at a time instead of splitting their attention between devices and those around them.** When you're talking with someone, especially a child or spouse, give them your full attention by putting your phone away.

Sadly, it's become the norm to turn away from those we love to answer a text and attend to someone else's need. This can have a negative effect on our relationships and may send an unintentional message that the person in front of us is less important.

Make a commitment to those in front of you that they have priority over interruptions from your smartphone or device. Look them in the eye. Listen as the Savior would. Focus.



Don't default to texting.

When sharing heartfelt feelings or important thoughts with others, **get as close to an in-person experience as your situation allows.** If face-to-face communication isn't possible, then try a video call so you can see and hear the person. If that's not an option, then place a phone call so you can hear the person's voice.



Delay giving children smartphones and social media accounts.

Delay ownership of smartphones and participation in social media **until children and teens have developed adequate in-person social skills, such as listening, making eye contact, showing empathy, and being aware of others.** Before children enter the world of digital citizenship, it's important for them to practice good citizenship by respecting and relating to others.

One of the reasons why the average age of pornography exposure is 11 years old⁴ (and in many cases younger) is that many children are given smartphones at a young age. Keep this in mind also: even if your children are mature enough for social media accounts, many other people online who will have access to your child's social accounts are not.⁵

3



Establish family rules and set limits.

Create clear boundaries in your home for when smartphones and devices will be used and then put away.

4

One strong recommendation: **invite everyone in the family to be deliberate about taking breaks from their devices on a regular basis.**

Perhaps you can designate a place to put them, somewhere out of reach where they can't be accessed easily—a basket in the kitchen, for example.

One family decided that devices needed to be plugged in and set aside during and after the evening meal so that family members could focus on spending uninterrupted time together.

When we intentionally set limits on our devices, our family members will begin to feel more connected.



Avoid mindless gaming and scrolling.

It's easy to mindlessly turn to our devices for relaxation, distraction, and fun. Resist the urge. Instead, **put down your device, go outside, and engage your senses.**

In June 2018, President Russell M. Nelson said to the youth of the Church, "My first invitation to you today is to disengage from a constant reliance on social media by holding a seven-day fast from social media."⁶

As parents, you can make the same invitation in your home, holding occasional fasts from games, social media, or other digital distractions.

5



Train yourself not to respond immediately.

Consider whether you need to respond immediately to every message and alert. Our devices are training us to believe that every interruption is urgent and critical, thus possibly diverting our attention from what matters most. **Try slowing down and delaying your response to messages** so you can be more present and aware of those around you. Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles observed that some in the Church "neglect eternal relationships for digital distractions, diversions, and detours that have no lasting value."⁷

6

Establish digital-free zones.

Designate sacred spaces where devices are never allowed. For example, one family decided that when they're driving around town, phones and devices aren't allowed in the vehicle so that family members can visit with each other. These kinds of limits allow for sustained attention and connection, which can prevent loneliness in families.

7

FREE YOUR RELATIONSHIPS FROM DISTRACTION

The modern world is increasingly filled with distractions. Mobile technology such as smartphones can make distraction a nearly constant state. Studies suggest that a distracted mind can create problems at work, at school, and in our relationships and can increase our stress and frustration. Some studies have even suggested that the mere presence of a person's

smartphone can be a drain on their available thinking capacity.

Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles once emphasized “the importance of four key relationships: with our God, with our families, with our fellowman, and with ourselves” (“Of Things That Matter Most,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2010, 21). Here are some suggestions for strengthening these relationships by reducing distractions.

Relationship with God

- **Scripture study.** Try doing at least some of your personal study without your device. The printed page doesn't give you notifications, and it has no other apps to entice you.
- **Prayer.** Make it regular. Make it quiet and alone. And occasionally make it long.
- **Pondering.** Add pondering time to scripture study and prayer. Add it to solo activities occasionally by making them truly solo—for instance, no device when you're exercising or doing housework or yard work, no music when you're alone in the car.
- **Repentance.** Give proper attention to this vital aspect of the relationship. For instance, during the sacrament, either don't have your device with you or turn it off.

Relationship with family and fellowman

- **Talking and listening.** Never underestimate family dinner. Try making it a sacred space (see #4 and #7 on pages 33 and 34). Show interest in others. Seek both informal exchanges and deeper conversations. Make most in-person conversations hands-free (no devices). And make eye contact a priority (see #1 on page 32).
- **Serving.** If an opportunity to serve someone comes up and your first thought is “But I still have to watch my show,” you may need to work on your priorities. Try going without that entertainment for a week.
- **Playing.** If you're building relationships by having fun together, give it your attention (see #1 on page 32). Remove devices from sight or hearing.

Relationship with yourself

- **Physical and emotional health.** Don't be distracted from self-care (sleep, exercise, stress management). For instance, don't bring your device into your bedroom at night. And don't fill time with mindless activities so that the rest of your time feels pressed (see #5 on page 34).
- **Protecting feelings of self-worth.** Avoid self-criticism and comparisons with others. For instance, reduce time with social media and be more selective in what you consume (see #4 on page 33).
- **Getting to know yourself.** Don't let an image of yourself from social media distract you from the true self you desire to become. Spend time with that true self doing things that true self wants to do.

Sanctifying Our Homes

Making our homes a haven from the world requires effort and vigilance, especially with so many digital distractions all around us. For the sake of our family relationships and health, every effort is worth it. ■

NOTES

1. See Jeremy Nobel, “Forging Connection against Loneliness,” American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, Sept. 25, 2018, afsp.org/forging-connection-against-loneliness.
2. See Avery Hartmans, “These Are the Sneaky Ways Apps like Instagram, Facebook, Tinder Lure You In and Get You ‘Addicted,’” *Business Insider*, Feb. 17, 2018, [businessinsider.com](https://www.businessinsider.com).
3. M. Russell Ballard, “Be Still, and Know That I Am God” (Church Educational System devotional for young adults, May 4, 2014), [broadcasts.ChurchofJesusChrist.org](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/broadcasts).
4. See Jane Randel and Amy Sánchez, “Parenting in the Digital Age of Pornography,” *HuffPost* blog, Feb 26, 2017, [huffpost.com](https://www.huffpost.com).
5. See “Cyberbullying,” *Ensign*, Aug. 2013, 39.
6. Russell M. Nelson, “Hope of Israel” (worldwide youth devotional, June 3, 2018), [HopeofIsrael.ChurchofJesusChrist.org](https://www.hopeofisrael.org).
7. David A. Bednar, “Things as They Really Are,” *Ensign*, June 2010, 19.