Sound, Smart, and Safe: A Plea for Teaching Good Digital Hygiene

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Abstract

The concept of "digital hygiene" addresses the way digital technology can be integrated into our lives in safe, healthy, responsible, and respectful ways. Teaching kids about digital hygiene requires parents to be confident about their role as models and guides for the use of these devices, which is difficult when adults feel—often quite justifiably—that their children's tech skills outpace their own. This commentary addresses the need for broadening the notion of digital hygiene with input from kids and teens, then educating and supporting parents (and educators) in its application.

When my twin daughters started high school six years ago, the number of digital devices in our household multiplied. Suddenly there were iPads for classroom use and smartphones in their purses, and the devices began to take over our lives. It got harder and harder to get them off their screens, and more difficult to know where homework ended and FaceTime, Instagram, and Netflix began. As they and their friends acquired these digital tools, their social lives became almost completed mediated by apps and screens of various sizes, and we worried about the ways it was changing their habits and personalities. Their bedtimes stretched later and later. Their voracious reading habits ground nearly to a halt. They spent less time outside. Their heads were always down, eyes focused on a screen; their spoken responses to questions became distracted and disengaged.

Now any parent of teenagers knows some of these behaviours are at least partly a consequence of contemporary adolescence, but it was clear that physiological changes couldn't explain them all. Unable to draw on models from our own pre-Internet adolescence, my husband and I began to gradually develop and implement a set of new rules and guidelines about how the devices could and should be used to keep their bodies, minds, privacy, and devices safe, a set of practices we began to refer to as "digital hygiene."

Our family-oriented version of digital hygiene looked like this: Every night before bedtime, I'd insist they remove their devices from their bedrooms and plug them into a charging station set up in the hallway. Until they demonstrated good judgment and earned their privacy in increments, they needed to share usernames and passwords to all accounts and devices with me and their dad. All smartphones were to be set to silent and kept away from the dinner table. Guidelines were established for keeping passwords private, and privacy levels on their accounts set to the highest degree. New rules needed to be developed all the time, and were generally hashed out around the dinner table, with the reluctant consent of our kids. While they didn't like the rules, we all appreciated the spirited critical thinking and debates around them. I learned a lot about how these tools fit into their lives, and these conversations offered (and continue to offer) golden opportunities to discuss our concerns and share ideas.

As my kids slowly adjusted to the new rules (albeit with considerable grumbling and protest), I continued researching this emerging set of best practices. I discovered the notion of digital hygiene wasn't my invention at all. The origins of the concept are a bit murky, with the earliest reference being a blog launched in November 2010 (Rodrigues, 2010), focused on best practices for keeping digital devices in good order and protecting them from malware, as well us online productivity and netiquette tips. The CyborgAnthropology.com wiki defines the term as the "cleanliness or uncleanliness of one's digital habitat" (Case, 2012).

As a parent of three teens and a writer and educator on the subjects of digital technology, education, and parenting, I'd argue that we can greatly and expand upon the concept of digital hygiene, and then actively teach it to our kids at home and in schools. This is reinforced in the writings and techniques of the Digital Citizenship Program (Ribble & Bailey, 2007a), a nine-component look at teaching about these tools that can easily accommodate the thinking behind a digital hygiene best practices. Ribble and Bailey have greatly expanded upon their original program on their website, DigitalCitizenship.net, and it's a resource I frequently allude to in my work with parents, teachers, and students. For many, it's a first introduction to the idea that teaching about digital tech is about so much more than learning how to put together a great PowerPoint presentation or code a website; it's fundamentally about using these powerful communication tools safely, and with respect and civility towards others.

Every one of their nine elements addresses different perspectives on safety, security, respect, civility, privacy, and effective, productive, and creative use of digital technologies. Digital Etiquette, for example, not only covers inappropriate use, but also encompasses effective ways to write an email (is "reply all" always necessary?), respect content shared in confidence by others, and addressing authority figures in different online formats. Ribble and Bailey's element of Digital Health & Wellness speaks to many of the concerns parents have over how screens may affect their child's vision, how earphones may cause hearing loss, and whether hours on the Internet may affect physical fitness or exacerbate stress and anxiety.

Ribble and Bailey (2007b, 2007c) offer kids' and parents' versions of a Family Contract for Digital Citizenship on their website for all parties to sign. Similar versions exist elsewhere (see the Family Online Safety Institute's Family Online Safety Contract (2017). These are excellent blueprints for facilitating conversation in homes and in classrooms, but they aren't especially comprehensive, and they are entirely top-down in their dynamic, imposing upon kids the rules created by adults.

That doesn't have to be the case. A more balanced model for developing guidelines for digital hygiene is already in practice in some forward-thinking schools. I've written elsewhere about the innovative, student-authored digital technology policy in place at my daughters' school, Montreal's Trafalgar School for Girls, (Sklar, 2014). Developed to counter the more typical, opaquely worded policies in most schools, Trafalgar asked their students to rewrite it in their own words (as in, "Always think about the effects your words might have before you post. Imagine the person's face when they read it" (Trafalgar, 2017). The resulting draft was circulated for feedback from teachers, school staff, and parents; each incoming class of secondary one students is invited to edit and offer feedback. It's a living document,

created by students, for students, which encourages both critical thinking in its development and buy-in from students who become de facto ambassadors among their peers for responsible behaviour online.

Any arrangement that draws kids into the conversation about best practices is likely to be more effective if it is simultaneously regarded as an opportunity for learning and communication. The problem with any kind of hygiene practice is that is based in practical, lived experiences, and is very often context dependent. Yet parents and educators tend to crave defined rules and clear directives, which isn't always possible or especially successful in achieving compliance. One of the most common set of questions I get from parents is about appropriate ages for different kinds of behaviours: what is the right age for an email account, for a first cellphone, for a Snapchat account. There is no easy answer to those questions. Although social media networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter require users to be 13 years old to set up an account, this is simply a matter of entering the correct year of birth during registration, and commonly circumvented by younger users who can manage the basic subtraction. The answer to questions about the right age is a complex formula each parent must derive, based on their comfort levels, family values, willingness to effectively supervise its use, level of responsibility of the child in question, and their capacity for following rules. This might be different for each child in the family.

Take the question of a first cellphone as an illustration. Getting one's own smartphone has become a right of passage for many kids, and the age of first acquisition has dropped steadily as devices become more affordable, kids' ownership of such devices has become normalized, and as parents trade up their own smartphones and pass the old ones down to their kids. The average age for an American child getting their first smartphone is now an astonishingly young 10.3 years (Influence Central, 2016); a 2014 report found 25% of Canadian fourth-graders had their own cellphone (Steeves, 2014).

Despite the fact that primary school-aged kids owning cellphones is becoming commonplace, parents express a lot of anxiety about how to handle this. During my workshops, parents confess three particular worries: that they are interfering with their child's privacy in demanding passwords or revision of texts and apps installed on the phones, that they are outclassed by their kids' superior technical abilities with such gadgets and doubt their abilities to effectively supervise their use, or that their rules for use are excessively strict.

My response to these frequently voiced concerns is to reassure parents on two fronts. The first is to remind them that freedom from parental involvement is a privilege that all children should earn through consistent, responsible behaviour. Any parent who has made the numerous mental calculations involved when their child asks to go to the playground on their own for the first time will be familiar with this process: Can the child can cross the street safely? Can they keep track of time and return at the appointed hour, will they talk to strangers? Will they wander off to a friend's house without asking permission? Will they know what to do if they get hurt? Yet, for some reason, today's parents doubt their ability to make those same common-sense parental assessments with regard to digital technology.

Second, I suggest that it is totally acceptable for parents to insist that their children do not have the right to privacy from them online until they have earned it through the same consistent, responsible behaviour outlined above. This is somewhat of a shocking revelation. I reassure them that their kids must still have a right to old-fashioned, low-tech privacy, such as face-to-face conversations with friends, handwritten diaries, notes, poems, or pictures drawn on paper. The margin for error with technology is simply too high for young children, tweens, and even some young teens to handle without direct parent supervision. If kids know their moms and dads are reading their texts scrolling through their apps and emails, they will exercise far more impulse control than if they believe they have complete privacy. That alone can be the difference between a simple disagreement with friends and an online diatribe that stirs trouble across the eighth grade (and beyond). I offer one caveat here, which is that parents do not do this behind their children's backs. Ideally it will be done together, or when access is requested. The sole exceptions to this rule would be if you believe your child or another is in danger of harm.

Let's apply this to the subject of digital hygiene for kids and their cellphones. Ideally, parents would hand our children their first smartphones with the express understanding that the device belongs to mom and dad, but is a privilege granted to children based on adherence to house guidelines. They would make it clear that content and apps on the phone are not private from parents, until such privacy is earned in age-appropriate increments through responsible, consistent behaviour. They would ask that phone usage respects school rules, that the device be charged when they leave the house, that kids answer parental texts and calls in a timely manner, that the phone be plugged into a charging station outside the bedroom 30-60 minutes before bedtime. Other guidelines should be developed with their kids' input; if mealtimes are no-phone zones, parents need to respect that as well.

Digital hygiene teaches so much more than just safe, responsible use of digital tools. A parent who sits down together with their child to Google how to configure Instagram privacy settings is also modelling critical thinking, research techniques, discussing context, and involving their child. Just as important, they are providing reassuring structure to the usage of these exciting, but often bewildering tools and online spaces. Just as we teach our kids to brush their teeth, tie their shoelaces, wash their dirty dishes, and safely cross the street, today's parents and educators must address the innumerable ways technology has infiltrated every aspect of our kids' lives.

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