VERMONT Consultation & Psychiatry Access PROGRAM

Supporting Pediatric and Perinatal Providers

CAREGIVERS GUIDE

HEALTHY TECHNOLOGY USE FOR TEENS

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Technology is an important part of teens' lives and can provide opportunities for **connection, learning, creativity, and entertainment**. At the same time, some types or patterns of technology use can negatively affect sleep, relationships, self-image, and mental health. Caregivers can help teens develop healthy, safe, and balanced technology habits.

WHAT CAN CAREGIVERS DO?

- **Be a good role model**. Pay attention to your own technology habits and screen time. Model putting devices away to make space for sleep, family time, and in-person connection.
- **Create expectations together**. Establish clear, developmentally appropriate expectations about when, where, and how devices can be used. The American Academy of Pediatrics' Family Media Plan can help families create a plan that reflects their needs and values.
- **Protect sleep**. Encourage teens to put devices away before bedtime and keep phones and other screens out of the bedroom overnight when possible.
- **Create screen-free times and spaces**. Family meals, car rides, or other shared activities can provide regular opportunities to put devices away and connect.
- **Think about quality, not just quantity**. Not all screen time is the same. Video chatting with a friend, creating art, doing homework, and endlessly scrolling social media serve very different purposes. Talk with your teen about how different kinds of technology use make them feel and whether they are supporting or interfering with the things that matter to them.
- **Stay curious and involved**. Ask about the games, apps, social media, videos, and online communities your teen enjoys. When appropriate, watch, play, or explore media together. Common Sense Media can also help caregivers learn more about specific games, movies, shows, and apps.
- **Pay attention to changes**. If you notice significant changes in your teen's sleep, mood, relationships, school functioning, or behavior that seem connected to technology use, talk with them about what you are noticing and consider adjusting limits or seeking additional support.
- **Avoid making screens the primary reward or coping strategy**. Help teens develop a variety of ways to manage boredom, stress, and difficult emotions, including movement, creative activities, time outdoors, and connection with others.

TALK ABOUT ONLINE SAFETY

Help your teen understand how to protect themselves and others online. Encourage them to:

- Protect personal and private information.
- Be cautious about communicating with people they do not know offline.
- Never agree to meet an online contact without involving a trusted adult.
- Understand the risks of sharing intimate or explicit photos or messages.
- Treat others with respect and tell a trusted adult about cyberbullying, threats, harassment, or other concerning interactions.
- Tell a trusted adult if they encounter content about suicide or self-harm, particularly if they are concerned about someone's immediate safety.
- Remember that online content can be saved, shared, or made public even when it was intended to be private.

Keep the conversation going. Technology changes quickly, and a single conversation or set of rules will not cover every situation. Regular, nonjudgmental conversations can help teens come to caregivers when something uncomfortable or unsafe happens online.

REFERENCES & HELPFUL RESOURCES:

- **American Academy of Pediatrics** - Media and Children
- **Columbia University Irving Medical Center** - Is Social Media Threatening Teens' Mental Health and Well-being?
- **Common Sense Media** - How Much Screen Time Is OK for My Kids?

ADAPTED FROM: Resources from the American Academy of Pediatrics, Columbia University Irving Medical Center, Common Sense Media, and Harvard Graduate School of Education.

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