Parenting Goes Digital

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>
> —*Parenthetical parent*

UW EXTENSION
University of Wisconsin-Extension

Situation

Today's average American spends almost nine hours per day using technology and owns four digital devices. Nearly 90% of all US adults are online and 80% have either broad-band access or a smartphone. In fact, smartphones are the great equalizer, providing young adults, minorities, those with no college experience, and those with lower household income levels a connection to the Internet.

Parents are digital media consumers, as well, using mobile devices and social media to get parenting tips, interact with other parents and connect with their children. Parents of teens, in particular, often stay "ahead of the curve" by learning about new technology through their teen.

Research shows that digital media can be a useful means for providing education to parents. Studies have found that online parenting education can be as effective as face-to-face settings in influencing positive parenting change.

But although parents' access to and use of digital media is expanding, there are few high-quality, research-based resources that exist to provide parenting information and support.

Response

The Digital Parenting Workgroup, a team of University of Wisconsin-Extension Family Living colleagues, was prepared to explore this situation. The group responded by designing, implementing and evaluating two digital parenting education programs.

eParenting® High Tech Kids (http://fyi.uwex.edu/eparenting/) was created to combat the negativity prevalent in conversations about youth and technology and, instead provide parents with positive uses and strategies for using digital media in their interactions with their 9- to 14-year-old children.

Parenthetical (http://www.myparenthetical.com) is a website intended to give parents of young teens a source of support and information about the transition to adolescence. The site was designed to offer developmental and parenting knowledge, normalize the parenting experience, and offer opportunities for parents to reflect and connect with others.

Results

Evaluation results from both projects suggest that digital parenting education programs have several positive impacts on parents.

Online programs easily fit learning into parents' daily life. Parents appreciate the easy accessibility of our online parenting education programs. Across both projects, parents reported valuing the UW-Extension connection, the quality, research-based

Family Living Programs Impact Report

information, and the formats. The vast majority of parents found the email reminders to be a beneficial weekly prompt and the websites easy to use. In fact, weekly email reminders were key to retaining weekly readership of both *eParenting® High Tech Kids* and *Parenthetical*. When email updates were not sent, fewer parents visited and commented on the sites.

Parents explained why the programs fit into their daily lives:

- *Short, easy to read, pertinent topics; produced by professionals from the Extension office; it's information I can trust." (Parenthetical parent)*
- *"Evidence-based information written in a fun, engaging format that helps me be a better parent." (Parenthetical parent)*
- *"Good facts, real life examples, good research, easy to understand with clearly presented information, not judgmental." (Parenthetical parent)*
- *"Good information on topics I may have been thinking about but didn't pursue on my own. Getting the emails is an easy way to get the information." (eParenting parent)*
- *"It gave me something specific to think about for the week; something new to try, or something to watch out for." (eParenting parent)*
- *"It makes improvement as a parent not such a daunting task as it breaks it down into bite-sized pieces" (eParenting parent)*

Parents learn from online parenting programs. As a result of using *Parenthetical*, 94% of the parents of teens surveyed said they spent more time reflecting on their parenting process. The majority of parents also reported more effective use of parenting skills, such as setting limits, communicating with their teen, and understanding the role of development in teens' thinking and actions. Parents who used *eParenting® High-Tech Kids* reported a better understanding of teen development and increased their knowledge of how to positively integrate digital media into their parenting. In fact, many parents could give concrete examples of how they were using digital media in their parenting, such as "texting humorous and supportive notes."

Online programs enhance parents' connections. Two-thirds of parents recommended *Parenthetical* to a friend, co-worker or family member. Parents also reported that the online programs gave them a sense of a positive connection to other parents, UW-Extension and their schools. For example, one-third of *eParenting®* parents liked the Family Living Programs' Facebook page after reading *eParenting® High Tech Kids*.

Parents described a number of ways they networked through these programs.

- *"I have forwarded the newsletters to friends and family, especially when it had a topic I know they are dealing with in parenting their children." (Parenthetical parent)*
- *"I sometimes forward the articles to my husband." (Parenthetical parent)*
- *"It made me feel more connected to the school and other parents who were receiving the same information as me." (eParenting parent)*
- *"I did not know the UWEX had this type of information available as a resource. I now check the UWEX website for more good information." (eParenting parent)*

A key mission of UW-Extension is to reach parents where they live, work and play. Digital technology has a strong potential to realize this goal. Online parenting resources can provide positive, widely accessible learning experiences. UW-Extension has the research-base combined with the local county connections to produce and provide high quality parenting resources. Additionally, online resources may serve to increase connections between parents and other UW-Extension or community programming.

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