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damages children’s social skills is an oversimplification. Still, about a third of the parents worried that media over-use leads to poor social skills. “Kids (are) losing the ability just to socialize,” said Tyler, a father of two boys, ages 4 and 8.

Benefits for kids

The parents in our study told numerous and often lengthy stories about their concerns. They mentioned benefits of media use much less often and with far less detail. Nonetheless, it’s important to recognize that digital media offer both risks and opportunities for children.

Parents appreciated how digital media enabled their children to communicate with family and friends who live far away, for example by video chatting with relatives in other countries. They also believed digital media skills are vital to their kids’ future job success. And they appreciate how digital media can support kids’ learning by building curiosity and providing access to new information.

Several parents enjoyed

playing online games with their children and texting them messages of support throughout the day. They felt these were examples of how they could use digital media to support healthy family relationships.

Finally, several parents discussed the joy and relaxation their children feel using digital media. Research shows that gaming in particular can be a healthy form of digital play when done in moderation and with parental awareness of content warnings.

How to guide kids

Thoughtful discussions with children are key to helping them benefit from digital media and to reduce potential risks. Toward this end, I suggest parents think about their role in guiding children’s media use less as protecting them from harm and more as educating them for long-term healthy habits. Here are a few recommendations to support that approach.

Rethink time limits: Time limits focus on the amount of digital media use without consider-

ing the value of different types of use. There is no “normal” amount of time children should spend with media. Three hours in one day spent watching cartoons probably isn’t great for social or educational development. But one hour watching cartoons plus one hour video calling with grandparents and one hour working online for a school assignment take up the same amount of time and represent a balance of activities that support entertainment as well as social and educational development.

Educate kids: Some online content is inappropriate or risky for children. But simply restricting access leaves them unprepared to make informed decisions on their own when they reach adulthood. Educating kids about the benefits and risks prepares them for a life certain to be spent partly online.

Encourage building social skills online: Much of young people’s social activity today takes place online, making online participation an important part of making and keeping friends. Being digitally connected can help children practice social interactions. Popular



Online interactions can help build kids’ social skills. Maria Thalassinou on Unsplash, CC BY-ND

cooperative games like Minecraft and Animal Crossing: New Horizons, for example, can help children learn how to solve problems together.

Model good media habits: When parents use media in moderation to interact with others and not just for passive use like watching videos, kids are likely to pick up these behaviors. If you decide to set rules for family media use, you should follow them, too. If children are not allowed to use their phones at mealtimes, for

example, parents should consider doing the same. The same is true for modeling respectful communication – set a good example by avoiding arguments online.

Avoid fear tactics: Most young people find positive discussions more motivating than scare tactics, which are generally ineffective. Rather than telling children that the internet is a scary place where dangerous strangers hang out, for example, teach them to leave online conversations when anyone asks

them to share personal information or when they begin to feel uncomfortable. It sends the same message without suggesting that all online conversations are dangerous. It also encourages children to build judgment skills.

At its core, a balanced parenting approach requires talking honestly with children about both the risks and benefits of digital media and helping them to learn to make good media use decisions.

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