



# MINISTERING *to* FAMILIES *in* CRISIS

*The Essential Guide for Nurturing  
Mental and Emotional Health*

Jennifer S. Ripley, James N. Sells & Diane J. Chandler, editors



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## SCREENS, CHILDREN, AND TEENS

The Challenges Are Real, and You Can Help

KATHY KOCH



Once upon a time, there were Walkmans and earphones, which was the end of civilization. Some predicted it would happen because youth would no longer interact. Everyone would be in their sound bubble. It didn't happen. But technology continues to change and to change us. Changes in the church are noticeable, too.

Churches both embrace and are cautious toward technology. They use websites, Facebook pages, text alerts, and email blasts for announcements, prayer requests, and encouragement. People can watch services online and stay connected from all over the world. Bible apps make it easy for people always to have a Bible.

There is a dark side to technology, also. Phones can be distracting. Kids might exchange pornographic images as if they were as harmless as baseball cards. Social media “challenges” can result in severe physical and mental health problems. Thus, parents may feel at a loss as to how to manage technology in a safe way for their families.

Challenges at home regarding technology can also find their way into your church. Parents often seek senior and youth pastors for guidance in helping them manage technology, which they may see as destroying their families. Discouragement is close at hand when parents can't effectively protect their families from harm. They see character changes, mood flips, and compulsion-like attachments to phones, gaming, and videos . . . and maybe these issues are interconnected. So, they meet with you to discuss their frustrations and concerns. You can help them connect the dots and the dotcoms.

### **WHAT HAVE YOU HEARD? IDENTIFYING ISSUES FROM OUR OBSERVATIONS**

Possibly, you have met with parents because of problems associated with technology. Familiar comments include statements like:

- “We don’t want to give our kids phones yet, but many in the youth group have them. Pastor Jim likes to communicate through texting and Instagram, so what can we do?”
- “My son and daughter saw porn by mistake. I feel horrible. What should I do?”
- “I can’t get my kids to come out of their rooms. They binge-watch YouTube videos all night. Their grades are slipping, and we’re not connected much anymore. How can I get them to care?”
- “We want our kids to come to us with questions, but they use Siri all the time instead.”
- “Our son says he learns so much from people he follows on social media that he doesn’t need our input.”

Pastors and staff have questions, too. One asked, “So many of my students are distracted by their phones, and they distract others as well. It happens more often on Sundays than on Wednesdays. It’s so frustrating! We talk about self-control and respect, but they succumb to the temptation to multitask. They seem to get bored so quickly now! I’m tempted to change the policy to no phones at all. What do you think?”

What about this question? “Can we do anything to encourage more youth and adults to use paper Bibles rather than phone apps? Especially

youth, they don't focus and concentrate well when using their phones. I'm concerned because they're dishonoring the Word of God and not treating it or God with the respect they deserve."

There is much to understand if we respond to parents with wisdom, discretion, and direction and equip them to expand their discernment, compassion, and practicality. Let's start with the brain.

### WHAT MUST YOU KNOW? TECHNOLOGY AND THE BRAIN

The use of technology affects children's brains at all ages. Because children's and teens' brains are not fully developed, screens have more significant and longer-lasting power over them than adults.<sup>1</sup> Young brains become "wired" for technology, and they may expect much in the world to behave like technology does. For example, they may always expect and prefer large amounts of stimuli and everything and everyone to be quick-paced. Brain-wiring is how habits form quickly, and expectations are learned, even unintentionally. For example, Choudhury and McKinney state that "Internet use exacerbates existing natural cognitive deficits and proneness for instant gratification and risk orientation in adolescents, impairing social and reasoning abilities by stunting the development of the prefrontal cortex."<sup>2</sup> Teen girls report they can't stop using social media even when they realize it's not good for their mental health.<sup>3</sup>

Repetition is powerful. For example, I've asked young people if they planned to "x" out of a game but chose "play again" even though they didn't mean to. Many admit they've done it. I've done it! When actions

<sup>1</sup>Kathy Koch, *Screens and Teens: Connecting with Our Kids in a Wireless World* (Chicago: Moody, 2015), 31-36; Doug Smith, *[Un]intentional: How Screens Secretly Shape Your Desires and How You Can Break Free* (Grand Rapids, MI: Credo House, 2021), 11-26; and Cory Turner, "10 Things to Know about How Social Media Affects Teens' Brains," NPR, February 16, 2023, [www.npr.org/2023/02/16/1157180971/10-things-to-know-about-how-social-media-affects-teens-brains](http://www.npr.org/2023/02/16/1157180971/10-things-to-know-about-how-social-media-affects-teens-brains).

<sup>2</sup>Suparna Choudhury and Kelly A. McKinney, "Digital Media, the Developing Brain and the Interpretive Plasticity of Neuroplasticity," *Transcultural Psychiatry* 50, no. 2 (April 2013): 192-215, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461512474623>.

<sup>3</sup>Derek Thompson, "Social Media is Attention Alcohol," *The Atlantic*, September 17, 2021, [www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/09/social-media-attention-alcohol-booze-instagram-twitter/620101/](http://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/09/social-media-attention-alcohol-booze-instagram-twitter/620101/); and Georgia Wells, Jeff Horwitz, and Deepa Seetharaman, "Facebook Knows Instagram Is Toxic for Teen Girls, Company Documents Show," *Wall Street Journal*, September 14, 2021, [www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-instagram-is-toxic-for-teen-girls-company-documents-show-11631620739](http://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-instagram-is-toxic-for-teen-girls-company-documents-show-11631620739).

are repeated over time, it's easy to keep doing them. Adrenaline is real, and online media forms habits that are difficult to break.

If you drive home from church the same way every time, I imagine you can almost turn onto your street without thought. Going a different way feels unnatural and requires effort. Patterns are set. This is how children are with screens. Using screens is natural, easy, and becomes very intuitive. For them, doing other things takes more effort and may feel uncomfortable or unnatural, and they may push back and resist.

Not only does frequent screen use cause comfort and desire, but screen use can be harmfully captivating. Children can become addicted to the adrenaline that surges when they get a like, win a game, enjoy a song, or get a message from a friend. Teens become so used to having devices in their hands that they miss them when they aren't there. When disconnected from their phones, they feel disconnected from their friends, society, and life in general. The phenomenon called phantom vibration syndrome can occur, which is a false perception that a device is vibrating.<sup>4</sup> The devices have become children's electronic pacifiers or security blankets.

Among the reasons to warn against tech addiction in children is evidence that those who develop addictions to screens now are much more susceptible to developing other addictions in the future. Research suggests that 90% of addictions have roots in the teen years.<sup>5</sup> Other reasons include missing activities that are much more beneficial for their development.<sup>6</sup> These include playing games with siblings and peers, exploring the outside world, reading, listening to music with others, talking with friends, and completing homework. These are not merely activities. While children and teens engage with others, they can problem-solve, create, find adventure, and develop negotiating skills. With diverse experiences, brains develop

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<sup>4</sup>Margaret Rouse, "Phantom Vibration Syndrome," Techopedia, May 11, 2015, [www.techopedia.com/definition/31221/phantom-vibration-syndrome](http://www.techopedia.com/definition/31221/phantom-vibration-syndrome).

<sup>5</sup>The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University, "National Study Reveals: Origins of an Epidemic, Teen Substance Use America's #1 Public Health Problem," PR Newswire, June 29, 2011, [www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/national-study-reveals-origins-of-an-epidemic-teen-substance-use-americas-1-public-health-problem-124690008.html](http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/national-study-reveals-origins-of-an-epidemic-teen-substance-use-americas-1-public-health-problem-124690008.html).

<sup>6</sup>Mitch Prinstein, "Protecting Our Children Online" (written testimony, U.S. Senate Committee on Judiciary, 2023), 17, [www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2023-02-14%20-%20Testimony%20-%20Prinstein.pdf](http://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2023-02-14%20-%20Testimony%20-%20Prinstein.pdf).



for more than technology use in the future. Confidence, autonomy, and self-reliance are formed. The ability to give and take with others grows. Hard things become more natural and easier to do.

Overuse or problematic use of technology contributes to unhealthy behaviors. These include overeating, irregular or deprived sleep, behavioral problems, weakened academic performance, violence, and less time spent playing and being outside.<sup>7</sup> Too much time on screens, coupled with less time for healthy activities, contributes to the stress, anxiety, and suicidal ideation that you may have to deal with in family and church settings.<sup>8</sup>

The American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry recommends time limits on children's social media usage to enhance overall development.<sup>9</sup> To help parents decide what's best for their families, you can encourage them to create a Family Media Plan. Focus on the Family also produces an excellent guide. These age recommendations will serve you well.<sup>10</sup>

- For children under eighteen months, avoid screen-based media except video chatting.
- For children eighteen to twenty-four months, watch only high-quality programming with adults for no more than one hour per week.
- For children two to five years old, limit screen time to one hour per day of high-quality programming, and often watch it with children.

<sup>7</sup>Jill Christensen, "Children and Screen Time: How Much Is Too Much?," Mayo Clinic Health System, May 28, 2021, [www.mayoclinichealthsystem.org/hometown-health/speaking-of-health/children-and-screen-time](http://www.mayoclinichealthsystem.org/hometown-health/speaking-of-health/children-and-screen-time).

<sup>8</sup>Allison Aubrey, "How to Help Young People Limit Screen Time—and Feel Better about How They Look," NPR, February 26, 2023, [www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2023/02/26/1159099629/teens-social-media-body-image](http://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2023/02/26/1159099629/teens-social-media-body-image); Jonathan Haidt, "The Dangerous Experiment on Teen Girls," *The Atlantic*, November 21, 2021, [www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/11/facebook-dangerous-experiment-teen-girls/620767/](http://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/11/facebook-dangerous-experiment-teen-girls/620767/); and TechDetox Mom, "Always on: Technology, Stress and Anxiety," TechDetox Box, November 20, 2023, [www.techdetoxbox.com/screen-time-problems/always-on/](http://www.techdetoxbox.com/screen-time-problems/always-on/).

<sup>9</sup>"Screen Time and Children," American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, February 2020, [www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families\\_and\\_Youth/Facts\\_for\\_Families/FFF-Guide/Children-And-Watching-TV-054.aspx](http://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Children-And-Watching-TV-054.aspx).

<sup>10</sup>Rachel Ehmke, "Media Guidelines for Kids of All Ages," Child Mind Institute, November 20, 2023, <https://childmind.org/article/media-guidelines-for-kids-of-all-ages/>; and Mary Alvord, "Digital Guidelines: Promoting Healthy Technology Use for Children," American Psychological Association, December 12, 2019, [www.apa.org/topics/social-media-internet/technology-use-children](http://www.apa.org/topics/social-media-internet/technology-use-children).

- For children six and up, establish consistent limits on how much time is spent using media and the types of media used. Continue to interact with children so you can help them interpret what they see—model appropriate technology use. Protect bedtime and create media-free spaces like bedrooms, the dinner table, and the car unless you're on long trips. Encourage other activities.

### WHAT MUST YOU KNOW? TECHNOLOGY AND THE HEART

Technology doesn't just change children's brains; it changes their hearts. Of course, I don't mean that it causes physical changes as it does to the brain. I mean alterations to what children think is good and right and what is harmful and wrong. Changes to their attitudes, actions, and decisions can spring from the amount of technology they use and what they do with it. Let's consider a few of the most important "heart changes." They include bullying and online harassment, doubts about God, others, and self, and accepting lies and deceptions without questioning.

Internet bullying and harassment are a big deal. The internet is impersonal. It is a fertile environment to exert power, revenge, and retaliation. Young users often have no filter and little realization of the effects and consequences of their actions. As leaders, if you and the parents in your ministry don't deal with bullying issues well, young people will believe they can continue, and their behavior will very likely escalate to more serious levels. Online bullying *is* a serious issue. If you become aware that it is going on, intervene and do what you can to stop it. Mitch Prinstein concluded: "Brain scans of adults and youths reveal that online harassment activates the same regions of the brain that respond to physical pain and trigger a cascade of reactions that replicate physical assault and create physical and mental health damage."<sup>11</sup>

Maybe parents have asked how to respond to their children's doubts about God. Lonely internet searches about God can lead children down pathways that draw them away from God. It is painful and even scary for them to see their children waver in their faith and question whether they want to be followers of Jesus. Yet, as you know, it's not uncommon for

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<sup>11</sup>Prinstein, "Protecting Our Children Online," 12.

adolescents to ask questions because they need to find their way to faith. Church ministry in late elementary and early middle school years can prepare parents for this reality. By identifying subtle and bold lies children may be exposed to online, ministry leaders can teach corresponding truths to help children recognize and reject these lies. Such teaching doesn't guarantee children will follow their parents' faith or recommended cautions, but offering trusted adults to help children understand and evaluate messages and platforms is part of good ministry leadership.

You might have wondered if some behavioral issues and doubts stem from technology. Maybe you haven't been confident enough to bring this up to parents. What I share below will help you frame future discussions.

When I teach parents about the lies children believe, they're relieved and concerned.<sup>12</sup> They're relieved because the lies reveal that children's defiant, argumentative behaviors and other challenges may not be due to poor parenting. Technology is often a primary culprit. I'm not leaving parents or children totally off the hook. The amount of tech use and what children and teens do with technology must be considered.

I've already pointed out that children can become *physically* addicted to the adrenaline that technology use causes. As a result, they want more of that same rush and joy. This is why it's hard for them to put their phones down and fully concentrate without thinking about what they might miss.<sup>13</sup> Since we are exploring issues of technology and the heart, let me suggest the metaphor that individuals can become *emotionally* attached to lies they find compelling. In my decades of interacting with thousands of children, parents, and ministers about what destructive beliefs drive us and our culture, I have identified four common lies about personhood rooted in technology. They deal with self-centeredness, happiness, options, and authority. Living out these addictive falsehoods as though they were true is a source of concern; they may feel emotionally satisfying, but they intertwine with the physical addiction cycle and become barriers to personal and emotional growth.

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<sup>12</sup>Koch, *Screens and Teens*, 83-88, 103-05, 137-38, 163-64, 181-82.

<sup>13</sup>Maria T. Maza et al., "Association of Habitual Checking Behaviors on Social Media with Longitudinal Functional Brain Development," *JAMA Pediatrics* 177, no. 2 (January 3, 2023): 160-67, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2022.4924>.

#### FOUR LIES TECHNOLOGY TEACHES CHILDREN

**Lie #1: *I am the center of my own universe.*** Technology can cause children to believe, “I am the center of my own universe.” Children may believe this because of the convenience of their phones, the ease of posting pictures, getting reactions to their videos and posts on social media, and the freedom to watch and listen to whatever they want. All this attention amplifies the sense of a world integrated around self, where all things connect with and come to or from me. Also, parents may consistently put children first and act as if the world revolves around them, reinforcing this self-centered perception.

Children’s hearts can turn toward pride, entitlement, and anger if they believe this lie. This belief can also cause loneliness because they elevate their importance over others, which causes them to think they don’t need anyone. If children know God, believing this lie negatively affects their relationship with Him. They begin to think He serves them. If they haven’t yet trusted Christ as Savior and Lord and they believe this lie, God seems unnecessary.

Today’s youth may struggle with boredom more than their parents did at their age. But boredom is a fact of life, and the misbelief that we can or should avoid boredom at all costs will cost something. Ministry leaders can equip and encourage parents to help their children navigate boredom, given that life is more than novelty, fun, and entertainment. Leaders might also advise young people on ways to use their free time constructively, such as developing hobbies, playing an instrument, engaging in sports, spending time outdoors, learning, and serving others.

When children get their eyes off themselves, they can recognize there’s a whole God-created universe worth living in. Now, they may be willing to serve others, which is one of the best ways for children and teens to discover more about themselves and the world they are *part* of—not the *center* of. Serving can be challenging for them at first, so they may resist. They may initially serve because it makes them feel important. Changes in their attitudes and character will likely happen when parents and church staff engage children in conversations during and after serving. Sharing relevant Scripture such as Mark 10:45 (Jesus came to serve), Luke 22:26 (leaders serve), and Galatians 5:13 (serve through love) is also wise.

**Lie #2: I deserve to be happy all the time.** If you reflect on your experiences with children, you'll realize many of them think, "I deserve to be happy all the time." Because technology is new, convenient, immediate, easy, personal, and entertaining, they've learned to prioritize happiness. Many would like the world to behave as tech does—with a happy-clappy marketing style of immediate gratification. Young parents also may believe this "I deserve to be happy" lie. They may feed into it by giving in to their children's complaining, even when it's not in their children's best interest.

Believing happiness is their right orients children's hearts to entitlement, similar to the first lie. If parents complain to you about their children's lack of gratitude, talk with them about these first two lies. And, because working hard doesn't make young people happy, you may also hear about laziness and children who give up quickly and complain about chores and expectations. Also, children may be depressed and angry when they don't feel happy. However, being happy all the time isn't realistic or satisfying.

How do children relate to God? They may not bother praying because they believe it's God's job to make them happy and keep them happy. They just expect it. If they do pray, they may sound demanding and pray only for themselves. They can be quickly disappointed and angry if God doesn't give them what they believe they need or deserve.

Children who believe this lie need help processing hard emotions. It's dangerous for them to stuff down emotions like grief, fear, loss, shame, and embarrassment so they can stay happy. If parents tell you their children aren't talking to them, their closed hearts may be the reason.

A second recommendation is to teach children and teens that challenges have a purpose. Share God's reasons from Romans 5:3-5: "Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us." Talk about how your character matured and your faith deepened because God allowed you to experience some hard times. Inspire youth to see the big picture of life so they will try new things and risk not being

happy. Challenges will strengthen them to handle the realities of life. Remind them they can make a difference if they serve and take risks. Heroes like Daniel, Esther, and Mary were young and inexperienced. You can point to how these biblical characters surmounted challenges without appearing triumphal. They trusted God. Inspire children, youth, and their parents to believe God has purposes for them so they can be wise and courageous now. If they consistently do a U-turn when they see challenges up ahead, they'll turn out immature and unhappy.

**Lie #3: I must have choices.** The third lie is “I must have choices.” When I teach this to teens and children, they agree they don't like being told what to do and having no options. Many thank me for pointing out the root of their dissatisfaction and negative behaviors. It's not hard to see why they believe it. How many apps, shows, movies, songs, brands, coffees, and other products are available? Millions! The drop-down menu effect from all platforms and devices contributes to this lie, too. Parents also believe this lie and come to expect their children to suggest options. Many parents give in and change their plans to make their children happy because they're tired of the fight.

Much has been written about the effects of an instant culture. No example is more apparent than pizza! You used to have to bake your own, and then pizza restaurants became the thing. Then someone thought of pizza delivery. Now you can have any meal delivered. That's not all! Groceries are delivered, too. None of this is wrong, but those who are older know that choice is a privilege. Young people think it's their right. Yet, research indicates that the more choices people have, the more unhappy they are!<sup>14</sup> The cereal aisle in the grocery store is an unhappiness zone! This seems counterintuitive, but when many options are offered and considered, people can worry that they missed out on the best option, which reduces their happiness and contentment.

This lie, “I must have choices,” is a definite reason children struggle to stay focused. They'd rather multitask than stay bored, rather do something easy than something hard. Their experiences with all the games,

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<sup>14</sup>Nathan Cheek et al., “Is Having Too Many Choices (Versus Too Few) Really the Greater Problem for Consumers?,” *Behavioral Scientist*, October 3, 2022, <https://behavioralscientist.org/is-having-too-many-choices-versus-too-few-really-the-greater-problem-for-consumers/>.

videos, products, and shows make having dozens of choices natural for them. They know they have many choices available at their fingertips. To help, youth pastors can explain the goals of focus and teach that clearing away distractions is an important Christian discipline. They can start by having everyone put their phones in a basket when they enter the room. They can encourage youth to use paper Bibles in services, not the Bible app on their phones. The temptation to respond to the alerts and to multitask is strong. Children are perfectly capable of not having a phone in their hands at all times. We encourage them to mature when we prove they can survive without their phones 24/7. This anti-establishment or “rebel” approach to tech can appeal to teens.

Other effects of this lie are similar and, in some cases, identical to the first two lies. Children who believe they must have choices aren’t content and complain, argue, and struggle with obedience. They need options, but they’re overwhelmed by them all. They need to stay happy at the center of their universe and don’t know what choice will cater to them. Hence, they may struggle to decide whom to date, what to do after high school, and whether to trust Christ as their Savior. Teens who believe this “I must have choices” lie may deny Christ because they want to keep their options open. For example, a high school graduate I spoke with chose not to trust Christ at an event because he said he might have better options at college. I’m unsure what options he was considering, but he couldn’t commit to Jesus.

Students who follow this lie can also resist God because they mistake “I am the way and the truth and the life” (Jn 14:6) as a limitation. We must remind teens that God doesn’t force anyone to believe. Choices abound within God’s protective boundaries!

We must teach children to make decisions using standards other than happiness as a baseline. A sermon series on decision-making may be in order. This way, everyone benefits, and teens learn from you how to use Scripture and God’s principles when making decisions. Reinforce wise standards that are biblical, healthy, others-focused, and mature that can inform decisions that align with family values.

Parents and perhaps staff may share with you issues regarding their disobedient children. Their children may talk back, be disrespectful, and not follow through on commitments. When I teach teens and young

adults that the choice lie and the happiness lie cause at least some of their argumentative, disagreeable behavior, they realize they've been immature. Most want to change. This will take time because they've developed habits of presenting options, disagreeing with what their parents want them to do, and debating at the drop of a hat. They will appreciate knowing they're not bad kids. Instead, technology is training them how to behave, which can be controlled.

Children will stop debating with their parents when parents make their “yes” a “yes” and their “no” a “no” and choose not to debate their children. Help parents learn why and how to stand up to their children assertively, wisely, and in developmentally appropriate ways while humbly listening to understand. They need encouragement and confidence to be in control, which counters the fourth lie.

**Lie #4: *I am my own authority.*** Children who believe the first three lies usually believe the fourth, “I am my own authority.” They must believe they are their own authority if they want to be at the center of their universe, happy always, and free to make choices. If they allow parents or pastors to tell them what to do, all three desires are at risk.

This dangerous lie is one of Satan's more convincing lies—that we can be masters of our own destiny. Of course, everyone worships or follows something or someone. People may not follow Jesus but will follow social influencers, media stars, or friends. Unknowingly, they will put themselves under their authority as they follow them. Hopefully, children and teens in your church follow you and their parents, in addition to God.

Busy and absent parents may cause children to believe they must be responsible for themselves. This is also true if their parents are available but don't answer their questions or don't answer them truthfully. The same is true for pastors. Young people may decide whether or not they can trust you and other leaders to lead them based on your availability and ability to answer their questions.

Children will turn to ChatGPT, Siri, Alexa, Echo, and Google if parents and other authority figures aren't available. These online sources are always available. However, as I wrote earlier, it is important to remember that these devices and platforms are programmed by people who do not have a biblical worldview. They're probably harmless when



wondering what other movies an actress starred in. But, for example, children could be harmed if they rely on these tools for answering questions about God, the meaning of life, and sexual ethics.

There are other reasons children believe they can be their own authority. They're aware of authority failures because of social media announcements they see and conversations they overhear. When leaders fail, they may conclude that leaders aren't trustworthy or necessary. Another key truth driving this lie is that there are no clear standards for right and wrong, good and evil, and true and false. Experts can disagree, and young people may be raised by parents who don't agree about essential principles. Disagreements among Christians and church attendees are especially damaging. All of this makes trusting leaders difficult for children.

Perhaps you're already thinking about the ramifications of this "I am my own authority" lie. As with other lies, children may be prideful, angry, and argumentative. Without biblically informed boundaries, teens are at risk of a weakened faith and life witness. Also, I'm concerned and saddened that although children are often overwhelmed when making decisions independently, they frequently reject input and instruction from others. They could make foolish and dangerous decisions because they have limited knowledge and experience.

To help children learn to trust God-given authority, their parents, pastors, and teachers must tell the truth, admit when they've made mistakes, apologize, and ask to be forgiven when they've sinned against children. They can also introduce their children to others who can be positive role models. It's beneficial for someone to explain how to process disappointments and how to discern when to trust again.

Again, encourage parents to stop arguing with their children. Empower and equip them to stand their ground without fear or anxiety. Help them enjoy their role as parents, leaving friendship for something that develops when their children are older. If they continually argue and debate and give in to their children, children can react badly and believe they are their own authority.

It's easy for children to treat God like any other authority if they don't see parents and others vital to them relating to God differently. Encourage parents to demonstrate with their choices and behavior that

God is their authority. Children need to see parents using Scripture on more than Sundays and pray more often than at meals. They must see them relate well with their pastors as their shepherds here on earth. Parents can also explain why they put themselves under God's authority. They should never assume children will figure it out.

These four lies described above (i.e., I am the center of my own universe, I deserve to be happy all the time, I must have choices, and I am my own authority) cause major character issues and can challenge relationships. They also can contribute to crises of faith. Trying to live up to these four lies is also a significant cause of digital stress, characterized by four things: connection overload, the fear of missing out, the need to be constantly available, and approval anxiety.<sup>15</sup>

### WHAT MUST YOU KNOW? THE ISSUE OF PORNOGRAPHY

There are many screen-based negatives we need to know about and discuss. I recommend children understand that many things are off-limits, not only porn. These include people using guns for violence, violent movies, movies with ratings older than the children's ages, drugs, glamorizing alcohol, and any abuse featured in films, pictures, shows, games, and whoever they follow on social media. Making porn the one big no-no can cause more problems. Curiosity about porn will increase. Young people likely will not come to you as a ministry leader if they see porn because you've presented it as the most terrible thing. They may fear your reaction.

This chapter does not have space to cover all of these significant issues. But it would be irresponsible not to address the crucial topic of pornography. Let's get specific. Wise pastors understand it's not "if" children will see porn but "when." Porn is so common today that even young children are being exposed.<sup>16</sup> For instance, at the time of this writing, 93% of boys

<sup>15</sup>Elizabeth A. Nick et al., "Adolescent Digital Stress: Frequencies, Correlates, and Longitudinal Association with Depressive Symptoms," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 70, no. 2 (February 2022): 336-39, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2021.08.025>; and Ric G. Steele, Jeffrey A. Hall, and Jennifer L. Christofferson, "Conceptualizing Digital Stress in Adolescents and Young Adults: Toward the Development of an Empirically Based Model," *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review* 23, no. 1 (2020): 15-26, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-019-00300-5>.

<sup>16</sup>Matt Fradd, "10 Shocking Stats about Teens and Pornography (2024)," Covenant Eyes, January 2, 2024, [www.covenanteyes.com/2015/04/10/10-shocking-stats-about-teens-and-pornography/](http://www.covenanteyes.com/2015/04/10/10-shocking-stats-about-teens-and-pornography/); "Internet Statistics," GuardChild, April 26, 2024, [www.guardchild.com/statistics/](http://www.guardchild.com/statistics/).

and 62% of girls are exposed to internet porn before 18, with 70% of children 7–18 years old having accidentally encountered online pornography, often while searching the web while doing homework. Research shows that 69% of teen boys and 55% of teen girls have seen porn showing same-sex intercourse.

As a church leader, how you and your parents respond to the news that children have seen porn is critical. Stay calm, avoid accusations, and reassure them that you'll help them. Also, children respond to their emotions before gathering information. Be quiet and feel their pain. Listen to their story and then get essential details. You may want to ask how their body responded to let them know what happened is normal and outside their control.<sup>17</sup> Feeling something when viewing porn does not make them terrible people. You may want to ask if they are remembering or replaying images they've seen so you can assure them that this isn't the same as viewing porn or sinning again. Ask them if they have questions that they want to ask you. Let them know you'll be available and that you expect to have many conversations about this and not a one-and-done discussion.

Emphasize the future and not the past in these conversations. Judging and talking about the past is necessary, but do it so the future is positively affected. Believe and teach that the past can inform us, but it shouldn't control us. Talk about whether the children sinned. Help them know there's a difference between accidentally seeing porn, having a friend show it to them, and searching it out. Talk about forgiveness if sin is relevant. Let them hear you pray for them.

Demonstrating unconditional love is easiest when ministry leaders and parents prepare for how children may disappoint or concern them. Preparation allows them to be proactive instead of reactive when something does happen. For example, practice and role-play potential conversations that your ministry staff and parents might have with children. This kind of preparation will make clear and calm communication more likely, which will help children feel safe.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Stacey Dittman, "The 8 Best Questions to Ask When Your Child Has Seen Porn," *Defend Young Minds*, July 24, 2018, [www.defendyoungminds.com/post/8-questions-ask-child-has-seen-porn](http://www.defendyoungminds.com/post/8-questions-ask-child-has-seen-porn).

<sup>18</sup>Kathy Koch, *Resilient Kids: Helping Children Embrace Life with Confidence* (Chicago: Moody, 2022), 87–121; Bob Waliszewski, *Plugged-in Parenting* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2011), 107–9.

You can also assist parents by offering education and anonymous question-and-answer opportunities about pornography to help them. Many believing parents ask me questions about how to parent, such as “What difference should my faith make? How will the church affect me? How will I parent differently from how my parents raised me?” Helping parents navigate their parenting role regarding pornography will encourage them. Addressing sensitive topics of sexuality provides a meaningful way to demonstrate you’re aware of the cultural chaos, your heart for families, and the relevance and importance of God’s Word and principles. While most parents in your church will appreciate your boldness and practical help, others may not. Anxiety about sexual ethics abounds, and pushback could be redirected toward you and other leaders.

Inform parents and ministry staff about what’s illegal in your state. Include information about parental control tools to monitor children’s technology use and prevent them from visiting certain websites.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, emphasize the importance of teaching children why and how to protect their hearts because these systems don’t always work and may not be in place everywhere. Encourage parents to teach children about their family values for bodies and sexuality so children can begin to determine what’s good for them and what isn’t. Teach critical reasoning skills, media literacy, and discernment. You can also teach children to bounce their eyes quickly from what they wish they wouldn’t have seen rather than staring at it.

### **WHAT IF TEENS ARE SEARCHING OUT OR ADDICTED TO PORN?**

Pastors and parents need to do what they can to prevent future exposure to porn at home, church, their children’s schools, and friends’ houses—which is true for anything unhealthy or unwise that children may seek. Parents will want to check in regularly without making every visit to a teen’s bedroom about porn. Parents and youth pastors need to stay alert to changes in teens’ moods, which may be telltale indicators of porn use.

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<sup>19</sup>For example, see these websites: Circle (<https://meetcircle.com/>); Bark ([www.bark.us/](http://www.bark.us/)); Canopy ([www.canopy.us/](http://www.canopy.us/)); SecureTeen (<https://secureteen.com/>); Bumpers ([www.bumpers.app](http://www.bumpers.app)); Wise-phones (<https://techless.com/>)

Consequences might include new limits on devices and platforms. For instance, you can consider the amount of time they're allowed to use devices, what they do on them, with whom they share, and where they use them. Not allowing device use after bedtime is an important parental control. It's usually not effective to ban their use at any time. Children will feel punished, which may mean they won't be honest with you in the future. They may get around this policy by hacking passwords and borrowing other people's devices.

Accountability is helpful. Parents can model the benefits of having accountability partners in their own lives by sharing how they approach accountability relationships and for what reasons. If adults have struggled with porn or have their own accountability for blocking it, sharing that honestly will usually help their teens. Emphasize that accountability is helpful to reinforce godliness and is not punitive. When teens understand this, it may be easier to be honest about their challenges. Make wise accountability plans together, and get children's buy-in.

If porn usage escalates, counseling is something to consider. Counseling may help uncover abuse the child has experienced, anxiety or depression, or family dynamics contributing to porn use. Sometimes porn use is a canary in the family coal mine that can illuminate more significant problems, so the desire for porn can be reduced once they're addressed. Professional therapists can help uncover underlying issues and respond to the unmet needs the child is trying to meet through using porn.

Teaching truth is vital. It can inspire teens to stop their viewing habits (or never begin if you offer preventative teaching). Teens can be equipped to teach peers. For example, one young teen I respect stumbled on porn when a friend worked past a supposedly effective preventive system on his device. Thankfully, he was disgusted by what he saw and was open with his parents, which allowed him and his dad to talk. He now understands the ideas described below, which he regularly shares with his peers.

Porn does not line up with a biblical worldview for several reasons. First, sex is to occur within a committed marital relationship between a man and a woman. Porn does not portray sex the way healthy married couples enjoy it. Porn makes sex seem consequence-free and only about immediate pleasure. Because porn teaches an unrealistic expectation for

sex in marriage, porn viewers who try to replicate something they saw or felt may feel like failures in marriage.

Second, porn dehumanizes men and women and everyone involved in the industry, including viewers, those featured in porn, and those who produce it. Porn has led many women to be trafficked and forced to “act.” Depending on what teens tell you about their addiction, you may want to point out that producers intentionally escalate the porn. Porn producers understand the porn addiction cycle, namely that those who watch porn need more and more and rougher and rougher sex to get the same reaction.

These disturbing details shouldn’t be shared lightly. But communicating with teens at the right time can radically help them understand that porn is an industry designed to trap and change them. It might be one of the best examples of the opposite of holiness we can think of. It dishonors God and his ways.

Dishonoring God is an understatement. Youth may be interested to learn and motivated to stop viewing porn when you tell them that 43% of male college students and 20% of female college students report that pornography worsened their relationship with Christ. There’s more. Increased porn use “is significantly related to reduced church attendance, diminished faith, lessened prayer frequency, and diminished feelings of closeness to God. At the same time, porn use increased religious doubts.”<sup>20</sup>

### **SPIRITUAL FORMATION: A POSITIVE CONCLUSION**

Let’s end the chapter on a positive note! Used wisely and under the careful eye of God-discerning pastoral leaders and God-honoring parents, technology can be used to grow children’s faith. Praise God that not all children will want to view porn or risk getting into trouble through the misuse of technology. Instead, they may use Bible verses and a movie clip when talking to a friend about why they love God. They may use an alarm to remind them to set the table for dinner, walk their dog, or start their homework. They can FaceTime with grandparents and easily stay in touch with others. Podcasts, apps, and internet sites can encourage

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<sup>20</sup>Sam Black, *The Healing Church: What Churches Get Wrong About Pornography and How to Fix It* (New York: Morgan James, 2023), 8.

personal and spiritual growth. Teaching mature, positive technology use can be an important antidote to the negative influences of media.

Most significantly, as a pastoral leader, you can work with parents to teach children the truths to combat the four lies identified above.

- God is the center of the universe (to counter Lie #1: “I am the center of my own universe”). I serve Him; He doesn’t serve me.
- Prioritizing happiness isn’t wise (to counter Lie #2: “I deserve to be happy all the time”). Consistent joy because of my dynamic relationship with Jesus is available no matter my circumstances.
- Choices are a privilege, not our right (to counter Lie #3: “I must have choices”). With God’s help, we can make God-honoring, wise choices.
- Believing we are our own authority is dangerous and foolish (to counter Lie #4: “I am my own authority”). I need to respect and learn from God-given authority exercised in love and grace. God’s authority is best.

Technology is here to stay, with more advances coming in the future. Knowing how these digital technologies affect children and families will make you a more relevant and effective ministry leader. Always keep learning!<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>For example: Black, *The Healing Church*; Amy Crouch and Andy Crouch, *My Tech-Wise Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2020); Andy Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2017); Frances E. Jensen and Amy Ellis Nutt, *The Teenage Brain: A Neuroscientist’s Survival Guide to Raising Adolescents and Young Adults* (New York: Harper, 2016); Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us* (New York: Atria Books, 2017).

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