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Heart and Hand Topic – May 30, 2017 (Proverbs 14:1-29)

“Children and the Digital Age”

The experts sound the alarm! A counselor, psychologist, neurologist, and occupational therapist have all sent out strong messages in regards to children and too much screen time.

But is this issue not trivial in comparison to big issues like pornography and such? We might say, “We know the effects, we know we should be careful, we don’t stick our kids in front of TV to watch Sesame Street all morning, etc.” The information and statistics keep coming in and show it’s a current and important issue.

This topic, based on the book *Growing up Social* by Gary Chapman and Arlene Pellicane, was recommended quite a while ago and has finally come to fruition. The more I researched, the more it struck me, that what we do now really affects our children in the future. It actually is like a culture war they are exposed to at a very young age. Victoria Prooday, an occupational therapist who works with many young kids, calls it “a silent tragedy developing”. So, yes, we have a big responsibility in what we expose our kids to at a very young age already! And this is going on among us... I can give examples of a 4-year-old addicted to his brother’s old cell phone which had a racing game on it, or to parents who let their young child play on an iPad every morning. The child’s behaviour became so aggressive and difficult they were strongly considering putting him on ADHD medicine before they weaned him off the screen addiction.

I. BONDING

The Dutch psychologist, Dr. de Jonge, stressed how important bonding is between parents and young children. That is the foundation which builds a good relationship between parents and children. Obviously, screen time detracts from that bonding. Multiple Canadian studies (Kaiser Foundation in 2010 and the Globe and Mail study in 2012) show that the average child/teenager spends over 7 hours/day with media and technology. There is more interaction with screens than interaction with other human beings! And yet talking together is so important. Think about it! In your own family, do you know what bothers each other? Keeps us busy? Or is our interaction just on the surface? The psychologist states that ½ of his patients are in the 15-30 age range, and they need help because of problems with bonding and personal identity. It goes back to the foundation! The root of the problem is that standards are not given, there is no real social contact because of social media, and deep relations are not being developed. As a result, personal development is delayed, there is a lack of clear rules (or rules are moved easily), and the clear explanation based on God’s Word is lacking. This is all combined with the busy-ness of life and very high expectations they can’t live up to. In a stressful situation, a child with a good bond to his parents will go to his parents. Without this good bond, however, they will clamp on to someone else and can act very uncaring or independent.

This psychologist writes about the situation in Holland now. They are often 5 to 10 years ahead of things here, but we need to be prepared for it! It becomes so important to nurture strong

family activities, talking, family worship, and not to neglect our baptismal promise to raise up our children in the fear of the Lord.

II. SCREEN TIME: Too much, too soon.

Why have kids become so entitled? Why can't they spell correctly or write complete sentences? Why do they complain and argue so much? Or need prompting to say please and thank you?? It is not the technology itself, but the impact on the growing brain and heart of a child!

There are many studies about the impact on the brain, but maybe the most important thing to remember is that the brain can change and adapt, and we have to MOLD it. Neurologists can see the harmful effects of too much screen time and the damage it causes the brain. Constant stimulations on the brain cause the stress hormone cortisol to rise. Too much of this hormone takes away the feeling of calm and comfort, and can result in anxiety disorders. The brain needs DOWNTIME. And for the proper development of the brain, kids need to move, to read, to use their imagination, and develop social skills with others by playing games and having a conversation. None of these are stimulated with screen time, and the long terms effects are yet to be documented. We are the first generation of parents who really have to deal with it on this scale!

Does addiction to screens exist? It certainly does. We may have heard of extreme cases of addiction to video games. A 28-year-old in Korea died after playing for 50 hours with minimal breaks (BBC News: August 10, 2005). The resulting death was due to heart failure from exhaustion.

But the use of digital devices is rapidly rising. In Holland 60% of young people age 13-17 owned a tablet in 2015. A year later, in 2016 it had risen to 72%. 25% of 8 year olds have their own phone, and the average age is 11 when they do own their own phone ("Trends in Digital Media" GFK Global). In Canada, high school kids average 4300 texts a month. We can't expect it to get less, but only to increase.

Video games are designed to bring pleasure to the brain. There are points, constant rewards, and increasing levels. There is constant change to keep the child engaged. The brain releases hormones as a reward to the child and gives it a special feeling. The more you play, the more you want to play. Nothing is as stimulating or rewarding as a video game. And like other addictions, it interferes with everyday life. Assignments, chores, responsibilities and personal hygiene are ignored, and family relationships suffer.

The side effects of screen use are known: obesity, irregular sleep, behaviour problems (social, emotional and attention problems), lower academic performance, violence and less time for play. According to child neurologists, kids that use social media continually, many hours a day, are coming in with headaches, chronic tiredness, and concentration problems. It is a silent epidemic; but unlike alcohol, the use and sale of social media are unlimited. Shouldn't there, however, be some restrictions on digital use?

Do you want your child to be taught how life works from a screen, rather than the real life classrooms of responsibility, chores and family relationships? Everything is easier with screens. Personal challenges like being bored or wanting something are immediately solved: use the calculator, play a game, buy it on Amazon or Kijiji. (My youngest says that very easily: “Oh just get it on keejee.” The solver of all problems!) Children must learn to process emotions, and none is learned in front of a screen. Virtues and high moral standards, like responsibility, compassion, persistence or faith are not taught on a screen.

What is the result? Things can't be too hard. No suffering or struggles should be involved. If homework or soccer practice is too difficult, we just quit. Kids can't handle losing in sports. They aren't praised enough or quickly rewarded like they are used to on the screen. Besides all this, how much do our children miss with their nose in a device or in front of a screen? Think of all the non-structured learning they can do in a vehicle or as you do groceries. The verbal interaction is vital for your child. But there are also easy alternatives for your young child at home that emphasize interactive and tactile activities which are so essential for your child:

1. Scribbling on butcher paper (start at 18 months! Swiping on a screen does not develop the proper drawing and writing position of their hand).
2. Cardboard box (climb in and out of, and decorate).
3. Special cupboard (only to use while preparing supper. Tupperware, plastic cups, plates. They like to be by Mom!)
4. Water fun! (Bowl with 1 or 2” of water and funnels, spoons, toys that float or sink).
5. Mystery toy box. (Change toys in a box every week. Make a show of presenting with a surprise element in it. Limit amount of items).
6. Jumping beans (Pan or cookie sheet with dry beans, measuring cups, etc.).

III. SKILLS THAT NEED TO BE TAUGHT TO OUR YOUNG CHILDREN

As lots of screen time correlates with poor listening skills and a need for strong guidance - we have our jobs cut out! Sure, our kids need academic achievements, but the following skills are at the forefront of learning at home:

1. Show affection. We can be there physically, but not mentally, when our phone is the object of our attention. Eye contact is very important! A social network connection is not the same as a hug! Facebook depression exists! Kids need unconditional love from real people. It is proven that when screen time is up, empathy is down. If they are exposed to violence, they do become desensitized. So we need to share stories of our lives, teach kids how to make friends, how to initiate conversation, and learn the names of people.

2. Appreciate others. Saying “Thank you” does not come naturally to kids! But it can “soften the heart, deeply connect, and give hope to the weary” (Chapman). Thus, we need to teach it and model it. Participating in household chores might make them more appreciative of the work involved, and try to make their attitude a “get-to” rather than a “got-to”. Try to make them see the

world in the light of “counting our blessings”. What we model and how we show appreciation to each other as parents, will be the best example to our children. What is the biggest enemy of appreciation? Indulgence! Kids become spoiled and selfish if we do not ever say “No” or teach them to wait for or earn something. Love is what our child needs most and not gifts. By age 2-3 they can say thank you for specific things/experiences. By age 4 they can thank for hugs and caring acts. By age 5-6 they can write their own thank you notes or call. By age 7-8 they can keep a notebook of things to be thankful for each day. By 9 we can have them help the less fortunate.

Some screen-free ways to cultivate thankfulness are to save money for a cause, keep a gratitude journal, be a good neighbor or volunteer, write a treasured note, or make a care package.

3. Deal with anger. We all experience anger, but we have to teach children to manage it. If a child gets angry, don't distract/delay/deflect by a video game or a cookie. They won't learn to process their emotions in a healthy manner, and are more likely to resort to screaming, losing temper or getting silent when they are angry, especially if that is how we model it! If they express their anger verbally, we need to ask questions calmly and let their anger be expressed, and the volume will decrease. We need to understand the reason for their anger. If they express their anger by behaviour such as pushing, striking, pulling hair, etc., they may need to leave the room, take a walk, count to 100, or follow some other mature response to cool down and then discuss the behaviour. With each episode, guide the child through anger, deal with the issue, and find a resolution. Then they will become more mature in verbalizing anger and not drive it inside which can show up later in aggressive behaviour. We can even use Bible stories to teach what is right and wrong in handling anger. (Cain, Joseph, Jonah, Jesus' anger to the money changers) and Bible texts especially in Proverbs and Ephesians 4:26-27 (“...let not the sun go down upon your wrath.”)

Without downtime and visual relaxation (outdoor play, a good book, hugging, talking) children are restless and prone to anger. A screen emphasizes speed, with little patience, and that changes to frustration and anger. As they get older, we need to teach online courtesies as well. What is appropriate? Ugly words can be read over and over and leave an emotional mark on a child.

4. Learn to apologize. Online apologies fall short, and children will grow up unable to conduct difficult conversations. The best is, of course, to model it. If they hear parents say sorry and give a hug, it is a powerful lesson. We teach them at a simple level, and it increases year by year. We can apologize to our child! Also share examples of times you gave or received an apology.

The following are key in a proper apology:

- Accept responsibility (rephrase sentence with I, not it.)

- Realize an action affects others (golden rule). Words and actions hurt or help people and make them feel bad or good.
- There are always rules in life. Be aware of the rule you broke. Parents need to set rules and be sure they are for the good of their child. Then make them aware of it! Unspoken rules are unfair. Consequences should be associated closely with rules and we need to be CONSISTENT!
- Apologies will restore friendships and good relations. Everyone gets angry and will regret things, but if we are willing to apologize, most people will forgive.
- There are five parts to an apology. Express regret (I'm sorry), accept responsibility (I was wrong), make restitution (what can I do to make it right?) genuinely repent (try not to do it again), and request forgiveness.

5. Pay attention. Keeping focused on one task in a digital age is hard for an adult and just as hard for kids. Growing children need calm and quiet to develop attention, focus, and deep thinking. The screen world doesn't promote that!

That is due to information overload, and the mind not being able to retain and process all the stimuli and information. In order to cope, it becomes a habit to move from one thing to the next, and not focus on one thing. Insist on eye contact to focus your child's attention when speaking to them. Screen time makes a child expect three things in real life:

- It is interesting!
- It is instant! (no effort to obtain)
- It is instant gratification! (immediate reward-advance to next level)

Kids enter the classroom not willing to risk failure or endure boredom. So if they face an uncertain task, they will disengage and stop paying attention. On a screen, they are trained to get what they want, when, and how they want it. But this isn't the real world! The average person's attention span has dropped by 40% since the year 2000! Screens foster shorter attention spans! From 2004 to 2008, young adults read 29% less printed works. What will that be 20 years from now? And yet the benefit of READING is of great value. You stay with one topic and absorb it deeply. You follow a story line and thought process. It offers only one place to focus. It is calming and relaxing. Online reading, on the other hand, is very distracting and hurried. After playing with a tablet or phone children are often argumentative (why can't I play longer?), moody, and grumpy.

Try to foster a love for reading by reading aloud, visiting a library to find interesting books, and modeling by reading yourself! Use screen time only as a reward after 30 minutes of reading. Play time and being in nature improves their attention span as well, giving stronger memory and improved cognition. Their brain will be calmer and sharper! Research shows that over-exposure to the screen (children more than 2 hours/ day) were 1.5 times more likely to have attention problems and be an ADHD case. Some parents will argue their child does not pay attention and seems to be ADHD, yet can sit still for hours, playing video games with full attention. That is

because it is a different concentration, and uses a different portion of the brain, than the attention needed to succeed in regular life. Some kids struggling in school look to success in video games and virtual worlds.

The last thing in regards to paying attention is the mistake of multitasking. It reduces the quality of your work (don't allow it during homework), changes the way you learn (brain activity in storing and recalling information), creates skimmers (shallow understanding) and wastes time (takes an average of 25 minutes to fully return to the original task after an interruption).

IV. IMPACT OF SCREEN TIME ON FAMILY LIFE.

1. Parental Authority. Remember you are a parent and not a friend. Set limits! Make rules and follow through. Parental authority is needed more than ever to provide instruction, correction and positive modeling to a child. Our example is so important! No child wants to compete with screens for their parents' attention. They need assurance they are more important than the screen world. They will grow up to be just like you so we have to walk the talk, and set rules for ourselves and our phones and computers. If we are constantly checking our devices, we are contributing to our children's overuse of the screen. Teach your child how to master their screen time by learning to master your own. Setting timers and limits to when and how, helps us keep it in control. Screens should be totally avoided under the age of two. The best alternative is reading a book with a child! But a child's ability to learn language is directly related to the amount of TALK time with parents. So if you are occupied with your phone or computer or use it as background filler, you are less likely to talk with your child.

The following list are alternative suggestions from an occupational therapist (Victoria Prooday, The Silent Tragedy Affecting Today's Children):

- one hour a day in green space
- daily technology-free family dinner
- involve your child in one chore a day
- play one board game a day
- implement consistent sleep routine in technology-free bedroom
- nutritious food and limit snacks
- teach responsibility and independence.

So don't over protect from small failures and teach delayed gratification. Actually provide the opportunity for boredom as that is when creativity awakens! Don't use technology as a cure for boredom.

The neurologist Dr. deJonge suggests the following limits:

- be a good example and restrict it for yourself (it has been proven with alcohol use that later introduction and limiting amount has worked with kids, so apply it to screen time too)
- make agreements with other parents when friends come over in regards to the use of devices.
- over the age of 3, no more than 15-30 minutes behind a screen/day
- over the age of 10, no more than 1-2 hours behind a screen/day including homework)

Deep down kids are looking for the approval of their parents. They need appreciation, guidance and warmth. They need to know what is expected from them, which gives them a feeling of security. Therefore a good system for reward and punishment is important in this regard too. Children need a chance to unwind, read, play outside and talk with parents and siblings. Giving them unlimited access to screen time is not doing them a favour!

2. Security. This is a whole other topic, with filters and cell phones, but the basic question is if media use is promoting a safe home. Proverbs 14:26 “In the fear of the Lord is strong confidence and his children shall have a place of refuge.”

3. Shyness. Children will hide behind electronics to avoid interactions with others, especially adults. They will begin to see interaction as unpleasant or unnecessary. This results in social isolation. This is not being shy! Children can conveniently take advantage of being told they are shy, to skip politeness and conversation. A quieter child is not necessarily shy. He/she is healthy if they make eye contact with others, are polite, content, generally have good behaviour and are comfortable with people. A shy child is nervous and uncomfortable meeting and talking with people. Don't promote this by socially isolating them with digital devices. We need to teach our kids, PEOPLE FIRST! They need to practise and be taught to focus on the other person, rather than on themselves, when they are nervous. Teach them to put the device down, look at a person and smile when someone begins talking to them.

4. Love languages: We have had a previous topic about the love languages which basically explains how your child receives love by physical touch, words of affirmation, quality time, gifts or acts of service. A child will miss out on physical touch when busy with devices and not sitting on the lap of a parent. A child will miss out on words of affirmation when receiving words from their screen time which will not substitute for positive and loving guidance from their parents. A child will miss out on quality time because they or their parents are busy with screen time. A child will miss out and have less meaning and love shown with a gift, when it is an electronic device or game. A child will miss out on the opportunities to share and teach acts of service which are limited with screens.

5. The electronic babysitter: Being a single parent or having a busy family, makes screen time an easy way to keep our children busy and entertained. But it is definitely not the best way! Keep in mind the huge effect it has on our children as they develop into adults. According to God's Word, our first priority has to be to raise our children in the fear of the Lord.

CONCLUSION:

What kind of home do we strive for? A home centered on screens or a home centered around people? If it is the latter, you will be drastically different from the average home, but let us strive for it. Technology and the digital age are here to stay, but are we aware of the dangers it brings? Are our children seeing and hearing what is of greatest importance at home, school, and church? Can we say from 2 Timothy 3:15 “..and that from a child thou hast known the holy Scriptures...” OR must we say, “from a child they have known electronics..”??

Question for discussion: What would have the most affect on your child as a (young) adult, based upon their experiences when young? (Both positive and negative).

Resources used:

“Growing up Social”, by Gary Chapman and Arlene Pellicane (2014) “Wie ben ik en wat is mijn huis”, by Drs. J.C. de Jonge (2015)

Dutch interview with a neurologist (Don't have copy anymore)

Blog by occupational therapist, Victoria Prooday, “The Silent Tragedy Affecting Today's Children.”