Being connected without connection

parenting in a digital age

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Have you ever sent a text message when you should have made a phone call (or dare I suggest, spoken to someone in person)? Our devices and apps are increasingly making it possible to place a technology between ourselves and real, authentic aspects of life and relationships. Texting can seem easier than a phone call as the technology plays a mediating, or go-between, role. It comes at less relational cost: less relational commitment. I may come to believe that I am becoming more connected, but it might possibly be at the cost of connection.

I suggest this is happening in subtle ways that can have harmful effects on relationships and maturing as a person. Children may not be developing in their ability to make and nurture authentic deeper connections and relationships—of a nature that God has designed for human flourishing. What is our role as parents around this? Is our modelling in this regard helping or hindering?

Powers (2010), reflecting on how his family now disperses to their rooms in the evenings instead of gathering as they used to around the television in the lounge room, cynically asks:

> Why not flee the few of the living room for the many of the screen, where all relationships are flattened into one user-friendly mosaic. A human collage that's endlessly clickable and never demands our full attention (p. 53)

Social media allows me to flatten out my many relationships into a patchwork of options from which I can choose to relate. The self-sacrificial component of authentic relationship—modelled ultimately by the Lord Jesus—is diminished as I use the go-between nature of these technologies to 'manage' my relationships and never allow any of them to demand too much of me. Could it be that you are doing this at a subconscious level?

The more we weave these technologies into the unquestioned day-to-day of our lives and relationships (and our family life and relating), the greater chance that we will be moving away from the relational intimacy that God has designed for life and relationships. Perhaps—as the increasingly popular meme suggests—we may at times need to 'disconnect to connect'. Or as one discerning teenager put it:

> Facebook and MySpace sell themselves as social networking sites, but I think they actually do more to keep people apart than unite them. Why bother calling a friend when you can post on their wall? There's no need to visit a friend to catch up when you can just check their profile to see what's new. (Twenge and Campbell, 2009, p. 111)

You might be wondering about efficiency and thinking something like, "surely some communication is just functional and texting, for example, is just convenient and of benefit to both parties?". Yep, maybe. But perhaps 'helpful' does not always bring 'happiness'? Perhaps the existence of these technologies means that we are inclined to allow function, efficiency, and convenience to wash into places where it should never be. Perhaps our tendency, as broken humans, to take relational shortcuts, and to resist self-sacrifice, clouds our wise judgement on the line between being connected and deep connection? If we err too often towards mediated efficiency, not only might we miss out on the relational richness God has designed, but we might also tend towards unhappiness. Have you ever felt a sense of loneliness despite your many digital 'connections'? Can any number of shallow connections replace deep connection?

I finish with a few questions and thoughts that flow from the parenting reflections of Coco and myself:

Modelling How well, as parents, are you modelling authentic connection with people? Children learn about life principally from watching their parents (whether they are aware they are doing it or not). What are your children seeing? Are they viewing a model of life and relationships that is committed to genuine, self-sacrificial deep knowing of other human beings? Or do they see lazy habits of shallow connecting resulting from the lure of mediated digital technologies?

Conversations I am not just thinking here of the importance of real-life, face-to-face family conversations—though, obviously, these are critical for family life and healthy parenting. Are you having conversations with your children about digital technologies and the potential shaping impacts? Are there parent-directed conversations around discerning use happening at the dinner table? Or is our technology-idolising culture setting the agenda of the 'conversation' without your input?

Training Sometimes our attempts at conversations fall on deaf ears—our children are not at an age or stage that they are ready to hear the messages or explore the nuances of an issue. As parents we need at times to give guidelines and boundaries until the wisdom and nuance is developed. Could it be that you need to insist on greater levels of authentic relating by your children with others? What level of commitment and ability to unmediated relating do you want them to have as they grow up and leave you? How are you helping them to achieve this?

Family intimacy When my two children got their first email accounts, I remember being quite excited (I still have the first email my son sent to me saved away). To this day I feel really tempted to be sending them quick emails as things come to mind through a day. But I have forced myself to question whether this new facility to connect with them may sometimes actually weaken my connection with them.

I recently heard a mother claim that when she needs to discipline her daughter she finds it great to be able to do that through text messages, as it makes it "less confrontational" for both of them. Perhaps 'confrontation' as well as self-sacrifice—as uncomfortable as they may be—are a crucial part of true, deep relating. Is this mother really fulfilling what she is called to as a parent by leaning on this approach towards difficult discussions?

Prayer Digital technologies have been woven into the very fabric of everyday life in ways that we have not seen a technology embraced before. Many of the shaping effects go to the core of what it is to be human. Are you praying that God will help you in your parenting around this? Are you taking opportunities to pray with your children both with thanks for technologies but also for wisdom in using them? ✱

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References

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