



Parenting in a digital age

Being connected without connection

Have you ever sent a text message when you should have made a phone call? 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.

Social media allows us to flatten out our many relationships into a patchwork of options from which we 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 we/you are doing this at a subconscious level, and are our children being shaped into doing this through their use of social media etc.?

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.

You might be thinking, “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’, richness, and an opportunity for growth? 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. Is it possible that our tendency, as broken humans, to take the easy path of relational tech shortcuts, clouds our wise relational judgment. Does tech’s ease and convenience lean us towards an unthinking resistance to self-sacrifice and a distraction from seeing the line between being connected and deep connection? Have you ever felt a sense of loneliness despite being digitally connected? Do our children ever feel this?

DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP AT WYCLIFFE

Perhaps these concerns are even more relevant when we consider that children are maturing and developing an understanding of life and world. These technologies may inhibit them in developing their ability to make and nurture authentic deeper connections and relationships—of a nature that God has designed for human flourishing. Our desire at Wycliffe is to not only model deep connection as a school community, but also to strategically teach wisdom and discernment towards the use and impact of digital technology. This occurs at many points within the curriculum, though a pivotal strategy is the Digital Citizenship program in Year 7.

FOR PARENTS TO PONDER

I finish with a few reflections for parents:

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 when our children are not at an age or maturity that is ready to hear the messages or 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 un-mediated relating do you want them to have as they grow? 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 and text messages as things come to mind through a day. However, I question whether this new facility to connect with them may sometimes actually weaken my connection with them.

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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A form of this article originally appeared in **Nurture** magazine.



FURTHER READING

The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place by Andy Crouch

12 Ways Your Phone is Changing You by Tony Reinke

The Frog and the Fish: Reflections on Work, Technology, Sex, Stuff, Truth and Happiness by Chris Parker