



Starting the Year Right

Managing Digital Distractions

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“The ultimate form of progress, however, is learning to decide what is working and what is not...” John Freeman, Wall Street Journal, 08/23/09

Crossing over from summertime to schooltime presents families with excitement, some trepidation and a few challenges. There are many things to be aware of during this transition time and suggestions for a successful beginning for the year ahead.

Much has been written lately about teens and the use of technology: the power and the perils. Research findings may prompt us to have family conversations about online behavior, how we all use our favorite digital devices and the need to shift the way we help our students manage digital distractions.

We know that multiple technologies are competing for our attention: smart phones with many applications, texting, email, IMing, Facebook, Twitter, Xbox and other video games etc. What about the effect of these digital distractions on learning, memory and teens' lives in general?

Studies indicate that there are concerns among educators and health professionals regarding digital overload that are compromising attention, affecting efficiency, and teens' learning and health. For example, statistics show that American teens sent an average of 2, 272 text messages per month in the fourth quarter of 2008 and may have doubled by now. Teens admit to texting during the school day and staying up late to send or receive email, texts or IM. The results are beginning to cause concern.

Some of the known effects are sleep deprivation, leading to distraction in school and daytime fatigue. These effects could result in lower grades, frustration and stress. Teachers notice the “far away look” in class when students are texting or simply checking for messages.

White Paper Summary

Starting the Year Right...

- The power and the perils of technology may prompt the need to shift the way we help students manage digital transactions.
- Digital overload is compromising attention, efficiency, and teens learning and health.
- Known effects include sleep deprivation and daytime fatigue.
- Suggestions for help:
 - Become aware of how “connected your child is.
 - Discern when a device is really needed.
 - Designate “digital blackouts,” during which no digitals are on.
 - Discourage use of cell phones during school hours.



The result is that students cannot give their full attention to properly receive, process and absorb needed information. Psychologist Kenneth Gergen, a senior research professor at Swarthmore College, calls it “absent presence.”

The tips that follow are some suggestions for helping students retain a balance with the use of virtual connections. The first step is to become aware of how often your students are depending on “being connected” virtually and create a device-free zone at various times in the evening. Experts advise that we try to help young people discern when they need these devices to be task efficient. When is concentrating on one task best and when is multitasking impeding learning? Some families may decide to turn off all electronic devices for a period of time in the evening. Having a basket for all family members to stow their cell phones during dinner or certain times would provide time for conversation and forced “downtime” needed for refreshing and decompressing after a long day.

Patricia Wallace, head of Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth, believes that we all need to relieve our “cognitive load” and engage in some forced relaxation. Just like removing the computers from the bedroom, we should also remove the smart phones from the bedroom in the evening. Christina Calamaro at Drexel says, “We need to get them less wired at night.” It would be wise, also to ban the use of Xbox games during the week on school nights. Once students start playing it is difficult to stop. To help lower distractions during school hours, parents need to discourage the use of phones during the school day. If students and parents need to connect, perhaps during lunch or after school would be best. Cell phones are not to be used during school hours according to the handbook rules.

Penn Charter continues to focus on these challenges, because strategies to cope with technology and information overload are closely interconnected to organization, time-management and processing to encode and retrieve facts for learning efficacy. As the volume of information increases, the faculty and students are committed to working together to devise better ways to teach and to learn. You, at home, are very important in these efforts also, and we hope this information is helpful. For more information on starting the year right, please see the Fall '08 parent newsletter.

Reference:

Palfrey, John and Gasser, Urs, [Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives](#). New York, NY: Basic Books, 2008.

www.BornDigitalBook.com