Tech Use and Mental Health

CURIOSITY. CONNECTION. COACHING.

START WITH YOURSELF.

You might be thinking, "My job is to think about my kid's tech use not my own!" But reflecting on our own relationship with technology allows us to build three essential ingredients for being the digital mentors that young people need right now:

1. **Empathy.** Doing these exercises will help you build critical empathy for students. Children and teens need adults in their lives who understand that growing up digital is complicated.
2. **Modeling.** What grown ups do with technology has a far greater impact on students' digital habits than what we say.
3. **Teamwork.** Being a digital mentor means being willing to model that we are grappling with this too and working to forge healthy habits alongside students.

Being a digital mentor means communicating to kids, "This is hard, isn't it? We will figure this out together."

REFLECT

On your own device, open a favorite app or game where you feel most socially connected. Why do you go here? Do you feel like you are "in charge" of how and when you use this app? What do you like most? What do you want to change?

GET CURIOUS

Get curious. Ask questions, listen to the answers.

Really listening with an open mind will help you better understand kids' online activities and behaviors, what they like and don't like about it. Moreover it will alert you to any red flags that indicate "trouble spots" where they might benefit from coaching, interventions, and support.

You can keep the same questions that you reflected on above in mind as you talk to students:
What do you use this app, game, or website for?

- What do you do here? Why do you go here?
- How does it make you feel?
- Have you ever gotten help or support here that you wouldn't have gotten otherwise?
- How would you feel if you couldn't access this app or game?
- When and how often do you use this app or game?

Young people's capacity for reflection changes by age and stage, but all youth have something to share with us about their digital lives. Keep going. Get creative. Keep asking. Keep listening.

LISTENING FOR STRENGTHS

While it's important to keep an eye out for red flags, it's not uncommon for adults to miss the ways that students are using technology to cope, connect, learn, and access supports.

Young people using technology should be encouraged to use functions that create opportunities for social support, healthy friendships, and belonging that can promote healthy socialization. What strengths do you observe/hear about?
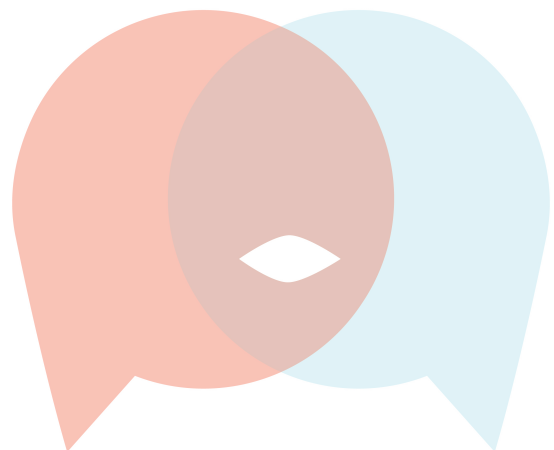
LOOK OUT FOR:

As you listen and learn more about young people's digital lives, there will inevitably be things that delight you, worry you, bore you, concern you, and inspire you. Our job when we are listening is to be open to the positive things while not ignoring concerns. As you listen, watch for the following signs:

Isolation and avoidance. Adults are often worried about youth connecting with others online. However, as long as the relationships are healthy we want children to have connections with family and friends online and offline. If a child cannot name anyone that they care about, trust, and connect with in the digital spaces they frequent most often, they may be using digital tools to escape social life rather than nourish it. This is especially true for adolescents.

☐ Very concerned   ☐ Somewhat concerned   ☐ Not concerned

Emotional over-investment. All youth are impacted by what their peers do and say online. However, if a students' mood rises and falls in dramatic ways entirely related to online reactions, they may be more vulnerable to the impacts of online cruelty, unwanted contact or cyberbullying.

☐ Very concerned   ☐ Somewhat concerned   ☐ Not concerned

Online cruelty or cyberbullying. Older youth often avoid the term "cyberbullying" and instead write off persistent online cruelty as "drama." Be sure to follow up and ask questions about what this "drama" looks like and who is involved. Be aware of signs that students might be the target of cyberbullying including:

- Noticeable increases or decreases in device use.
- Hides screen or device when others are near and avoids discussions about what they are doing on their device.
- Shuts down social media accounts or creates new ones.
- Avoids social situations, even those they previously enjoyed.
- Persistent change in mood, appetite, or sleep patterns.

☐ Very concerned   ☐ Somewhat concerned   ☐ Not concerned

"Dual sensitivity." Students with symptoms of mental illness, such as students with social anxiety, depression, or loneliness, for instance, may benefit from interactions online. Unfortunately, these same young people may also be at higher risk for some of the negative facets of media use.

☐ Very concerned   ☐ Somewhat concerned   ☐ Not concerned

Interference with determinants of mental health. While time-based measures of screen time are useful in the extremes, we should pay much closer attention when tech use interferes with the following:

- Sleep
- Connection
- Exercise/Movement
- Downtime
- Studying
- Play

☐ Very concerned ☐ Somewhat concerned ☐ Not concerned

Signs of problematic use. While many adults and kids alike throw around the word "addiction" fairly casually when it comes to technology use, we should get specific and pay attention to signs of "problematic social media use." We should be screening regularly for signs that social media use is interfering with what youth want or need to do in school, at home, and with their friends.

- Using technology even when young people want to stop, or realize it is interfering with necessary tasks
- Spending excessive effort to ensure continuous access to technology
- Strong cravings to use social media, or disruptions in other activities from missing tech too much
- Pattern of spending more time on technology than intended
- Lying or deceptive behavior to retain access to social media use
- Loss or disruption of significant relationships or educational opportunities because of media use

☐ Very concerned ☐ Somewhat concerned ☐ Not concerned

Exposure to Health Risk Behavior Content. Exposure to harmful content may be related to increased risk for mental health issues. We should take seriously the potential for significant harm associated with:

- Exposure to content that encourages health risk behaviors such as self-harm, harm to others, or disordered eating behaviors.
- Exposure to "cyberhate" content such as online racism, extremism, transphobia, ableism, etc.
- Over-exposure to beauty or appearance related content, especially when students are being pushed towards more extreme content.

☐ Very concerned ☐ Somewhat concerned ☐ Not concerned

COACHING SKILLS:

Being a digital mentor isn't just about listening. It also involves coaching skills. Good coaches are clear about the rules of the game, explain what is in and out of bounds, and help kids practice specific skills that will help them succeed. Good coaches don't just enforce rules; they teach skills. For example, rather than just saying, "Our expectation is that you are kind online," youth benefit from breaking this down into habits and skills. For example, what does kindness look like? What do you do if you witness cruelty online? How do you stand up to peer pressure?

Identify an expectation for healthy media use:

Following through on expectations like "Be kind online!" Is actually quite complicated. Harvard University's Project Zero offers another helpful guide for talking about digital dilemmas in ways that encourage thoughtful decision making and skill building. Consider using these four prompts as students work through digital decision-making:

Identify. What's the dilemma and who is involved?

Feel. What might each person be feeling?

Imagine. What are different options for handling the situation?

Say. What could the people involved say or do?