

## Lower School Technology Tips: Family Agreements, Media Consumption, & Group Chats

We're inspired by the wisdom of noted expert Dr. Devorah Heitner, who conducted workshops for Doane parents and students two years ago. Dr. Heitner counsels parents to both *mentor* and *monitor* their children's online activities. Her [mentoring manifesto](#) is well worth a read.

Some of her suggestions for mentoring our children include:

- Engage in online activities with our kids; observe and guide their online behaviors.
- Make sure that our children have a good balance of creativity and consumption in their use of technology.
- Model positive and balanced use of technology in our own habits and behaviors.

For more of Heitner's wisdom, we recommend this article: [At Your Wits' End With A Screen-Obsessed Kid? Read This](#). Here are the takeaways:

- Ban devices at mealtime.
- Take phones away at night.
- Impose more chores.
- Introduce new interests.
- Try more screen-free whole-family activities.
- Ask children to monitor their own mood after they play video games, or engage in another form of screentime, on a color chart. Heitner says this can help to develop self-regulation skills. Instead of just fighting against the limits parents set, "it would be good for (a child) to start to see, OK, an hour is good, but two hours starts to make me a little crazy."

At the advice of Dr. Heitner and many others, we recommend that each family collaborate to develop a shared agreement about screentime and media usage. Here are some resources:

- [Creating a Family Screen Time Agreement the Heart-Mind Way](#)
- [Screenagers Resources | Screen Time Contracts](#)
- [The Best Technology-Screen Time Contract for Kids](#)

### **Online Media Consumption: YouTube**

Heitner recommends that we look for interesting and age-appropriate YouTube channels and individuals to follow with our kids. In addition, we can engage in non-confrontational conversations with our children about the media they consume.

- Tell me about what you're watching on there. What do you like about it?
- Why do you think that YouTuber likes making these videos?
- Have you seen any videos you didn't like? What didn't you like about them?
- Talk with our kids about the "suggestions" they see on YouTube and why they should pursue a more intentional set of choices, rather than letting an algorithm choose their next view.

With our positive role as mentors established, we can co-create ground rules with our children for how they consume media. Here are a few examples:

- Pre-select a [curated playlist](#) of YouTube videos with our children and limit their choices to that list.
- Make sure our children watch videos and subscribe to channels under our own accounts, so we receive email notifications of any updates made.
- Allow our children to explore on YouTube only when we are nearby and able to supervise.
- Consider [restricting YouTube](#) so that our children can use it only with adult supervision.

If our children do approach us to share that they have seen something inappropriate or upsetting, Heitner recommends that we begin from a place of curiosity. We can ask our kids how they ended up seeing the upsetting image, thank them for telling us about it, encourage them to express their feelings, and calmly explain how they might have avoided this situation. We want to make sure we continue to acknowledge the positive aspects of technology; after all, YouTube can be both inspiring and educational when we use it to learn more about cooking or Lego-building or skateboarding tricks.

### **For Older Lower School Students: Digital Citizenship and Group Chats**

We generally discourage Lower Schoolers' participation in group chats. These chats require a good deal of maturity and highly developed self-awareness, emotional regulation, and executive function. Over the last few years, the general pattern we have seen is that group chats tend to have a negative impact on friendships and in-person social interaction. However, if your children do engage in group chats, we recommend the following:

- Have proactive discussions with your child about how important it is to "think before you post," be the same kind of friend online as you are in person, and keep group chats positive, helpful, and supportive.
- Make sure your child knows that they can always come to you for help if they become uncomfortable with any messages in a group chat.
- Be proactive in helping your child to develop an "upstander" message they can send before leaving a chat if inappropriate or unkind language is used.
- Monitor your child's group chats and make sure your child knows that you will be checking in on them.
- Take away your child's device at night.

Our current fifth graders developed the following list of guidelines about participating in group chats:

- Communicate clearly - say what you mean respectfully.
- Keep your comments positive and encouraging.
- Think before you type: "Is this necessary, true, and kind?"
- Before you write anything, ask yourself: "Would I be OK with my grandparent reading this?"
- Be aware and observant of the chat you're in - make everyone feel included.
- Ask for permission before you share a photo or text that someone sent to you.
- Be supportive of online teammates when gaming.
- Make sure you know who you're talking to/gaming with.

- Be an upstander and say something if you see online teasing or cyber-bullying.
- Know when it's time to leave a chat or game and talk to an adult.