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Awareness Is Not Enough: How Can We Sustain Change in the Digital World?

Smartphones and digital technologies have become an integral part of the lives of today's youth. Young people use these technologies not only to communicate but also to learn, have fun, socialize, develop their identities, and feel a sense of belonging. Therefore, the goal is not to distance young people from technology, but to help them establish a healthy, balanced, and conscious relationship with it.

The work carried out with high school students throughout the TechWell project has shown that a large majority of young people perform a significant portion of their habits in the digital world on autopilot. Students can often spend long periods of time on social media, short-form videos, or games without being aware of why they picked up their phones in the first place. However, raising awareness is only the first step in behavioral change. The real challenge is sustaining this change.

Scientific studies show that lasting behavioral change in youth is only possible with the support of their family, school, and peer groups. For this reason, parents and teachers play a critical role in sustaining digital awareness.

How should we communicate with young people who use technology?

Today's youth are often more proficient with digital technologies than their parents and teachers. This can sometimes create a sense of inadequacy in adults. However, it is important to remember that while young people possess advanced technical skills, their self-regulation, impulse control, risk assessment, and ability to foresee long-term consequences are developmentally still maturing. Therefore, the role of adults is not to teach technology, but to foster the life skills needed to regulate its use. In the communication process, a curious, listening, and collaborative approach should be adopted rather than critical, accusatory, and punishing language. Phrases like 'Put the phone down right now!' or 'You are constantly on your phone!' often only increase conflict. Instead, open-ended questions such as:

- 'What do you think about your phone usage lately?'
- 'What is the most challenging thing for you when using your phone?'
- 'In what situations do you notice you lose control while using your phone?' help young people develop insight.

Being a Role Model: The Most Powerful Teaching Method

Research shows that the technology habits of parents and teachers have a direct impact on young people. When an adult asks children and teens to put their phones away at the dinner table but is constantly engaged with a screen themselves, it diminishes the impact of the message. Therefore, adults should:

- Establish phone-free times during meals,
- Prioritize face-to-face communication,
- Set digital boundaries while working and resting,
- Review their own screen time.

Young people learn from what they see, not what they are told.

How should boundaries and rules be set?

Effective digital parenting does not mean imposing strict bans. Studies indicate that entirely prohibitive approaches often lead to increased secretive use, conflict, and resistant behaviors. Whenever possible, rules should be established together with the youth. Co-created rules have a higher likelihood of being followed. For example;

Rules such as:

- Turning off screens at least one hour before bedtime,
- Keeping the phone² in a different room while studying,
- Designating meal times as phone-free zones,
- Planning daily online time in advance,

should be clear, consistent, and practical.

Equally important to setting rules is assigning responsibility. Encouraging young people to track their own screen time, set usage goals, and evaluate their progress supports the development of their self-regulation skills.

How should we manage conflicts?

Digital tools have become one of the significant causes of family conflicts today. However, conflict is not always negative; when managed correctly, it can turn into a learning opportunity. During moments of conflict, the following approaches contribute to protecting relationships:

- Postponing the conversation when anger rises,
- Focusing on the behavior rather than the personality,
- Saying "Your screen time has increased lately, and I am worried about this" instead of "You are always like this",
- Focusing on generating mutual solutions.

Especially during adolescence, respecting young people's need for autonomy is of great importance. The goal is not to control, but to support the youth's ability to self-manage.

Conclusion

The digital world will continue to be a part of young people's future. Therefore, our goal is not to remove technology from their lives, but to raise individuals who can use technology consciously and in a balanced manner. Awareness alone is not enough for young people to develop healthy digital habits. This process is a long-term learning journey where families, teachers, and youth walk together. Because in the digital world, the most important skill is not using technology, but being able to realize when, how, and why you use it.



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