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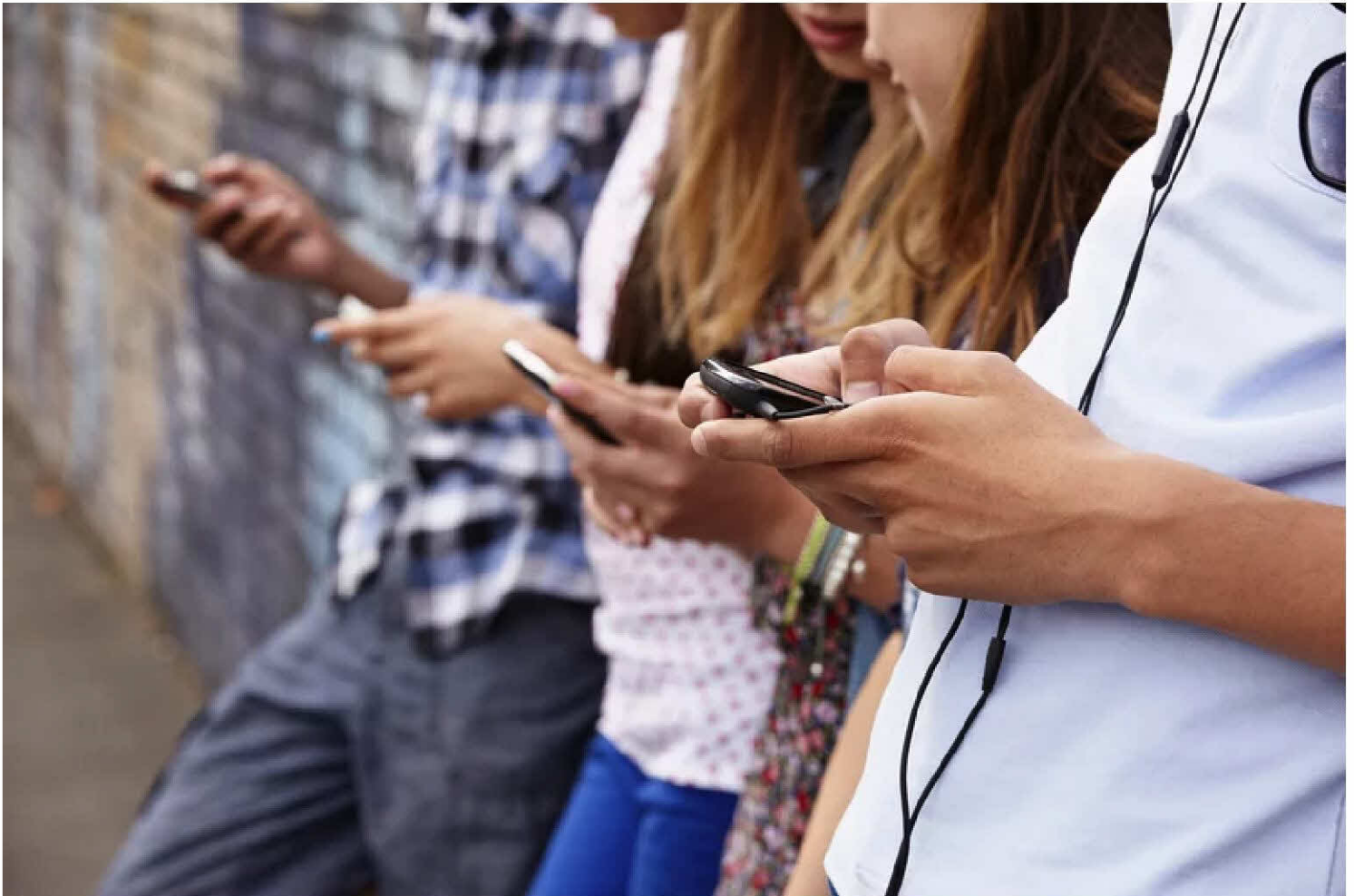
8 Ways to Help Cure Your Teen's Screen Addiction

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By **STEFANIE BROWN** February 19, 2015

Parents welcome technology devices in the home as helpful tools. (Who doesn't want a homework assistant, a boredom killer, or a virtual chaperone a pre-installed geo-tracker for their teen?) But without parameters, technology is like the obnoxious houseguest who overstays his welcome, while consuming all the snacks in the fridge. Current research reported by the National PTA suggests that the typical American kid devours more than six hours of screen time each day. But parents don't need studies to know that.

So how do teens reform their technology habits? Author and voice actor Bill Ratner is probably the last person any parent would consult as an expert on the topic. The man made a career out of lending his voice to some of the most aggressive advertising powerhouses around. But Ratner is also a dad. And his lifetime of work in the industry make his perspective a useful one. Consider these eight guidelines based on Ratner's recent book, Parenting for the Digital Age

1. **Give teens a voice.** When they're part of the decision making process of how and when their household uses technology, teens are more likely to take ownership of the plan. And since teens know technology so well, chances are they'll help families make better decisions:

"They are familiar with kids who are game-addicts, textaholics, and Facebook freaks. Use the wisdom of your kids to help knit together a strategy to deal with media screens in your home," says Ratner.

1. **Teach teens to pick up on marketing ploys.** Teens who are wise to the ways marketing, advertising, and the media work, are also more keen to tricks of the industry.

"Remember that [teens] have been lured to their screens by masters of their craft, highly paid communication experts whose sole responsibility is to secure kids' eyeballs and keep them watching day and night," writes Ratner.

Ask your kids questions about the advertisements they see, questions like: *What's being sold? How is the selling done? Who does the advertiser want to entice?* That type of conversation encourages critical thinking in place of passive viewing.

1. **Resist the cool stuff = cool person image.** Teens sometimes connect technology devices with social status. Make it clear that a person's value isn't related to the things they own.

Ratner says, "The challenge for parents is to find ways to affirm children's self-esteem and their membership in their group of peers while making sure that they know the difference between self-worth and simply owning a smart phone or t-shirt. "

1. **Remember that technology use is not an all or nothing matter.** Every rule is malleable. Don't be afraid to adjust a rule that doesn't quite fit. Each family needs to find the formula that works for them.

"You can negotiate cellphone-free hours at home, web-free spaces in the house, TV-free portions of the week," says Ratner.

1. **Find allies in other parents.** Connect with families from the neighborhood, school, and local place of worship and find out what other parents do to manage technology use in the home.

". . . Each family must determine the principles and practices that will work for them . . . But there is so much we can learn from the opinions of others," suggests Ratner.

1. **Don't just limit media use.** Find activities to replace it. And be creative about it. Ratner, and his family enjoy homegrown cabarets as entertainment at their family gatherings and also go to professional storytelling events:

"Confronting the obstacles for families in our digital age can either be a battle or a creative challenge. I find that with a little improvisation, creativity, and the desire to try new things like storytelling, we can lighten our load and inject fun into our lives in simple ways," prescribes Ratner.

1. **Be O.K. with the backlash that comes with setting parental limits.** This is one of those simple and timeless parenting principles. Find which rules work and stick to them. Don't cave to slammed doors and sucked teeth:

"Psychologists say that when our children shout their demands and complaints at us, they are rehearsing to get their way in the world. Parents are the easiest

and safest targets for them to practice on. Will we cover our ears, or will we take the opportunity to teach, guide, and protect?" questions Ratner.

1. **Find ways to make technology habits productive.** A technology obsessed teen might be finding a passion. Channel that and put it to work. Enroll that kid in a programming, animation, or app design class.

As a mother and professor whom Ratner interviewed said, "For our family, it wasn't about restricting access to a computer; it was about educating our kids about what a computer is for, what it's capable of. In order to survive in the workplace, our kids were going to have to be computer literate. Why not teach them early?"

For additional ideas on managing teen technology habits, visit these online resources:

Common Sense Media — CommonSenseMedia.org
National Institute on Media and the Family — http://www.ParentFurther.com
Media! Tech! Parenting! — http://www.MediaTechParenting.net