

Spring 2014

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**FRIDAY, May 2nd, 2014**

9:00 am—noon

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**PRESENTED BY**  
**LESLIE R. JOHNSEN, MA, LLP**  
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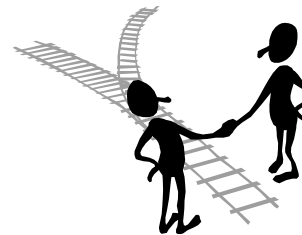
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## The *TEEN* Brain in a *TECH* World

Facebook reached 50 million users in just over 3 years while Google Plus took just 88 days to reach 50 million users! Compare that to radio airwaves which took 38 *years* to reach 50 million listeners! Digital communication has afforded many advances in the last fifteen years, and thanks to the developing physiology of their brains, adolescents can more easily adapt to this ever-changing technology. But at what cost? Two areas of particular concern for the adolescent brain include the amount of multitasking that occurs while using technology, as well as social development.



The period of adolescence is marked by developmental changes both physically and emotionally, including important changes to the brain that includes delayed growth in the frontal lobes. These changes are critical for decision-making and impulsivity. Having a developing, pliable brain means that adolescents are more susceptible to external environmental circumstances. Many recent studies in the U.S. have found that adolescents are spending as much as 8.5 hours a day using computers and mobile devices. That number jumps to 11.5 hours if you take into account the amount of multi-tasking that occurs, such as texting while watching television or studying. Technological multi-tasking has proven through research to break down the quality of learning due to increasing the time it takes to complete a task. It also decreases both the level of performance and the ability to recall what one was doing earlier. Risks of instant communication can include missed opportunities for both deeper and abstract thinking. The question must be asked: while homework may be complete, did the quality of work reach its potential had it been given one's full attention?

The rise in technology usage also raises concerns regarding the social development of adolescents. Social interactions are now being changed by technology. For example, an adolescent may have hundreds of friends through social media whom they interact with but may be limiting the essential face-to-face social skills. This include forming impressions of others, gauging others' emotional reactions, as well as making inferences about others' intentions. These skills require in-person practice as they deal with subtle language cues, such as pauses, the intonation of voice, facial affect, and body language.

Despite these concerns, modern technology continues to provide undeniably positive influences on society. Adolescents are able to connect instantly to the world with a touch of a screen, making them more global-minded than generations before them. For instance, adolescents around the world can be laughing at the same YouTube videos, potentially breaking down cultural barriers. Surprisingly, research is also showing that teenage pregnancy, sexual disease and violence in the US is lower than previous years. These declines arguably suggest that technology use may be an alternative way for adolescents to work through various hormonal impulses and positively assist transitioning into young adulthood.

As technology continues to permeate our lives, here are a few suggestions to incorporate healthy limit setting and accountability with adolescents:

- Begin by talking with your adolescent about how you want them to succeed and be healthy. This includes eating well, exercising, being outdoors and getting enough sleep.
- Get into their world and talk about the benefits of electronics. Teach appropriate ways to navigate technology with moderation. Stay educated on what interests them online!
- Consider equipping your home with a family docking station for all electronic devices to be plugged in outside of the bedroom. This allows for the brain to fully rest without the screen lighting and notification reminder sounds.
- Engage in what they are doing online. Join their social network, play their favorite video game with them, and ask open-ended questions about what they are doing.
- Most importantly, MODEL healthy technology usage! Are you expecting an adolescent to turn off their phone at dinnertime but not doing the same yourself?

Pushback against these limits should be both expected and even welcomed as adolescents explore their independence and ability to have a sense of control. What matters is that they understand that the overall goal is to be successful individuals who can glean the benefits from technology.

*Leah Ethier, MA, LPC, NBCC is a Licensed Professional Counselor at Perspectives Counseling Centers who specializes in adolescents and adults in the areas of Mood Disorders, Anxiety, Eating Disorders, Self-Injury, Divorce, Grief and Loss, and Adjustment Issues.*

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