Educating in the New Technologies

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Other articles in the series on the family

The new generations are born in an interconnected world unfamiliar to their parents when growing up. They gain quick access to the Internet, social networks, chat rooms and

video game consoles. Their learning ability in this area progresses at the same breakneck pace as the development of these new technologies.

From an early age, children and young people are exposed to a world seemingly without borders. This situation offers a lot of benefits, but also involves some risks that make parental closeness and guidance even more necessary.

We need to take a positive attitude towards the "digital age." As Benedict said, this technology, "if used wisely, can contribute to the satisfaction of the desire for meaning, truth and unity which remain the most profound aspirations of each human being."[1] But at the same time, reality presents facts that cannot be ignored: for example, that children's over-exposure to screens has been tied to health risks such as obesity,

and aggressive or disruptive behavior at school.

Technology shapes to a great extent our lives today. We need to be in control of it so that its use helps us grow in virtue, and to be attentive so that children use it properly. Education requires a good deal of patience and planning, but when it comes to new technologies parents also need to acquire some specific knowledge, both ideas and a bit of practice, in order to develop sound criteria and guide their children correctly.

Increasingly, technological devices are tied to the Internet. This makes it possible to reach very large audiences and opens up the possibility of disseminating messages immediately and at virtually no cost. In turn, it produces uncertainty about who will have access to these contents and when.

The experience of recent years shows that the new technologies are not just a tool to improve in the reach and level of communication. In a certain sense, they have become an environment, a "place,"[2] and one of the connecting elements in our culture, by which personal identity is expressed.[3]

Part of the task of Christian parents today is to sanctify this environment, by helping children to behave virtuously in the digital world, and showing them it is also an environment where they can express their Christian identity. With the continuous and radical changes in the digital world, it would not be effective only to provide a list of rules that quickly become obsolete. Rather, the task of education is to help young people grow in virtues. Only thus can they come to lead a good life, putting order in their passions and exercising control over

their actions, joyfully overcoming the obstacles that prevent them from growing in virtue in the digital world. As Pope Francis said, "the issues are not principally technological. We must ask ourselves: are we up to the task of bringing Christ into this area, or better still, of *bringing others to meet Christ*?"[4]

At the same time, to avoid putting children at risk unnecessarily, parents need to study when it is it appropriate to start using digital devices, and which are more in accord with the maturity they have attained. In many cases, it will be possible to "include the use of filtering technology in devices, to protect them as much as possible from pornography and other threats,"[5] knowing at the same time that a virtuous life is the only unfailing filter and that it is available at all times.

Growing in virtues: the importance of good example

The family is a school of virtues, which grow through education, deliberate acts and persevering effort. Divine grace, in turn, purifies and elevates the virtues.[6] Since the family is the place where the first notions of good and evil are grasped and the importance of sound values is learned, it is there that the edifice of each child's virtues needs to be built up.

Certain lifestyles help children to find God, while others hinder it. Christian parents should naturally seek to form a Christian mentality and heart in their children, and try to make their home a school of virtues. The goal is to help every child learn to make decisions with human and spiritual maturity, in accord with their age. New technologies are another aspect that should be

present in conversations and in the rules drawn up for the home, which usually are few and depend on the children's ages.

Virtues cannot be lived in isolation, in a few specific aspects of life but not in others. For example, helping children not to give in to whims regarding food or games will also help them to behave better in the digital world, and vice versa.

New technologies attract everyone. Teaching virtues requires that parents should know how to make their personal self-demands contagious, setting an example of moderation. If children see our own struggle, they will be spurred to make a greater effort themselves. For example, by paying attention when speaking with them: putting the newspaper aside, turning down the television, making eye contact with the person speaking, not checking

messages on the phone. And when the conversation is important, any devices should be turned off so that it is not interrupted. Education requires "prudence, understanding, a capacity to love and concern for giving good example."[7]

When they are still young

Childhood is the time to begin practicing the virtues, and to learn the right use of freedom. It is at this stage when character development more easily occurs. We could even say that in childhood we build the "highways" that we will later travel in life.

Although any general rule can be nuanced, the experience of many educators is that when children are very young it is better for them not to have advanced electronic devices (tablets, smartphones, consoles). Also, in order to instill temperance and detachment, it is advisable that

these devices belong to the family as a whole and be used in shared places. Parents should provide a plan to help children be moderate in their use of them, with family schedules and rules that protect other critical times for study, rest and family life, and that facilitate good use of time.

While children are coming to know the benefits and limits of the digital world, parents also need to teach them the value of direct human contact, which no technology can replace. At the appropriate time, we need to accompany them in their travels through the digital environment like a good mountain guide, lest they hurt themselves or cause others to be hurt. Checking the Internet together, "wasting time" playing on a console or fixing the settings on a smartphone are opportunities to engage in deeper conversations. "Parents and children should discuss together what we see

and experience in cyberspace. It is also useful to share with other families that have the same values and concerns."[8]

At this age, it is usually best for them not to have devices that are constantly connected to the Internet. It is better to follow a specific plan, with clearly set times and places for Internet access (disconnecting the devices or turning them off at night). While children need to be taught to protect themselves from dangerous situations, they also need the peace of mind that comes from knowing they can always turn to their parents for help. As St. Josemaria taught, "the ideal attitude of parents lies more in becoming their children's friends–friends who will be willing to share their anxieties, who will listen to their problems, who will help them in an effective and agreeable way."[9]

Adolescents

Upon reaching adolescence, children forcefully claim spheres of freedom that often they are not yet ready to handle properly. This doesn't mean depriving them of their rightful autonomy. Rather the parents' task is a much more difficult one: to teach children to manage their freedom responsibly. Only then will they be able to achieve the breadth of vision that allows them to aspire to higher goals.

As Benedict XVI stressed, "educating means providing people with true wisdom, which includes faith, in order to enter into relationship with the world; it means equipping them with sufficient guidelines in the order of thought, affections and judgments."[10] Adolescents need to open themselves freely to formation. While certain rules will always be required for family life, parents have

here a fundamental resource: dialogue. It is important to explain the "whys" of certain ways of behaving, perhaps perceived by young people as over-rigidity, as well as the underlying reasons for certain ways of doing things that might be seen as limits, but which in reality are not petty prohibitions but strong affirmations for forging an authentic personality, by enabling young people to go against the current. It is more effective to show how attractive virtue is right from the start, appealing to the magnanimous ideals that fill young people's hearts, the great loves that move them: loyalty to their friends, respect for others, the need to live temperance and modesty etc.

The parents' work here is easier when they know their children's interests. This does not require "spying" on them, but rather generating enough confidence for

them to feel comfortable talking about what attracts them, to know what interests them and, where appropriate, spending time with them and sharing in their interests. Some young people have blogs or use the social networks, but their parents are unaware of this and have never looked at what they write there, so that children may think their parents don't care or don't like what they are doing. For some parents, looking from time to time at what their children are writing and doing on the Internet will be a pleasant discovery and a source of enrichment for family life and conversations.

This age is also appropriate for instilling the value of austerity in the use of devices, gadgets and software (applications, etc.). Parents need to teach children how to live detachment, not only because of the cost of hardware and software, but

also so as "not to be dominated by feelings, going from one thing to another without discernment in search of what is fashionable."[11] This behavior is sometimes encouraged by those selling these devices, exerting a strong influence on children that is hard to counteract.

Adolescents also need to be taught to live self-restraint in the time they spend on social networks, video consoles, online games, etc. Explaining very well the reasons for behaving in this way will be a big help here, as well as, and above all, giving good example themselves. Living these guidelines personally is the best way for parents to communicate their importance in an atmosphere of love and freedom.

Knowing how to explain the "whys" doesn't demand having advanced technical knowledge. In many cases

the advice children need for their behavior in digital environments is the same required for their behavior in society: good manners, modesty and decency, respect for others, guarding their sight, self-control, etc.

Depending on each child's age, it is crucial to have deep conversations about guiding their affections and about true friendship. It is good to remind children that what is published on the Internet is usually accessible to countless people anywhere in the world, and that almost all actions carried out in the digital environment leave a trail that can be accessed through searches. The digital world is a vast space that children need to learn to navigate with naturalness, but also with a lot of common sense. If no child would begin a conversation with the first person encountered on the street, neither should this happen on the Web. Effective and open family

communication will help children understand all this, and create an atmosphere of trust in which they can voice any questions and resolve uncertainties.

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[1] Benedict XVI, *Message for the 45th World Communications Day* (2011).

[2] Cf. Benedict XVI, *Message for the 47th World Communications Day* (2013).

[3] Cf. Benedict XVI, *Message for the 43rd World Communications Day* (2009).

[4] Address to the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 21 September, 2013.

[5] Pontifical Council for Social Communications, "The Church and Internet" (2002), no. 11.

[6] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1839.

[7] St. Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 27.

[8] Pontifical Council for Social Communications, "The Church and Internet" (2002), no. 11

[9] St. Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 27.

[10] Benedict XVI, Address to Italian Bishops, 27 May 2008, "The Crisis in Education," no. 11.

[11] Francis, Address in Basilica of Saint Mary Major, 4 May 2013, no. 3.