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Smart Phones for Young People: Pros and Cons

High school students everywhere struggle to control the use of their phones. The Headmaster of The Heights School in Washington DC offers some advice based on his extensive personal experience.

07/15/2017

Letter to Parents from Alvaro J. de Vicente, Headmaster of The Heights School in Washington DC.

Dear Parents,

Smart phones are here to stay.

Actually, that is not entirely true, for they will gradually be replaced by more sophisticated tools. But it is true that smart phones are commonly used these days, even by high school students. This letter intends to present some ideas regarding the wisdom of that use by teenagers – a topic of interest to all Heights parents since even those of you with younger sons know that they will be teenagers soon!

The main arguments for a teenager having a smart phone seem to be the following:

- the phone is a tool for communication with family and friends,
- it provides parents with the peace of mind that they can always reach their sons,

- it is a convenient tool to coordinate often complicated family schedules,
- it is the way of the future so it's time to accept it, teenagers need to learn how to use it properly since they will be using it for the rest of their lives, and
- it has become increasingly harder to find a non-smart (dumb?) phone.

The first three arguments only present the case for having any type of phone since they can all do voice calling and text messaging. It is true that in an age when parents often have to juggle multiple family member schedules, having instant access to the children can be beneficial. But a simple phone will accomplish the goal of allowing you to call or text your son whenever you see fit.

All of us will increasingly have more technology both encroaching upon

and facilitating our lives. There is, therefore, an argument for seeing smart phones as part of that trend, a trend that is inevitable and therefore must be accepted.

But the fact that technology will increasingly be part of our lives does not mean that you ought to have your son fully embrace any new gadget that comes along. It is your place as parents to decide whether each technological advancement is good for your son, and whether it is good for the family dynamics. A better TV system may not be good for your family if you have determined that TV-watching is taking too much time and you are looking to do away with it. A portable computer may not be great for your son if you think that he is already spending too much time on the non-portable computer.

You should not be afraid of technology, just cautious and discerning.

I agree that there is a benefit for a young man to learn how to use current technology well and properly since he will likely need to use it eventually. This is what is now called becoming a good digital citizen. The argument for allowing smart phones while in high school, then, is that it is better for the teenager to learn how to use the phone properly while he is still at home before he goes to college and is on his own.

A question of character

The main factor in learning how to use a smart phone properly is not a technological question, but one of character. The real issue is whether your son is going to be the master of the phone, or the phone the master of your son.

Learning how to use a phone properly is a question of the will, of strength of character, of discipline, self-control, temperance. Does your son have the strength of will to master his phone and use it prudently? The phone is a very powerful, eminently attractive, potentially addictive, tool for all of us -- but much more so for teenagers. Does your son have the strength of character to have a smart phone and not abuse it?

To gauge his strength of character, you may want to consider how he fares in other areas of his life. How is his material order in his room, bed, clothing, book-bag, and other personal belongings? How does he manage his own schedule – is he a procrastinator, or is he diligent in doing what he ought? Does he do what he wants or what he should?

If he does not have the self-control to follow a schedule and do what he ought, but takes the easy road and mostly does what he wants, then a smart phone will be at best an endless source of distraction, procrastination, and will-weakening for him.

Does he have disciplined work-habits? Is he already the kind of disciplined worker you would eventually like him to be? If he isn't, then he needs fewer, rather than more, distractions.

How is his sociability? Is he shy about engaging others face-to-face? Smart phones offer a false heaven to shy people in that they make it socially less awkward to not engage others in conversation or even to look at them – it is easier to bury one's head in a screen and ignore everyone around.

So, while I agree that there is a benefit to having the young man learn to properly use a smart phone, the real issue is how to teach proper use. A prerequisite is for that young man to be able to control himself. Few are in that situation, and even those who are, may risk losing ground in their self-control battle by accessibility to the phone.

Finding the right technology

Finally, it is becoming increasingly harder to buy a regular phone. Well, harder is not impossible, at least not yet, although maybe we will get to the point when only certain antique shops will carry regular phones.

But the ease of getting the regular phones is not an important factor to consider since that has nothing to do with doing the right thing for your son. If getting a smart phone is the right thing to do, then the ease of getting one is welcome; but if getting

a regular phone is the right thing to do, then the growing difficulty of obtaining one is an inconvenience, but still a small price to pay for doing what is right for your son.

The downside of using a smart phone

So, if there is no real benefit for your son in having a smart phone, is there any real harm in his having one? Is getting a smart phone for your son a neutral proposition? I have already hinted at some potential disadvantages, but I will be a bit more specific in detailing them in no particular order of importance.

First, the vast majority of teenagers are intemperate. They are at the time in their lives when they have strong passions and emotions but only a half-developed will. Strong passions in a teenager are good since they are a sign that he is alive. But his will is

just developing and therefore still in great need of support.

One of the manifestations of that intemperance due to the natural combination of strong passions and developing will is that a teenager wants things *now*. A young boy who interrupts his parents' conversations with a question or a request because he can't wait for a few minutes, or a young boy who wants to eat now and cannot wait until dinner time is manifesting his intemperance. A particularly strong form of intemperance among teenagers is curiosity.

The young man who must know the score of the sports game now or who cannot wait to see the funny video his friends told him about but rather must have his curiosity satisfied now is a boy or a young man who is manifesting this form of intemperance.

We all suffer from this, and thus we have the curiosity-driven phenomenon of traffic jams due to rubber-necking. Smart phones prey on teenagers' curiosity by providing them with instant access to whatever information they want to get or video they want to watch. The smart phone eliminates the need to wait by promising instant curiosity satisfaction, and so it may actually weaken your son's will by catering to the bad habit of seeking instant gratification.

Second, the smart phone focuses one's mind and eyes downward onto the screen rather than on the world around him. We are becoming a society of people who look typically down and only exceptionally up and about. New York is sometimes referred to as the city where you could be loneliest in a crowd.

There is something healthy about a teenager having to break out of his shell to socialize with those around him in a parking lot, or lounge, or elevator, if nothing else by making eye contact and recognizing another person's existence.

Because sociability is best developed at a younger age, the smart phone may prevent a teenager from developing into a more confident man capable of talking with those he does not know as well. A smart phone can practically shut down the world around your son and reduce it to the images on a screen – all of them at his command. The phone provides entertainment, but it deprives people of reality, and a young man can only become social when he is living in reality.

Third, smart phones provide access to everything the web hosts. As you know, the pornography industry is a

multi-billion dollar industry intent on getting its product into the hands, eyes, minds, and souls of your sons.

Producers know that once that young man, that boy, has been exposed to their material, that young man is more likely to want to see it again. And that once he has seen it a few times, he will have a battle to try to stop the habit. We also know that it is very hard to prevent access to such material, no matter what filters and other measures we put in place. But there is no doubt that prevention becomes increasingly difficult with additional potential access to the material.

A smart phone or a highly portable powerful computer makes this prevention virtually impossible. Filters, reporting mechanisms, parental controls and the like can be installed. And yet there is the cold fact that the smart phone increases

the risk of exposure to pornographic material. Ultimately, the only safeguard against falling into watching such content is the viewer's will and self-control. Unfortunately, these are the very strongholds the smart phone may erode.

In addition, *an invariably bad reason for giving your son a smart phone is his claim that "everyone has one,"* a claim that will become true only if every parent were to give in to it. Neither is it a good reason to give him a phone simply because he insists with the intemperate perseverance characteristic of teenagers. His inability to take *no* for an answer may be the best evidence that he lacks the self-control to handle a smart phone.

The risk of owning a smart phone clearly becomes less and less worth taking as the benefit the phone provides diminishes. Your son can

hardly argue that he accrues a real benefit from having a smart phone, one that overcompensates for the great personal risk he is under when having it. The questionable benefit of having access to the web for a teenager is dwarfed by the certain risk of having such access, both because of the potential for intemperance in looking to satisfy one's curiosity, and because of the pernicious content that he may fall into.

Although it refers to smart phones, this letter has really been about your sons and how they can use technology in a way that will not hamper their growth. Ultimately, the letter is about considering how to empower your sons to become life-long prudential users of technology by truly mastering themselves.

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