

# Do You Know the Three Pillars of Digital Wellness?

---

 drdavewalsh.com

Dr. Dave and Erin Walsh • January 29, 2014

Digital technologies have changed the way we live and communicate as a dazzling array of electronic tools has become integrated into our daily lives. Children and youth today spend more time tethered to technology than any other activity in their waking hours. It is transforming the way that they learn, share, connect and grow.

We've written before about the false choice between a "lock down" and "hands off" approach to technology. The debate about whether technology is "good" or "bad" for children and youth misses the most important part of the conversation: What is it that children needs to thrive?

Start with these three ingredients:

## 1. Digital Participation

Confiscating all forms of digital entertainment until young people are twenty-five might keep them from uploading inappropriate pictures to Facebook, but it won't help them practice the skills they need to navigate the complex challenges of living in a connected world.

For the last twenty years, there has been a lot of attention paid to the digital divide based on access. Some kids were wired while too many others lacked a connection. While there is still a ways to go, this gap has closed dramatically in the last decade. However, a new digital divide is now emerging based on how young people are using these tools. University of California's [Mimi Ito](#) describes it as an opportunity gap. Some young people have the extra support, guidance, and resources to use technology in healthy ways that advance their academic and personal goals. Others are just hanging out online, wasting time. Senior researcher at Microsoft, Dana Boyd, reminds us "Access is not a panacea. Not only does it not solve problems, it mirrors and magnifies existing problems we've been ignoring."

In other words, getting digital tools in or out of young people's hands is just the beginning of the journey. Next they need support and guidance to learn how to use them. As you consider strategies for helping young people cross the digital divide, don't forget to honor their strengths. Young people are creative, energetic, and capable of incredible integrity and courage. Harness their passion and energy for digital technology and direct it towards online learning, creative work, media literacy, and community engagement.

### TAKE ACTION:

- Enjoy media together. Ask young people questions about what they are interested in, where they hang out online, and what they like about it.
- Talk with young people about the images, messages, and stories they are hearing online and in the media.
- Avoid talking about technology as if it is a mindless waste of time. Help young people use online resources to explore their interests and strengthen skills.
- Connect teens with community media organizations. Many have youth programs where young people can build both digital literacies and leadership skills.
- Find out if your child's school is working on any school climate initiatives and see if they want to get involved. Youth-led campaigns that incorporate new media are exciting and impressive.
- Do they have strong opinions about a local issue around Internet safety or online learning? Encourage them to write an Op-Ed or a Letter to the Editor.

## 2. Digital Citizenship

Digital citizenship is a new term with an evolving definition. Some use it expansively to include the themes of participation, safety, and privacy. We like to think of digital citizenship as the habit of mind that guides the way that we treat one another online. It is the set of social emotional skills that enable us to be good to one another including being caring, empathetic, responsible, and courageous. It is the emotional and moral compass that leads our kids to talk to a trusted adult if they see something that makes them feel uneasy online or to stand up for another kid who is being bullied.

Becoming a good digital citizen doesn't happen overnight. It happens over time as young people experience mini-failures and mistakes, as they reflect on the impact of their actions on others, and as they practice kindness in both the virtual and real worlds.

### TAKE ACTION:

- Start with a conversation. Talk about what good digital citizenship looks like. Communicate clear expectations and consequences around [cyberbullying](#) and cruelty.
- Don't "spy" on kids' every move. Instead, encourage families to [use parental controls](#) openly to ensure that children are earning digital privileges by choosing caring and responsible behavior.
- Expect mistakes. Make sure that Internet "incidents" are an opportunity to communicate and reflect, not a platform for endless lectures.
- Recognize when a young person is being an upstanding digital citizen. Hold a mirror up to their caring and respectful behavior.

## 3. Digital Discipline

The previous two ingredients involve maximizing the benefits of technology when it is powered on. A skill that will only grow in importance in the next decade is the capacity to know when to power off. Concern about focus and attention, chronic multi-tasking, decline of real-world social skills, and "internet-addiction" is growing and warranted.

To be fair, it isn't only youth who are having a hard time unplugging. A friend's three-year-old staged an intervention on him a couple of years ago. She put her chubby little fingers over the top of his smart phone during dinner and said "Daddy, please put that away I'm trying to talk to you!" Our friend knew he had a problem when he snuck into the bathroom ten minutes later to check his email.

"Digital Discipline" is a term we coined to describe the set of skills, behaviors, and practices that enable us to unplug when we need to. Twenty-first century communities, be they business, academic, or family, are not only going to need digital innovators and digital citizens, they are going to need people who know when to put their digital devices away to focus, recharge, and connect with one another.

### TAKE ACTION:

- Cut down on the multi-tasking and [reduce digital distractions](#).
- Carve out screen free times to connect. Meal times and short car rides might be a good time for this.
- [Set a digital curfew](#) at night and stick with it.
- Encourage your kids to work out conflict [face-to-face](#). Start with siblings! Help coach them on the words they might use.
- Model good communication and don't duck the hard conversations. Texting is a great way to stay connected but if something is important make sure you follow up face-to-face.