Addressing Problematic Tech Use in Young People

This tip sheet is intended to help parents and other caregivers prevent problematic tech use and identify specific behaviors that may be a sign of problematic tech use in young people—particularly regarding smart phones.

Prevention Strategies

While not an exhaustive list, the following tips may help parents and other caregivers navigate the issue of tech use:

- Model the behavior you want to see—limit your phone use; put phone away during family activities, driving, and meals; avoid discussing social media activity of friends.
- Set limits for phone use and follow through with specific consequences for breaking rules; establish phone-free zones in your home such as the family dining table.
- Have serious discussions about the importance of face-to-face connections and prioritizing mental health.
- Have serious discussions about addiction and how it doesn't just apply to drugs and alcohol.
- Encourage "urge surfing" — the practice of overriding our urges in an effort to make healthier choices.
- Actively engage youth in conversation. Ask questions such as "How did you successfully connect with someone in person today?" or "Tell me about one good thing that happened during your day."
- Set up regular experiences such as family picnics in the park, trips to community and sporting events, etc.
- Consider requiring your child to do volunteer work in the community to expand their horizons beyond their phone. Talk about your family values and select volunteer options that align with those values.
- Discuss the concept of mindfulness, which is the opposite of mind*less*ness. It means waking up out of autopilot and pursuing a moment-by-moment, non-judgmental awareness of our own thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and environments.

Signs of Trouble

The following behaviors could indicate an unhealthy relationship with technology:

- Visibly altered mood after engaging with phone (on a regular basis).
- Sleeping with phone in bed or under pillow.
- Extreme agitation upon being asked to disconnect from phone for family meal or event.
- Inability to stop phone use upon command.
- Exhibiting distress intolerance (e.g. sneaking phone use after phone is taken).
- Constantly taking selfies, altering photos, and/or talking about how appearance will come across to "followers."
- Regularly commenting on the social media activity of others instead of actual human interactions (i.e. life happening through phone).
- Failure to fulfill responsibilities at school or work.
- Complaints from teachers or supervisors about phone use.
- Decline of interpersonal skills (e.g. can't seem to make eye contact during conversations).
- Pronounced nervousness when phone is not in their possession.

Next Steps

If you have done as much as you can to address your child's tech use but are still seeing signs of trouble—or if concerning behaviors have escalated beyond your comfort level—consider seeking professional help.

There could be underlying issues at play that are best explored by a licensed therapist. The following resources can help to point you in the right direction.

www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline
www.mhanational.org/finding-help
www.psychologytoday.com/us

Remember, addressing concerns before they get bad almost always yields better results. Don't be afraid to reach out for assistance. Mental health professionals are uniquely equipped to identify and unpack unhealthy patterns, thoughts, and behaviors—and empower youth to take control of their lives.