

Embracing Change and Technology Positively

What did we do before cell phones? I often wonder how I survived my teenage years without having instant contact with my friends and family. Like many people my age I don't have a land line at my home, but live through my cell phone. On the other hand cell phones annoy me to no end. Working with young people I find myself ever frustrated that they can't put their phone down for an hour during a meeting or event. In fact just the other day one of my 4-H members was showing me that her right thumb is bigger than the left from texting so much, over 12,000 messages in one month. Shaking my head at her story I returned to work only to realize this is just the beginning of what the future holds.

Being one of the younger professionals in my field I sometimes feel like I am in tune with technology. I have a new cell phone that does all kinds of cool things like play music, check e-mail, locate restaurants, and it even makes phone calls. But the more I spend time with young people the more I realize I don't know nearly as much as I think. The next generation is technology savvy, beyond my comprehension. They enjoy instant gratification and as many parents know are turned off by rules, authority and discipline.

Young people today rely less on face-to-face communication and more on cell phones, instant messaging, and the internet. They don't wait for answers, if they have questions or ideas they share them immediately with friends or look for answers on the Internet. Almost everything they need is only a click away. They can use technology to travel around the world without ever leaving their homes. They can also learn from and about people they have never, and probably will never, meet. The technology of the next generation is exciting and it is scary, but it is here to stay. We can't stop it; the change will continue to be rapid, constant, and revolutionary.

As adults we are competing with the Internet and instant communications for the attention of young people, and it's not a fair competition. Simply put, their world moves faster and in more directions than most of us will ever understand. Since this change is inevitable and already happening all around us what can we do to make it a positive experience for everyone. The following are some suggestions:

1. Inspire them and show them how to turn their goals into action. Many young people have inspiring ideas, and too often that is where the cycle stops. The next generation is full of people who will make a difference in the lives of others. When your child has a goal help them to look at ways to act upon their goal.
2. Mentor them without lectures. For many of us lectures is the easy solution to the problem. Telling your children how things were when you were a kid or what you would do in the situation seems helpful, but the next generation cannot see themselves in your place. Find ways to work through the problems they are facing, rather than the problems we as adults perceive they are facing.
3. Help them learn "the ropes" but know they will use them differently than we did. For many of us this is one of the hardest things to do. We have all been through many life experiences and all you want to do is share your successes and failures with your children so they can avoid making the mistakes you did, but for them this doesn't work. They need to experience things for themselves.
4. Help them develop a positive, can-do attitude and give them strong character traits to build upon. Success starts at home. If parents create a young person with good moral and strong character they will be successful in the future, with or without technology.

In short, technology has changed everything about the world now taking shape and it will continue to change rapidly. The changes aren't driven by machines and systems, but by the minds of young

people who have grown up with the machines. I am not saying the change is good or bad, but it is happening. Today's young people want mentors, but they want a different relationship than the one you had with your parents. As parents and teachers we are the bridge from the status quo to the future. Instant communication seeking young people are the leaders of a vastly different future, let's make an effort to be ready for that future.

I must say, as I learn more, I also need to remember my manners and be sure to leave my phone in the car or turn it off at appropriate times. The teenagers in our lives may be the ones teaching us how to use technology, but we all need to remember that even in the world of technology we as adults need to lead by example.

For more information on this or other youth development related topics please contact the University of Missouri Extension Office in Henry County at 660-885-5556.

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