Autumn Term 2022 – A healthy approach to digital media

As each year passes it seems that we are more and more involved and dependent on the digital world for communication, information and reassurance.
If I reflect on the increase in the ways that I use my own mobile phone now compared to five years ago, the gradual and almost unnoticeable increase is surprising. As well as the standard functions of telephone, text and camera; I now use my phone for banking, health tracking, weather forecasts, travel planning, pollen monitoring, and tracking my daily step count.
With so many uses, it is hard to leave a telephone behind. It is natural to pick it up in case you need any of the functions listed above, and in case of any other expected emergency. We are all beginning to forget a time without them. How did we cope?

The answer, of course, is that we coped just fine. We memorised phone numbers of family and friends and used public phone boxes. We listened to the weather report on the radio before we left the house. Newspapers were everywhere, and cheap.

How is the increased dependence on mobile technology affecting our children?
Recent studies by people involved in assessing children's development are alarming. Very young children, hardly older than babies, mimic parents using phones.
Tablets and other hand-held devices are used to entertain and stimulate from before a time when children are developing language, and studies show that this cuts across vital parent / child interactions in terms of language formation.
A recent blog from Dr Hayley van Zwanenberg on the Priory Group website gives further detail of some startling results of their latest research.
https://www.priorygroup.com/blog/should-children-really-have-their-own-smartphones
The fact that The Priory is more known for addiction reveals how seriously healthcare professionals are taking the issue.

How can we help our children?
It is obvious that clear boundaries for mobile use help our children to use digital media in a more discerning way, and benefit from time away from their devices. Some suggestions in the article quoted above include:

- Meal times should always be phone free – and that includes for parents
- Encourage activities that involve meeting and seeing people, such as attending clubs, having friends over, playing sport or just going to shops. All these offer opportunities to build self-esteem and allow for healthier social comparison - away from the digital world
- Have consistent time limits on screen time and make sure that it isn't taking time away from sleep or physical activity. There is lots of software out there to limit children's screen time
- Have "media-free" times with your kids and "media-free" spots in the house like bedrooms. Young people need time boundaries when accessing social media and a total restriction may be necessary, for periods of time, when they lose parents' trust, so you may need to turn off your wifi. Year 7 parents of one school in Barnet reportedly got together recently and decided not to give their children smartphones,

which the majority agreed to. It was based on a recommendation from the school, but led by parents

- Walk and talk – without the distraction of the TV or tablet. Use the time to chat openly; laugh and maybe broach sensitive subjects that have been off limits during term-time (parents might be surprised at what teenagers suddenly decide to share – and vice versa).
- Reintroduce a games night at home – playing board games or card games. You might be surprised how much your child enjoys these and how they enjoy the competitive nature of such games, playing against family members
- Children must have time to relax as well as get an adequate amount of restorative sleep. Remove phones and electronic devices from your children at least an hour before going to sleep and never leave devices charging in the bedroom. We need to get smart about phones.
- Implement rules on which social media sites they are allowed to use and consider investing in software which allows you to see exactly what your child is watching, and when. Limit them to just one social media account and make sure the correct privacy settings are in place and you are aware of what they are posting and who they are communicating with.

I am sure that many parents will already have come to similar conclusions and developed their own rules. Consistency is the key. The challenge is the pressure that children feel to join in at all times online, and the social dangers of missing out. This even has a word – 'FOMO' – 'Fear of Missing Out'.

I have a few simple rules with my two teenage children that echo those in the suggestions above from the Priory article. We pile our four phones at the end of the table when we sit down to eat and don't touch them until the end of the meal. We all charge devices out of bedrooms, and never take phones to bed with us. And finally, we have outdoor time without phones. I am lucky that my son is a great walker, so we have some time each week away from the digital world, breathing the (relatively) clean air of Croydon.

How you decide to approach this issue as parents will vary according to your own situation, and knowledge of what is best for your own children.
An extreme but interesting approach is a 'Digital Sabbath' – there is an organisation that promotes Sundays completely without digital contact. It is hard for many of us because of responsibilities (elderly parents are a good reason) but well worth consideration. It might be good for you, and would definitely be good for your children. The great irony, of course, is that all the information about time away from digital media only exists online: https://digitalsabbath.io/

Good luck, and enjoy the simple pleasures of time offline with your children.