Parenting Well in an Age of Technology

In this day and age with so much going on and so much technology available it is hard to keep up with what children are doing. In this month's Parenting Newsletter, we are sharing some excerpts from an article by Rod Arters which we feel might be very helpful to today's parents. You can follow his work on his blog (www.rodarters.org), Facebook (Rod Arters, Writer) or Twitter (@rodarters). He has three children and currently resides in Charlotte, NC. Please share with other parents and even grandparents.

With every generation, raising children takes on new challenges never before seen by parents. Think about how **parenting** has changed through the ages. Before the invention of the light bulb, kids were inside by dark. Now, they can stay out late and see all night. Before the automobile was invented, children had to walk or take the family horse. Now, they are able to travel hundreds of miles in just a few hours. Before the invention of television, kids were outside all the time. Now, there are enough channels in the basic cable package to entertain them 24 hours a day, literally. Before the invention of the internet, kids had to go to the library for hours to do research. Today, with a few clicks from home and they can find what they want in minutes. It used to be that parents had to set a geographical boundary and curfew for their children to obey. In this day and age, those boundaries are primarily online. "Don't go past that landmark" has now been replaced with "Don't go to that website."

Like it or not, we are in the zenith of the technological age, and it seems that parenting has to morph just as rapidly as the technologies that are created. Just in the last few years, parents have had to address the following technological bombardments: MP3's, iPods, YouTube, MySpace, Twitter, Facebook, Nook, Kindle, instant messaging, web cams, cell phones, texting, Xbox, DVR, TiVo, and more. To an older ear, some of these terms can and does bring confusion.

GET EDUCATED. Listen to your children and you will learn a lot. They will talk about the latest technology, how they use it or how they want to use it. Ask questions. Get online and "google" to find answers. Knowledge is power and too often parents are powerless simply because they don't even know what they don't know.

GET ONLINE. If your kids are on Facebook, you need a Facebook account. If your kids use Twitter, you need to have a Twitter account and subscribe to theirs. If your child plays Xbox, you need to at least be familiar with the game and how it's played. If your child likes to text message, you need to learn how to do it. Nothing can distance a parent quicker than not understanding their child's world. There is already a great chasm between a child and his parent. You being online and trying to interact with your child can help bridge that gap a bit.

It does not mean you have to *like* everything your child posts. It does not mean you have to "tag" every photo your child is in. It just means you have to be nearby, online. Isn't that the heart of parenting anyway – being near your children?

<u>DO NOT OVER REACT</u>. Remember, technology is not the problem. It's the use or abuse of it that can be the problem. Just because you heard a story about some kid in some mid-western state that abused MySpace does not mean that your child will do the same. Just because other teenagers are "sexting" (sending naked pictures of themselves via text) does not mean yours is, or will. When you hear stories of how technology is being abused, talk it through with your kids. Make sure they understand the pitfalls and realize the consequences are real when technology is abused. Just as you would warn them of the dangers of driving, you too need to make sure they understand the dangers online or with various technologies.

<u>DO NOT BE TOO TRUSTING</u>. While overreacting can be a problem, so can too much trust. Just because you have a "good" child, does not mean he/she cannot get in trouble with certain technology. Children, particularly teenagers, are still developing portions of their brain. The common sense and rational portions are still a work in progress. These factors combined with the influence of friends and the ease of access to technology can cause them to go down a road you never dreamed they would. Education will help you know what's out there and what the dangers are. Knowing your child and maintaining an open, close relationship with them will help you keep access as to how they are handling emerging technology. If you are concerned that your child is doing some things online that are inappropriate or destructive, there are accountability websites and keystroke logging software available to help.

<u>GET EDUCATED</u>. Listen to your children and you will learn a lot. They will talk about the latest technology, how they use it or how they want to use it. Ask questions. Get online and "google" to find answers. Go to the store and talk to the employees. Knowledge is power and too often parents are powerless simply because they don't even know what they don't know.

<u>KNOW THEIR FRIENDS</u>. How well do you know their friends? Are they in your home often? Are you creating opportunities where you can interact with them? Are you placing yourself in proximity (even online) to see, hear or read what is going on in their world? Who do they email or text regularly? If you do not know their closest friends, you do not know who is influencing them, positively and negatively.

<u>GET PASSWORDS</u>. This is a controversial suggestion but one that I firmly believe can make a huge difference in the protection of your child. Having a child's password gives you access to their online world. If they argue about giving it to you, that's probably a good indication they are probably doing or saying something they shouldn't be. It doesn't mean you have to read their mail, but if you wanted to – you could. Some would be quick to say, "Isn't that an invasion of their privacy?" If you are financing any aspect of their life, you have the right to see what they are involved in. Obtaining an online password is just like doing a random drug test. Privacy is an earned freedom after a proven track record of wise behavior. The more responsible your child is and proves to be, the more freedoms he/she should be given.

<u>BE YOURSELF</u>. You will never be as "cool" as your kids. The only way you will be hip again is when you get yours replaced. Don't try to be their "BFF," just be their parent who cares enough to try and engage them on their turf. Don't comment on every picture they post or "like" every status update. Don't respond to every tweet or try to get in on every chat. Be yourself. After all, you are the only parent they have. Do not trade down your elite position by trying to be their friend. They have enough of those.