Anywhere at any time or everywhere all the time?

It seems hard to believe that iPads came onto the market as recently as May 2010. In less than five years these particular mobile devices, other electronic tablets and “smart” telephones have become so much a part of our lives that we find it difficult to remember how we ever existed without them, five years ago. They have enabled us with potential to be in easy electronic contact, access emails at any time, text a thought in a moment, send a selfie of our lunch before eating it or while standing in front of a parked Ferrari (that’s as close as I get to them - others may be more fortunate).

The challenge for us all is to understand how to incorporate this technology into our lives rather than have it running our lives. It should be supporting what we do, not intruding and dominating us. In a short period of time the ability to have access to information and communication anywhere at any time has become more demanding than convenient. It has become more of a case of connection everywhere, all the time. There is no time to switch off, enjoy a moment or even a whole morning without interruption. We have to take control of this, especially with our children to enable a separation from the technology maintaining connections with each other, their parents and families as well as others by conventional means.

We have to manage the technology and teach our children how to do this. The difficulty with this is that we (adults) are making it up as we go along. The technology changes so quickly with new means of connection appearing as an app on a mobile device, Facebook became “old hat” for teenagers as soon as their parents worked out how to use it and adults felt it was a fabulous way to communicate with old and new friends. In the absence of a full understanding of how digital interaction works in the so-called “social media” and the implications of this on other aspects of our lives it is clear we are moving in unchartered waters.

To address this problem we have to revert to basic principles of good manners, positive relationships and self-regulation. We do not need to devise an elaborate protocol outlining expectation for the use of mobile devices. We all need to have better self-regulation and self-discipline to ensure we do not let mobile devices rule our lives. Common courtesy, patience and polite interactions associated with positive relationships are at the heart of this.

In our community we can do a lot to help our children with this problem. Managing use of devices at home rather than an open approach (like the restrictions on television watching enforced in homes 30 years ago), keeping devices out of the bedroom (especially overnight), buying your son or daughter a watch (so they don’t have to check their phone for the time) as well as demonstrating self-discipline ourselves with the devices are all ways we can help. Our challenge is to ensure that mobile electronic devices enabling communication for social or business purposes anywhere at any time do not take over our lives to become devices demanding contact everywhere and all of the time. They are a tool, we must not be a slave to them. Mobile devices are here to stay so we have to learn to deal with them.

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Dr Peter Miller