The virtual family: Does technology help or hinder family life?
A recent study by the Barna Institute finds technology's impact on family life depends on existing dynamics within the household – on its own, technology is neither good nor bad.

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The Family and Technology Report, a May 2011 study by the Barna Institute, a California-based research group, finds digital technology "seems to amplify the relational patterns and problems already in place: families that have healthy and frequent conversations find technology aiding that process, while families without such healthy interactions find that technology exacerbates the isolation of its members." [1]

The study looks at how technology shapes parent-child relationships. The results show that while parents use technology as much as their children and see it as having either a positive or neutral effect on family life, they feel there is not enough coaching available on how to best integrate technology into the home.

The challenge for some is with establishing limits, as younger family members often have an advantage over their parents when it comes to understanding the new digital reality. [2]

This is a potentially concerning change from a family dynamic where parents create and control the climate of the home – part of which is regulating how digital technology is used in that environment.
So as technology becomes more prevalent in the home, how can parents knowledgeably set fair rules about what is acceptable and what is not when it comes to browsing, plugging in, and tuning out?

It is an important question, and one the American families the Barna study surveyed admit they are struggling to answer. Guidance is lacking, they say, from organizations like churches or schools to help them navigate the new and, for some, mysterious world of digital life. It is likely a similar reality in Canada, where 79 per cent of households have internet access. [3]

But as in other areas of family life, parents have the ability and responsibility to establish rules – rules that set healthy limits. Limits on using technology might define how much time is allowed with digital devices, what sorts of content are acceptable, and who gets to use what and when and how often.

Perhaps it is an obvious conclusion, but research suggests the intentional, direct involvement of parents in monitoring their children's use of media is the best way to regulate the use of technology within the household. [4]

This regulation is further enabled when parents understand the technologies they are trying to control. As the Barna study points out, there is increasing technological literacy among parents surveyed, who are just as reliant on technology as their children. More responsible use of media happens when parents and youth are monitoring each other to ensure family rules are followed and enforced. [5]

And monitoring matters: overuse of digital technology can be harmful to family life. Consequences of being constantly connected include creating family conflict, addiction to technology, and work overload by being at the office remotely via mobile devices. Household friction can emerge when mobile phone users, for example, multitask by checking email, rather than being fully present in a family situation such as sitting down for dinner. [6]

In the absence of clear limits on quantity and content consumption, technology addicts neglect their families and themselves: "... the increased and invasive nature of use (in bed, while on vacation, etc.) can exacerbate conflicts inside families because less time is spent on family activities, and more is devoted to interacting with the technology." [7]

Healthy limits mean being in control of technology. It's about parents and caregivers embracing their responsibility to set limits for their children and themselves. Technology can bring families together, where family members intentionally work within clearly identified household rules. Technology can be channelled, if families are careful, as a facilitator of good communication and quality time spent together, rather than as a distracting force pushing people apart.

Endnotes

[1] Barna Group. (2011). How technology is influencing families. Retrieved June 14 from http://www.barna.org/family-kids-articles/488-how-technology-is-influencing-families.
[2] Tapscott, D. (2009). *Grown up digital: how the net generation is changing your world.* Toronto: McGraw Hill, p. 28.
[3] Statistics Canada. (2010). Canadian internet use survey. *The Daily*. Retrieved June 6, 2011 from http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/110525/t110525b1-eng.htm
[4] Whitefield, N. and Schwartz, K. (2008). *The wired world of families: Youth, their parents, and the media.* Ottawa: Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. Retrieved June 6, 2011 from http://www.imfcanada.org/article_files/e.pdf
[5] *Ibid*.
[6] Turel, O., Serenko, A., Bontis, N. (March 2011). Family and work-related consequences of addiction to organizational pervasive technologies. *Information & Management*, 48 (2-3), pp. 88-95.
[7] *Ibid*.