



MODULE FOUR

Managing the Digital World

Contents

Preface	3
Glossary of Terms	4
Chapter Thirty-Six	5
The Attraction and Impact of the Digital World.....	5
<i>Seeking Truth, Goodness, Beauty</i>	6
<i>What Went Wrong?</i>	6
<i>Tackling the Issue</i>	7
<i>Reflection Questions</i>	8
<i>Notes</i>	9
Chapter Thirty-Seven.....	10
Principles for Helping Our Children Manage the Digital World.....	10
<i>Foundational Principles of Engagement</i>	11
<i>Reflection Questions</i>	12
<i>Notes</i>	13
Chapter Thirty-Eight	14
Helping Our Children Manage Screen Time	14
<i>Overview of the Issue</i>	15
<i>Issues with Excessive Screen Time</i>	15
<i>Professional Recommendations</i>	15
<i>Guiding Principles</i>	16
<i>Practical Tips</i>	16
<i>Reflection Questions</i>	18
<i>Resources</i>	18
<i>Notes</i>	19
Chapter Thirty-Nine	20
Managing Digital Devices.....	20
<i>The Need to Manage Devices</i>	21
<i>Good Servants</i>	21
<i>Quick Tips</i>	22
<i>Reflection Questions</i>	24
<i>Notes</i>	25
Chapter Forty	26

How to Protect our Children Online	26
<i>A Rough Neighbourhood</i>	27
<i>Practical Steps</i>	27
<i>What About Other Devices?</i>	28
<i>Ultimate Protection</i>	29
<i>Reflection Questions</i>	30
<i>Resources</i>	30
<i>Notes</i>	31
Chapter Forty-One.....	32
Protecting Our Children From Pornography.....	32
<i>The Problem with Pornography</i>	33
<i>Practical Steps</i>	34
<i>Reflection Questions</i>	36
<i>Resources</i>	36
<i>Notes</i>	37
Chapter Forty-Two.....	38
Let's Talk About Sexting.....	38
<i>Defining the Problem</i>	39
<i>Vulnerability</i>	39
<i>Practical Steps</i>	39
<i>What if..?</i>	41
<i>Reflection Questions</i>	41
<i>Notes</i>	42
Chapter Forty-Three	43
T.H.I.N.K. Before We Post.....	43
<i>To Be Wiser and Kinder</i>	44
<i>First Principles</i>	44
<i>Reflection Questions</i>	46
<i>Notes</i>	47

Preface

Welcome to Catholic Parents Online, where we share tips and resources on Catholic parenting. This is brought to you by the Theology of the Body parenting team of the Apostolate for Catholic Truth. Presented with the lens of the Theology of the Body, we will see how we can be a sincere gift of ourselves to our kids, in ways that will help them find true happiness and flourish in accordance with God's wonderful plan for each and every one of them.

This project began as a YouTube and podcast channel for Catholic parents, with various modules covering topics such as the foundations of Catholic parenting, bonding with our children, sexuality education, managing social media and so on. In our hope to help parents optimize its contents, we have developed a handbook to accompany each module.

While the contents of each chapter/episode can be done through print (handbook), video (YouTube) or audio (Podcast) format, depending on each individual's preference, parents now have the opportunity to run through its contents in greater detail through reflection questions at the end of each chapter. These questions are designed to help us assimilate the materials better, whether as individuals, as couples, or as parent support groups in parishes or Church groups.

We hope and pray you will find these handbooks and YouTube and podcast episodes useful. It is our hope and prayer that through these resources, through God's mercy and grace, we will connect better with our children and lead them to where God wants them to be, glorifying God as human persons fully alive in His image and likeness.

Humbly in His Love and Service,

The TOB Parenting Team, Apostolate for Catholic Truth

Glossary of Terms

- AL** **Amoris laetitia** – Pope Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation “The Joy of Love”, 19 March 2016.
- CCC** **Catechism Of The Catholic Church** - Latin text copyright (c) Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Citta del Vaticano 1993.
- EV** **Evangelium vitae** - Pope St John Paul II, Encyclical “The Gospel of Life”, 25 March 1995.
- FC** **Familiaris consortio** - Pope St John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation “On the role of the Christian Family in the Modern World”, 22 November 1981.
- GS** **Gaudium et spes**, “Pastoral Constitution On The Church In The Modern World”, 7 December 1965.
- HV** **Humanae vitae**, - Blessed Pope Paul VI, Encyclical “Of Human Life”, 25 July 1968.
- TMHS** **“The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: Guidelines for Education Within the Family”**, Pontifical Council for the Family, December 8, 1995
- TOB** **Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body**, Michael Waldstein, Pauline Books & Media (2006).

Chapter Thirty-Six

The Attraction and Impact of the Digital World

We cannot deny that the advent of the internet has certainly brought about much good. Yet, many of us are also acutely aware of the dangers that come along with it. And if not managed, these dangers that lurk in the digital world can cause much harm to our children, ourselves and our families.

But why is the digital world so attractive, and sometimes even addictive? What is its impact on ourselves and our children?

We suggest answers to these questions, and introduce our series on helping our children manage the digital world.

[Watch the YouTube video here](#)



Seeking Truth, Goodness, Beauty

Why are we so attracted to the digital world? Whether it is Facebook, Instagram or Twitter, or gaming, or movies? We want to check on the latest news of what is happening in the world as well as what is happening in other people's lives around us.

We want to do good by fighting the bad guys and saving the world in the games that we play, we like to watch movies where good triumphs over evil, and we are always enthralled by beauty that we see in various forms of media, beauty that we hear in music (in games and yes, even *Baby Shark*, which I have listened to countless times with our grandchildren), and beauty that we see in various aspects of nature, whether it is a double rainbow, a glorious sunrise or sunset, and so on.

Why are we so attracted to these? I would suggest that it is because, deep down inside each and every one of us, we are looking for what is true, what is good and what is beautiful. We are looking for God, Who is absolute truth, beauty and goodness.

What Went Wrong?

Then how did things become so bad with issues such as **pornography** and gaming addiction? In addition, **studies** have also linked the use of social media to depression, anxiety, poorer sleep quality, lower self-esteem, inattention, and hyperactivity — often in teens and adolescents.

In one **survey** of respondents aged 16 to 24 years old, between 79 to 86% said that social media affected their happiness, self-esteem, anxiety, loneliness, and depression.

What went wrong? For one, our desires, when rightly ordered, should direct ourselves to God. But because of our human weakness, we tend to misdirect our desires. Instead of seeing the human body as a wondrous image of God and a call to communion, a call to love as God loves in a gift of self, we tend to lust and use others' bodies for our own gratification.

Secondly, while it may not be wrong to participate in social media and gaming in themselves, the lack of virtues such as temperance and prudence can result in our spending far too much time in these areas, to the neglect of others.

Thirdly, all of us need affirmation of our goodness, being made in the image and likeness of God. If our children do not get enough of this in the right way from us, they will start looking for it elsewhere, and sometimes unfortunately, in all the wrong places and in all the wrong faces. Sometimes it might even result in them posting compromising pictures of themselves, being subjected to sexual grooming and abuse, and even becoming victims of cyberbullying. The list can go on. And it is unlikely to get any better with the advent of the Metaverse.

Finally, it is a fact that social media platforms are designed to be addictive. They are designed by experts who know how to get users hooked. The bottom line for them is this — the more users are hooked onto their platforms and games, the more money they generate.

Many tech executives know that. In fact, it has been reported that tech moguls like Steve Jobs and Bill Gates seldom let their kids play with the very products they helped create. Even the CEOs of Snapchat and Google's parent company have been reported to **significantly limit** their children's screen time.

Tackling the Issue

What can we do when faced with this predicament that is the digital world?

For a start, the last thing we should ever do is to stick our head in the sand, pretending that nothing is amiss, and hoping that bad things will just pass our children by. The digital world is a reality that is here to stay. As parents, we must take it by its horns and manage it in a way that makes it a good servant. Otherwise, it will turn out to be the nastiest master we will ever know.

With that, we begin our journey into managing the digital world. In the next chapter, we will share the principles for engaging our children and helping them on this journey in managing the digital world. Following that, we will cover topics including screen time, accountability, pornography, sexting and more.

Reflection Questions

1. Do I think my child spends too much time on the internet and social media?
2. What do I think my child is looking for when using social media?
3. Do I spend too much time with social media myself?
4. How can I be a better role model to my child?

Notes

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Principles for Helping Our Children Manage the Digital World

Managing the digital world ourselves is in itself a challenging enterprise. What more with our children? In this chapter, we cover the basic principles of engagement with our children in managing digital media, so that they can do so as safely and responsibly as possible.

[Watch the YouTube video here](#)



Foundational Principles of Engagement

As with sexuality education, we cannot hope to teach our children well until and unless we have established a **good connection** with them. If you have not done so, I will encourage you to revisit our earlier chapters on bonding with our children, namely chapters 8 to 17.

In particular, be present to your children always, and cultivate an environment that fosters open, honest and warm communication with your children.

1. Be **role models** for your children. If we do not want them to spend too much time on social media, then neither should we, whether it be Facebook, YouTube or any other platform. Show them what it means to use the internet responsibly and optimally.
2. Continue to **build up their self-worth**. Affirm them often, so that they can be less vulnerable to bullying, grooming and other forms of manipulation online by others with nefarious intentions. You may wish to revisit episode 8 in this series to build on this.
3. Disciple our children in the **virtues**. We covered this somewhat in chapter 11 when we touched on the topic of discipline. Our children need virtues such as temperance, fortitude, prudence and justice to help them navigate the digital world wisely and well.
4. Build on our **marriage** so that as better lovers, we can be better parents, supporting each other and consistent in the setting up and implementation of rules in our household. You may wish to refer to chapter 6, which discusses this topic.
5. Encourage our children to engage in more **physical activities**, outdoor games, and face-to-face interactions, rather than allowing excessive online use. Our children want to have fun and meaningful activities. Let them have it. Give them good and fun options in these areas through family and outdoor games and activities. Cultivate these from as young as possible.
6. Take an **active interest** in what our children are saying and playing and doing in the digital world. By this, I do not mean for us to be nosy and to intrude into their privacy regardless of their feelings. Rather, we can check in on them often. Placing and using devices like the computer and mobile phones in common and high traffic areas such as the living room can help a lot in this. Create opportunities for conversations in

comfortable and cozy settings and find out what is happening in their lives. Chapters 9 and 10 deal more specifically with how we can do so.

7. **Pray always** and let our Lord be our Master and guide us in this journey. Entrust your mission and your children to Him and the prayers of Mother Mary and St Joseph. From young, encourage your children to pray often. Teach them the prayers to St Michael the Archangel and their guardian angel. Immerse them into the life of the Church and in the Word. Like it or not, helping our children safely navigate the world today so that they reach their ultimate destiny in heaven is ultimately a spiritual battle. But with our Lord by our side, there is nothing to fear.

In the following chapters we will cover topics including screen time, accountability, pornography, sexting and more.

Reflection Questions

1. Do I intentionally role model for my children when it comes to managing digital media?
2. Do I make effort and time to bond with my children (see chapters 8 to 17 in handbook 2)?
3. Do my spouse and I make the commitment to build on our marriage?
4. Do my spouse and I agree on a set of household rules to guide our family? Do we make it a point not to contradict each other in front of our children, so that we can become one effective parenting unit?
5. Do I make it a point to provide good alternatives to the internet for our children, such as physical activities outside the house and dedicated time for family bonding?
6. Do I pray for my children and entrust them to our Lord?

Notes

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Helping Our Children Manage Screen Time

In a local survey, more than 60% of parents were not aware of the actual recommendations for physical activity and screen time.

What are the recommendations from professional bodies when it comes to screen time for children? How can we help our children manage screen time?

In this chapter, we address these questions and propose guidelines for parents to follow in our efforts to help our children manage screen time in a healthy way.

[Watch the YouTube video here](#)



Overview of the Issue

One of the biggest challenges we face as parents today is helping our children manage screen time.

In a **local survey**, more than 60% of parents were not aware of the actual recommendations for physical activity and screen time.

95% of preschoolers had an average of two hours per day on weekends, well exceeding the recommendation for this age group.

Issues with Excessive Screen Time

Studies have shown that higher levels of screen time in preschool children were significantly associated with poorer performance on developmental screening tests.

Primary school children who exceeded screen time recommendations scored lower on **cognitive assessments**.

In addition, a combination of excessive screen time and too little sleep has also been associated with heightened **impulsivity** in this age group.

As for **adolescents**, higher levels of screen time have been associated with depressive symptoms, obesity and poorer quality of life.

It also exposes children and young people to more psychological and emotional **harm**, such as cyberbullying, watching violence or pornography, or the need to monitor their online status with their peers (such as the number of 'likes' they are getting for their posts), which can affect their self-esteem significantly.

Professional Recommendations

For **infants and toddlers below 18 months** of age, they are **not supposed to have any recreational screen viewing time**, including background screen time. This does not include online chatting with trusted adults like Grandma and Grandpa.

For children between **18 months to 3 years of age**, they may watch up to a **maximum of one hour of screen time**. Personally, I prefer to divide this into three separate segments throughout the day, so that they are not at it for too long each time. They can also be more aware that there is such a thing as a limit to screen time, and they will accept it better when screen time ends.

Even for children **up to 7 years of age**, recreational screen viewing time should be limited to a **maximum of one hour a day**.

By the time they are 7 years of age, we hope they would be better equipped to manage screen time from their earlier years of formation. The principle then would be to make sure that other **essential activities are attended to first**, before they move on to recreational screen time, and even then within limits agreed upon previously with us.

Guiding Principles

Place **consistent limits** on the time spent using media, and the types of media, and make sure screen time does not compromise adequate sleep time, exercise, family time, schoolwork, and other behaviours essential to our physical, psychological and spiritual well-being.

Work closely with your spouse on this. It is a joint project. This endeavour is tough enough as it is. It can be made a lot worse if spouses contradict each other in front of their children.

Practical Tips

How then can we help our children manage screen time?

1. We know for a fact that **good habits** are best cultivated from as early as possible. It is the same with screen time. We must cultivate good habits from the time our children are young, and do our best to help them adhere to the recommended guidelines for their respective age groups. Be consistent in their implementation.

2. Provide children with **good alternatives** outside of screen time, such as games and physical activities; family time with parents and siblings, both indoor and outdoor; reading good books, and so on. Remember, we cannot deny one thing such as screen time without providing good, viable and enjoyable alternatives.
3. As far as possible, **watch what they are watching**, with them. In addition to helping us supervise their screen time, we can ask questions about the programmes they are watching in order to help in their development of analytical skills, critical thinking, and character formation.

In our home, we prefer to cast or project what is on our phone to the bigger TV screen, so that the children can enjoy screen time together, and with us.

This way, screen time is seen not as an activity that one does alone by withdrawing from others, but a communal activity whereby they can watch these cartoons or animal documentaries together. The kids get to laugh with each other and they talk with each other about the programmes during such screen time. They also take turns to switch the TV on and off when it is time to do so. It is our hope that this will help them develop the virtue of temperance and reinforce the concept that there is such a thing as a limit to screen time. And it helps them get used to the idea of sharing screen time with us, and having conversations around this, even as they grow older.

4. If our children are older and already steeped in unhealthy screen time habits, then we will have to **spend time discussing** it with them. But first, we need to **bond more closely** with them before we can engage them in such discussions. This is covered in **chapters 8 to 17** found in handbook 2. Only then can we broach the subject with them, gently.

We can ask them what their hopes are for themselves, both in the short term and in the long term, how they see themselves achieving their goals, and how unhealthy screen time habits can jeopardise those goals they have set for themselves. This has to be done in a calibrated and tactful manner. We wouldn't want this to cause further strain on our relationship with them if we can help it.

If we find this too challenging to handle by ourselves, we may wish to engage the help of other good friends and relatives whom our kids respect, possibly even professional counsellors. There should be no stigma attached to this. My wife and I have spoken with counsellors ourselves to help us with the challenges we faced as parents.

5. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we must be good role models for them. A **recent study** from Bournemouth University showed that the more addicted the parents to screen time, the stronger their children's compulsions were to the same.

Not only should our kids be accountable to us when it comes to screen time: we too should make ourselves accountable to our kids and to each other in this area.

Before we manage our children's screen time, it might be advisable to reflect on our own first. Do we put away our phones during meals and family times? Do we use our devices when spending time with our spouse and children? Do we make sure we stop using our mobile phones after set periods of time in order to give our attention to other life-enriching activities like prayer, family time, reading some good books, and so on? Or are we constantly on our devices, even and especially when we are with our children and family?

Reflection Questions

1. Am I managing my screen time well? Or do I think I spend too much time on it?
2. Do I intentionally provide my children with good alternatives to screen time such as physical activities outdoors and family time?
3. Do my spouse and I agree on the daily limits to screen time for ourselves and our children in our family?
4. Are my spouse and I consistent in enforcing daily limits to screen time in our family?

Resources

1. [The Singapore Integrated 24-Hour Activity Guidelines for Early Childhood](#)

Notes

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Managing Digital Devices

Studies have shown that excessive media use can lead to attention problems, school difficulties, sleep and eating disorders and obesity. In addition, the Internet and cell phones can provide platforms for illicit and risky behaviours.

How can we help our children manage devices?

We address these questions and propose guidelines for parents to help children manage devices in a safe and responsible way.

[Watch the YouTube video here](#)



The Need to Manage Devices

In the previous chapter, we touched on the management of screen time. In this chapter, we discuss a very closely related topic — how we can help our children manage their use of devices.

As we have shared before, “**Studies** have shown that excessive media use can lead to attention problems, school difficulties, sleep and eating disorders and obesity. In addition, the Internet and cell phones can provide platforms for illicit and risky behaviours.”

How can we help our children manage devices safely?

As always, the first thing we must do is to have a good relationship with our children, namely, affirming them and building in them a good sense of self-esteem, making it a point to be there for them, providing a warm and conducive environment for honest and open communication, and forming them in the virtues, such as temperance, fortitude, and prudence. These were discussed in chapters 8 to 17 found in handbook #2.

Good Servants

The overarching principle in managing devices is this — we want to manage devices in a way that will make them good servants, not bad masters. We should be in control of our devices, not the other way around. And always within reasonable limits and never harming the good, dignity and well-being of ourselves and others. Whether it is for leisure, education, work or connection with others, we use them in a way that can help us become better persons, and facilitate a deeper communion of persons with others.

The bottom line, therefore: devices can be used for good or for bad. The choice is ours to make. Take a knife, for example. It can be used for good in helping us cut food for cooking and fruits to eat. It can even be used to heal when used in surgery. But it can also be used in a way that can harm or even kill ourselves and others.

How then would we introduce our children to using the knife? Would we let our infants and toddlers touch or play with it in any way? No way, right? Even as they grow older, we would teach them and guide them about its uses and dangers before we let them use it, and even

then, in a supervised and calibrated way. We would only let them use a knife independently once they have shown themselves to be able to do so safely and responsibly.

It is the same with digital devices. In fact, the part of our brain that is responsible for the 'higher' brain functions including **decision-making, problem-solving, emotion regulation and impulse control**, the prefrontal cortex, is thought to be properly developed only at around 23 to 25 years of age or so, which means we can be considered more or less mature around that age.

Quick Tips

With the above in mind, here are some tips on the management of devices. These are just some guidelines for your consideration. As parents, you would probably be best placed to know when and how to implement the measures needed.

1. **Avoid using a digital device as a babysitter for children.** Children below the age of 18 months of age should not be given recreational screen time.
2. **Avoid using digital devices to calm children**, as this can lead to problems with the child's own ability with setting limits as well as processing and managing emotions.
3. **Set up clear rules and time limits on media usage.** The younger they are, the less access. A child's brain develops rapidly during the early years, and young children learn best by interacting with people, not screens.
4. **Always praise and encourage self-control** when children demonstrate it.

The younger our children are when using devices, the more we should be supervising them.

5. **Avoid giving primary schoolchildren personal mobile devices with internet access.** You can be sure their teachers will be able to reach you anytime if they need to. At this stage, we should try to sit down with our children when using devices, teach them how to use these responsibly, and help them learn the skills and strategies they need to do so. This will help them prepare for the time when they can have their own devices as they

grow older.

Even if they do need phones with internet access for school purposes, say for chat groups, and we are not comfortable with letting them have a smartphone or other device all to themselves, we can consider letting them use one of our own, at certain periods of time, and to which we should have access as part of accountability. After all, the device does belong to us. It can then be returned by a certain time and kept with us for the night.

When it comes to family rules for managing devices, it is good for us to explain to our kids in age-appropriate ways, that our main objective is not to restrict them, but to help them. Explain the *reasons* behind the rules, so they don't seem so arbitrary. You may want to share with them stories of how others have been hurt badly by improper use of devices and social media, such as becoming victims of cyberbullying, sexting and so on. Now when it comes to enforcing the rules, both parents must be consistent — and consistent too in meting out disciplinary measures when these rules have been broken, for example, implementing time out from using devices if they have not been used responsibly.

Once they enter secondary school, we may consider providing our children with a mobile phone, but with the following considerations:

1. Start with dumb phones with no internet access. If they need internet access, they can use the computer at home, during the designated times for such use. In this way, they can also develop temperance and learn how to use their devices in a measured and responsible way.

Once they show us that they are responsible with the use of their devices, we can over time gradually let them use phones with internet access.

2. **Place computers and tablets in common and prominent spaces in the house,** in full view of and frequented by other family members, such as the living room and the dining area. Do not allow devices to be used in children's own rooms.

3. **Be firm about device-free times in the family,** for example, at mealtimes, during family activities, and so on. I have heard of families that go for walks in the park or outings to the beach without their mobile phones, to ensure that their attention will be on each other and

not on their devices. Some have even instituted device-free days such as Sundays so that they can focus their attention on other important aspects of life, such as church, family outings, and personal reflection time. Some parents even designate a time in the evening when all members of the family, including themselves, put away their devices in a common area, so that from that time on, they are not distracted by these.

4. Protect our devices. We will discuss the various ways and levels of protection in chapter 40.

5. Be good role models for our kids when using our devices. *Monkey see, monkey do.* Our children learn best from the example we give.

6. Finally, remember to **pray always** and entrust our children and our endeavours to our Lord. Without Him, we can do nothing right; neither can our children.

Reflection Questions

1. Are we ourselves in control of our devices, or are we controlled by them?
2. Do we place our computers and tablets in common and prominent spaces in the house?

Notes

Chapter Forty

How to Protect our Children Online

While the internet has brought much benefit, there are also many dangers that lurk in there, ready to pounce on our unsuspecting children if we do not put measures in place to protect them online.

While no method is perfect, there are many measures we can take as parents to protect our children in the digital era. We discuss the various levels of protection and security we can put in place to do just that, and keep our children as safe as we possibly can in the rapidly evolving world that is the internet.

[Watch the YouTube video here](#)



A Rough Neighbourhood

As a young child, I grew up with my family in a rented two-bedroom apartment in a rather rough neighbourhood. Some people called it the wild, wild west of Singapore at that time.

Fights occurred downstairs, and these were not infrequent. I remember the sound of glass bottles crashing late at night. I was told there were gangs in the area. We had good neighbours, but there were also some who seemed a little bit shady, and I remember one who tried to introduce me to smoking while I was still in primary school.

It was not the safest of environments, and I remember our parents laying down ground rules for us:

- we had to be back by a certain time before things became more dangerous at night;
- we could play with our neighbours, but only with those whom my parents knew and were comfortable with;
- our gate was locked all the time, and sometimes our door as well.
- we were not to enter certain neighbours' homes without permission.

We knew these rules were put in place because our parents cared for us, and wanted us to be safe where we lived.

It is the same with the digital world. If we are not careful, and allow our children to be exposed to anything and anyone out there, the consequences can be severe, and dire, for them.

We need to lock our gates, lock our doors — double-lock sometimes — and put in place various measures to protect our children from the dangers that lurk in the internet.

Practical Steps

Allow me to share a few tips on the various levels of security that we can put into our homes, so that our children can enjoy the benefits of the internet as safely as possible.

At the first level is the **internet service provider**. Most, if not all, have various degrees of security that we can place on the content that enters our homes and devices. Check their

websites and speak to their customer service officers to see what you can do to filter objectionable content at this level.

At the second level is the **wireless router** at home. Most if not all router systems today allow for the administrator, i.e. parents, to set a security level to filter content that we think is inappropriate for our kids, depending on their age.

At the third level are the **devices** that we and our children use — our phones, tablets, laptops, and so on. It is good to install some **accountability software** in these **devices**, whereby we can all be accountable to each other. Sure, as administrators, we can and should know what websites our children may be looking at, but it is good to let our children know the sites we have been surfing through ourselves. This demonstrates the concept of mutual accountability, that we are all accountable to each other in the family, and we are not merely exercising parental controls for the sake of merely restricting their enjoyment.

What About Other Devices?

Then again, besides the devices that our family use, there is the possibility, or rather probability, that they might be using other devices that do not have the same protection as ours, such as those belonging to schoolmates, friends and relatives whom we might visit, and yes, grandparents too.

What can we do to protect them in such situations?

Here are some possible options:

1. Check with the friends and relatives whom we visit if they have those layers of protection that we have in our own household. If yes, good. If not, encourage them to install these. If they do not wish to do so, then we may want to advise our children not to use those unprotected devices.
2. If Grandpa and Grandma are not familiar with these layers of protection, perhaps we can help them with installing these in their homes and devices too.

Ultimate Protection

Over and above all these measures to protect our children, perhaps the most important one is the parent-child relationship. As parents we want our children to feel secure and develop good self-esteem. We want to develop a good relationship whereby our kids are encouraged, and feel safe, to talk with us freely, with the assurance that they will not be slighted or condemned for sharing with us mistakes they might have made, or objectionable sites they might have stumbled upon.

Process this with them, find out how and why certain things might have happened the way they did, and discuss with them how we can avoid such situations in future. The underlying message we want to share with our children is this – *we love you. You can turn to us if you encounter any trouble or you have any questions. We are here for you, and we want to help you. Let us journey through this together, with each other, for each other.*

Do this calmly. Is it easy? Not at all. Have I made mistakes myself? Absolutely! That's why we are so totally dependent on God in our mission as Catholic parents.

This leads us to our final point: remember always to **pray** for ourselves and our children. As with everything else, we cannot do anything right without God's mercy, grace and guidance.

What I have outlined is only a very brief sketch of what we can do to protect our children online. To find out even more, I would like to encourage you to watch or listen to a podcast in which Jason Evert spoke with Chris McKenna about the various layers we can use to protect our children online. Chris is the founder of protectyoungeyes.com, a very good website which also has an app to help parents on this journey. I have provided a link to this podcast in the resource section below.

Let us ask ourselves if we would like to invest in measures to protect our children online, if we have not already done so. Is there anything else we should do?

Reflection Questions

1. Are my children's devices protected adequately?
2. What are the layers of digital protection I have put in my house?
3. Are these adequate?
4. Should I invest in further measures to protect our children online?
5. Do I communicate regularly with my children about what they do online?

Resources

1. **The 5 Levels of Online Safety**, Jason Evert ([podcast](#))

Notes

Chapter Forty-One

Protecting Our Children From Pornography

Pornography is a multi-billion-dollar industry that has devastated individuals, marriages, and families.

As parents, we cannot but be concerned about the negative impact of pornography on our children.

We discuss what we as Catholic parents can do to protect our children from the scourge of pornography.

[Watch the YouTube video here](#)



The Problem with Pornography

Many of us probably know the harmful effects of pornography on our children. It is a multi-billion-dollar industry that has devastated individuals, marriages, and families.

According to the American College of Paediatricians, “consumption of pornography is associated with many negative emotional, psychological, and physical health outcomes. These include increased rates of depression, anxiety, acting out and violent behaviour, younger age of sexual debut, sexual promiscuity, increased risk of teen pregnancy, and a distorted view of relationships between men and women.”

Voyeurism, such as taking upskirt photos, is a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly prevalent and worrying, and many, if not all, voyeurs have been heavy users of pornography too.

Yet perhaps the most objectionable aspect of pornography is how it causes us to regard people as objects for our own gratification rather than persons who, made in the image and likeness of God, are meant to be loved and not to be used.

As Pope St John Paul II said, “The problem with pornography is not that it shows too much of the person, but that it shows far too little.”

How prevalent is pornography among our children?

A survey in 2016 indicated that 91 percent of teenage boys and 35 percent of teenage girls in Singapore had watched or read sexually explicit materials within the previous year.

By now, the statistics are likely to be worse.

The ease of access to online pornography and the easy availability of digital devices has made it that much more difficult to protect our children from accessing its harmful content. I have often remarked to my wife how easy it would have been for me to go the wrong way if I were a teen in today’s world.

Practical Steps

What then can we do to protect our children from the scourge of pornography?

It won't be easy, but our children are worth whatever it takes to help them live the meaning of their bodies according to God's design; to help them appreciate and live human love in the divine plan.

Allow me to propose the following for your consideration.

- 1. We need a good parent-child bond.** For this reason, I invite you to visit episodes 8 to 17 of this series, if you haven't done so, where we discussed the ABCs of bonding with our children, and episodes 18 to 26 where we discussed the topic of talking to them about sexuality.
- 2. Affirm them of their goodness.** God doesn't make junk. They need to know they are good; they are unique, they are irreplaceable. And others are too, since we are all made in the image and likeness of God. This leads us to:
- 3. Show and teach them respect** and love for others, from as early as possible.
- 4. Do not indulge their wants**, always giving them whatever they want in an instant. It is important for them to learn delayed gratification, and gradually develop the virtue of temperance.
- 5. Set up filters and accountability software** in our homes and devices.
- 6. Make use of teachable moments** when these present themselves, e.g. when watching TV together and certain scenes pop up; reading newspaper articles with them; or observing events that have happened to people around us. These chats do not have to be long. They should be just enough to communicate the main message. Children learn better with frequent short chats, and not long chats that are far and few between.
- 7. Create a home environment that promotes open, honest and warm communication** with our children from young. Provide them with a safe space that encourages them to share anything with us without feeling condemned. Remember, while

we may provide an environment at home that filters out pornography, they are still in contact with friends and relatives outside who may not have the same level of protection. It is possible they might still be exposed in one way or another. This leads us to the next point.

8. **Encourage them that should they come across pictures of nudity or people who are inappropriately dressed, in any form of media, they should guard their eyes, put these aside and let us know.** When they do tell us, do not reprimand them, or they may never report this to us again. Instead, we thank them for bringing this up to us, then seek to understand the circumstances in which this happened, which is often accidental in the first instance, and even traumatic to their young eyes. Tell them that they should “give those persons their privacy” and that the private parts shown should remain private for that person, and not to be seen by others. Then let them know we are there to love them, support them, and journey with them, and share with them how they can avoid such exposure in future. It is always important to let them know we are there for them, and with them.
9. **Be good role models for our children,** in how we respect and regard others, how we look at women, how we love each other and people around us, and how we use our devices. Whatever we say and do in these areas, we can be sure our children are watching and learning.
10. **Pray always for our children.** I remember I was exposed to so many negative influences outside the home when I was young — bad company, friends who cracked obscene jokes whenever the opportunity presented, a neighbour who tried to introduce me to smoking, gang fights that happened fairly frequently downstairs from where we lived. I do not know how I managed to survive all these. I can only attribute it to my mother’s constant prayers for my siblings and me, and God’s abundant mercy and grace, no less.

Indeed it is God’s grace that we must rely on to help us survive parenting in the digital era.

Reflection Questions

1. Have I installed adequate filters in my house and in the devices our family use?
2. Do I myself struggle with the issue of pornography? If so, am I prepared to seek help to overcome this?
3. Do I provide a home environment that promotes open, honest and warm communication with my children?
4. Do I pray for my children every day?

Resources

1. **STRIVE: 21-Day Porn Detox** — Join Matt Fradd and a community of brothers in discovering the keys to living porn-free.
2. **Forged** is a 33-day exercise designed to purify, heal, and strengthen a man, gradually replacing old vices with new virtues.
3. **What's the BIG DEAL with Pornography?**, Dr Christopher West
4. **Theology of the Body and Porn: A Conversation With Dr Christopher West**, *Covenant Eyes*
5. **Q+A with Jason Evert on Pornography**, *Integrity Restored*
6. **The Victory App**: for quitting porn and protecting the ones you love.
7. **Catholic Family Life Therapy Services**, Main line: (65) 6488 0278

Notes

Chapter Forty-Two

Let's Talk About Sexting

Sexting is a rather new phenomenon that has arisen among the young over the past 10 to 15 years or so, and which has rightfully sparked concern among parents.

How prevalent is it? Why do teens engage in it in the first place? We discuss what we as Catholic parents can do to protect our children from this disconcerting phenomenon.

[Watch the YouTube video here](#)



Defining the Problem

There is a rather new phenomenon that has arisen among the young over the past 10 to 15 years or so, and which has rightfully sparked concern among parents. I am referring to sexting - the sending of sexually explicit digital images, videos, text messages, or emails, usually by mobile phone.

According to a **meta-analysis** published in 2018 in the paediatric edition of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, “consensual sexting is becoming a more common practice among youth”, with 14.8% of youth sending sexts, and 27.4% receiving sexts. It added that “higher prevalence rates were found in more recent studies.”

This means it is likely these figures have risen even further since then.

Vulnerability

Why do teens engage in sexting in the first place?

Often it boils down to a poor sense of self-esteem, resulting in them becoming more likely to succumb to pressure, whether from friends or romantic crushes, or even cyberbullying, into sending compromising pictures of themselves. Sometimes they do it to obtain some form of self-validation, to feel wanted, to feel accepted, to feel loved. Isn't this a basic desire that is found in all of us — to be seen, to be wanted, to be loved?

Practical Steps

What can we as parents do to protect our kids from this?

1. It is important, very important, to help them **develop a good sense of self-esteem** through appropriate and constant **affirmation** of their God-given worth and goodness. They need to know they are loved for who they are, not for what they can do. They need to know they are good, very good, that they are unique, indispensable, irreplaceable.

2. **Talk to them regularly**, from young and in an age-appropriate manner, about the various phenomena and dangers in the digital world. Keep these channels of **communication** open and safe, so that they feel confident in approaching us with any concerns they may have, or anything that may have happened to them, knowing that we are there for them, a source of information, wisdom and support they can turn to when needed. I find that having casual chats with them at their favourite cafe, fast food place, or ice cream joint helps them to relax and feel more at ease in talking to us about the things that are going on in their lives. Let's try having these parent-child dates at least once a week.
3. **Share with them stories** that we come across in the media, about the consequences and problems faced from sexting. Besides it being against the law to send sexually explicit material, they must assume that every image or video of themselves will be seen by everyone else, including their friends, their teachers, and future employers. And these images may never, ever be erased from the internet.
4. **Install filtering and accountability software** in our children's **devices**. Not so much to control what they do, but more so to protect them by preventing sexually explicit images from being sent or received. In addition, it gives us an idea as to what sites they have been surfing and what apps they have been using, which provides us with the opportunities to chat with them about their interactions with the internet and social media, again in a comfortable and safe setting.
5. Form them from young to **respect the beauty and dignity of the human body**. Like **pornography**, sexting violates the dignity of the person by making him or her merely an object of lust, to be used for our selfish gratification, rather than one to be respected and loved, being made in the image and likeness of God.

What if..?

Now, what if they have already engaged in sexting? Well, as always, keep our calm, no matter how upset or frustrated we might be. **Report it** to the website or apps where the image is posted. Try to have it removed as soon as possible. If needed, report it to the police, especially if we suspect blackmailing, cyberbullying or harassment is involved.

No matter what happens, let us continue to support our children through thick and thin. The journey may not be the easiest for us. There will be pain. There will be tears, but our children are worth every bit of our blood, our sweat, our tears, just as Jesus gave every ounce of Himself to us on the cross. Sometimes it might help to **engage other adults** whom we and our children respect. If necessary, we may even consider bringing in professionals such as counsellors, psychologists and so on.

Finally, remember as always to **pray and fast for our children**. The challenges today are extraordinary, and we cannot do without God in our lives. Neither can our children.

Perhaps we could ask ourselves this question: *have we affirmed our children enough so that they will feel less inclined to seek acceptance and validation elsewhere? Do we make it a point to love them for who they are and not merely for what they can do?*

Reflection Questions

1. Have I made it a habit to affirm my child regularly?
2. Do I make it a point to love each child for who he/she is and not merely for what he/she can do?
3. Have I installed adequate accountability software in our family devices?
4. Do I make it a point to instill in my children a healthy respect for the beauty and dignity of the human body?

Notes

Chapter Forty-Three

T.H.I.N.K. Before We Post

Social media is replete with numerous posts that are untrue, unkind and even unbecoming. It is so easy for us and our children to fall into this trap, if we do not think first and discern what and how we should post on social media platforms.

In this chapter, we discuss 3 broad principles that will help us guide our children in using such platforms safely, properly and responsibly.

[Watch the YouTube video here](#)



To Be Wiser and Kinder

How can we help our children be wiser and kinder in what they post on social media?

First Principles

For a start, here are a few pertinent points from what we learned in the **Theology of the Body** to guide us in this endeavour.

1. We are made in the image and likeness of God, Who is love; in fact, an eternal communion, an eternal exchange of love in the Holy Trinity;
2. As bodily and spiritual beings, we express this spiritual reality in and through our bodies. Since we are made in His image, we are called to loving communion, to be a gift to each other, to give and to receive love in and through our bodies, in the way we communicate with each other, through our thoughts, our words, and our actions;
3. This love is not a fuzzy, feel-good sentiment of sorts, but a decision, a commitment to will the good of another. And what is the greatest good that we can wish for another? That he or she be united with God; one great way is for them to experience God through us: in the way we communicate with them, the way we connect with them, even through social media.

With this in mind, here are 3 main points that we can share with our children when talking with them about their postings on social media. These are:

1. THINK before you post
2. How can we stay safe?
3. Does it glorify God?

Let's talk about the first point — T.H.I.N.K. before you post. By this, I am using THINK as an acronym. What do the letters THINK stand for?

“**T**” challenges us to check if the information we receive is **true**, or otherwise. I am sure we are aware of the tremendous amount of fake news out there in social media. Thus, it is important that we check on the veracity of the information that people send to us, or that we read on the internet. Encourage our children to check on the information from reliable news agencies, journals, with other respectable adults or with us, before they forward it or re-post it on their profiles.

“**H**” asks us if what we intend to post is **helpful**, before we actually post it. In other words, does it build a communion of persons? Or does it destroy it?

“**I**” encourages us to ask if a posting is **inspiring**, before we send it out.

“**N**” asks us if a posting is **necessary**. Very often, we are tempted to forward many messages from friends, relatives and other contacts. I am sure you would have asked this same question as I have: “Was it really necessary to do so?”

And then “**K**” reminds us to be **kind** in what we say on social media. Do our words affirm others in their worth and goodness, or do we use words that are hurtful? In this day and age, it is rather commonplace to see nasty posts and comments from people, especially if they think they can remain anonymous behind their screens.

Having gone through the acronym “**THINK**”, I think another good question for our children to continually ask themselves is this: **will this post keep us safe?** We have discussed **sexting**, the sending of sexually explicit materials through digital media. This is certainly one easy way to get ourselves in trouble. Besides getting into trouble with the law, these materials can be disseminated widely at the click of a mouse or a touch of a button, and these images will likely end up in the wrong hands, with the wrong people, and may never ever be erased from the internet.

There are other ways in which our children’s posts may get them into harm’s way. One example is making their addresses, the buses they take and at what time, and their personal particulars easily available for others to see. There have been many examples of young people who have been accosted by strangers, including sexual predators. This is also a reason why we are extremely careful when posting pictures and information of ourselves, our kids and our grandchildren on social media platforms.

Finally, let us ask ourselves one more question before we post something on social media: **does this post glorify God** by promoting what is true, good and beautiful? Or is it merely an endeavour to glorify ourselves instead? Does it help in building God's kingdom, or does it not? Will my post touch others in a way that will draw them nearer to God, or will it not?

Summary

1. THINK before we post
2. Stay safe on the internet and social media, and
3. Let us be instruments to bring God to others, and others to God.

Reflection Questions

1. Am I a good role model for my children through my posts on social media?
2. Do I discuss with my children the merits (or otherwise) of their posts on social media?
3. How can I help my children to be safe as they navigate the digital world?

Notes