Building Children’s Social Skills and Interpersonal Relationships in the “Techno Generation”

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- One of the best predictors for a developing child to become a healthy functioning adult is the amount of social competency one acquires as a child.
- Communication is essential to good interpersonal relations and social competency. Communication is what sets us apart from other life forms. It allows us to collaborate, problems solve, influence, empathize, and instruct.
- Social skills imply interpersonal communication but in our current age of technology we seem to be dealing more with inter-machine communication. Interpersonal behaviors includes eye contact, gestures such as handshakes, use of personal space and other nonverbal actions such as facial expressions, posture, etc. Considering how much time our children spend in front of some kind of a screen (i.e., computer, tablet, phone, etc.) valuable aspects of our children’s social skills development may be jeopardized. Think about how long you can go in a day without having any kind of face to face interaction with a person (ATM, self serve gas, grocery store, on-line shopping, customer service, etc.)
- What interpersonal skills are potentially on the “endangered species” list? Consider the following.
  ✓ In our quest for instant information, it now seems acceptable to disrupt our sustained focus on our communication partner when we divert our attention to look at an incoming text, email, or answer our cell phone.
  ✓ We tend to reinforce an immature desire to get an immediate response to our questions and demands versus waiting to learn an answer at a more acceptable time.
  ✓ The art of small talk and chit chat may be in jeopardy as we engage in less and less face to face time.
  ✓ Avoiding actual conversation is becoming more popular. How many of us prefer to leave a “voicemail” or text versus taking the time to engage in actual verbal exchanges on the phone?
  ✓ “Child’s play” looks, sounds and feels different these days. As our children are engaged in more organized activities at an earlier age, free play in the neighborhood with kids of varying ages occurs less and less at the expense of developing and practicing valuable creative, collaborative, and cooperative interpersonal skills. Also consider how much “interactive play” involves screen time and maybe with other players who are miles away?
- What inter-machine concepts do we want our kids develop?
  ➢ The power and lasting impression of the written word.
  ➢ The limits of written communication without the benefit of the nonverbal layers to enhance the meaning of the message.
  ➢ Privacy limits (i.e. don’t want things to go viral....)
For most of us, we take it for granted that our children will develop appropriate interpersonal skills. But as in most aspects of our child’s development, it is definitely a combination of nature and nurture. Our sociability is an innate personality trait, but how we cultivate it depends on our environment. So, how do kids learn social skills?

Communication takes on a whole new dimension in the “virtual” world of texting, Facebook, and email. Our techno interactions are more instantaneous, concise, and at times open to misinterpretation because of limited access to nonverbal cues. Just like verbal communication, our children learn the “Rules of Engagement” and social etiquette through observation and personal interaction. Hopefully our kids know to take advantage of the more appropriate models available to them. As parents, it is important to strike a balance between the efficiency of communication technology and the effectiveness of “face-face” interaction.

Here are a few “tips” to consider in our question to provide the best social models for our children who are growing up in the techno generation.

- Use common sense as to appropriate times and places to make private phone calls (i.e., if you get a call while on line in a crowded grocery store, set an example for your child by telling the person on the other end that you will call them back when you can talk more privately.)

- Make every effort to arrange for a few more family dinners during the week which allows face to face interactions. Everyone should turn off their cell phones, computers, etc. during the meal time to foster more conversation.

- Directly teach your child that texting is for casual, friendly conversation. It should not be used to gossip, spread rumors, share bad news or private, personal family matters.

- Remind your child that cell phone and computer use is a privilege. If rules are broken, the phone/computer can be taken away.

- Try and set aside one day or even part of a day when electronic devices are turned off. It can show your child that they can live without them for a while.

- Be careful to avoid making video gaming or movie watching a substitute “babysitter”. Sit as a family and play a video game together, watch a movie or even download a book to read aloud to promote more family conversation and interactions.

Resource: