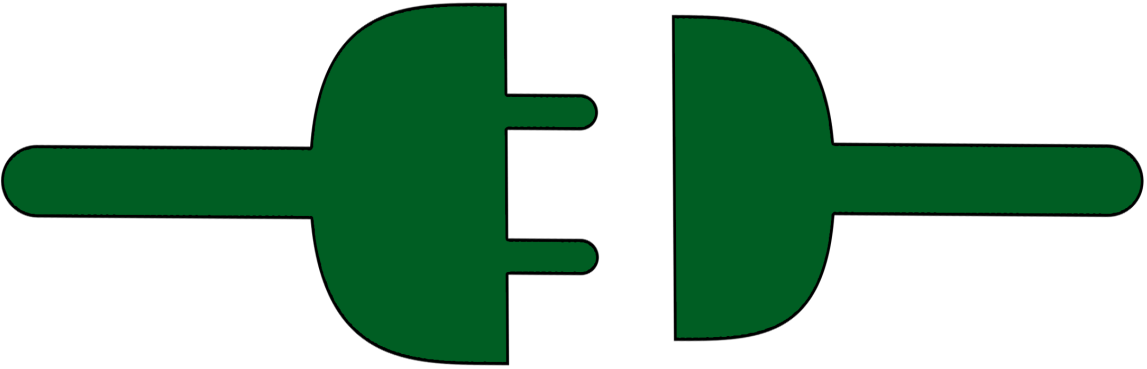# MB

PLUGGED IN

BUILDING TECH-HEALTHY FAMILIES

An initiative of All In Mountain Brook

2024 MB PLUGGED IN TECHNOLOGY REPORT

MB Plugged In is an initiative of All In Mountain Brook that educates parents about social media and technology so that children will have safe, appropriate access to technology.

MB Plugged In published a larger report in 2023 that we recommend to function as a handbook for parents who are seeking a safe, healthy pathway for technology adoption. This year's report provides updates and adjustments based on focus groups with youth pastors, teachers, counselors, high school students, and law enforcement. New research also has been considered.

Highlights in this year's report

- New insights and warnings regarding Instagram
- The prevalence of gambling
- Beware of Discord
- Students' dependency on phones
- Impact of social media and notifications on academic performance
- Random chat apps
- Strong warnings from high school students to parents of elementary school children
- How to respond when a child has made a big mistake according to law enforcement

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I.   NEW TRENDS IN TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL MEDIA

(1) Instagram has become increasingly dangerous and ill-advised for middle school kids.

In the 2023 MB Plugged In pathway, we recommended that kids not have access to Instagram before 9th grade. We would adjust that position to say "not before 10th grade" this year for several reasons. In principle, we asserted last year that apps that took on these three qualities should be avoided: (1) potentially addictive, (2) access to harmful content, and (3) potential for children to interact with potentially dangerous/harmful strangers. Instagram has added features that violate all three of these rules.

Instagram now has "Reels" with an algorithm that functions much like TikTok and can be similarly addictive. Instagram also has "vanish mode," which enables users to send messages that disappear in a similar manner as SnapChat. Several focus groups mentioned Instagram has become a place where many people in the sex industry use their profiles to link to their pornographic websites. Finally, law enforcement said that a large percentage of the "sextortion" cases that they see originate on Instagram. Criminals create fake profiles, build relationships with kids on Instagram, lure them to become friends on SnapChat, and then ask young people for nude pictures that they use to extort them. We recommend abstaining from Instagram until after 9th grade.

(2) Gambling apps

A prevalent theme in this year's report involves gambling apps. Youth pastors talked about gambling apps being the "cool thing to do" among tenth grade boys. Teachers said they hear high school boys (particularly 10th and 11th graders) often talking about their gambling activity. They said you can find boys gambling across all social groups, from the most straight-laced to the more rebellious. The high school focus group also said online gambling is rampant. Disagreement existed on whether kids do this more through legitimate betting apps (BET MGM, DraftKings, etc.) or through unregulated websites. Students remarked that it's not uncommon for students to win but not be able to get the bookie to pay. Meanwhile, if they lose, the bookie demands the money. Law enforcement commented that students need to know that if they are placing bets with a bookie, then they are certainly interacting with organized crime and need to beware of how dangerous this is.

(3) Discord — Too early and too dangerous

Discord is an application with various functions. It primarily enables gamers to play video games with each other. Many kids like to watch other people play in order to learn how to get better and advance further in games. Discord has a social media component as well.

When we asked students what they associate with Discord they quickly said, "pedophiles." An educator and law enforcement officer both said that it is "not good" and "a kid has gone down a really bad road" when they receive a case related to Discord. A law enforcement officer in a rural county told us, "of the 72 cases we have on the books now of Internet Crimes Against Children, 40 originated on

Discord." In a survey that the Mtn. Brook Schools conducted that captured the general ages at which students adopted technology, a substantial number of students gained access to Discord in elementary school. (An alarming number started using Discord as early as third grade.) We cannot emphasize strongly enough how rigid parents should be in restricting Discord.

(4) Addictive relationship with phones

Adult focus groups expressed concerned at how addictively attached students are to their phones. One teacher said, "Phones function like an appendage of these teenagers." Another teacher said they almost have to "pry phones from their hands" to get students to give up their phones for class. Youth pastors commented on "withdrawal stress" that occurred when students had to put up their phones at church events.

(5) Concerns for negative impact of social media and notifications on educational performance

Neuroscience research indicates that notifications have a particularly negative impact on mental health and school performance. A collection of studies indicated that notifications negatively affect sleep, stress, concentration, memory, and reading retention. In particular, during study hours, notifications disrupt a student's attention and impede the retention of what has been learned in the previous 90 seconds. Given that teenagers receive an average of 237 notifications per day, this can be a massive issue with effective learning. Students with phones should be encouraged to turn off notifications or at least limit them through customized settings.

Furthermore, new research indicates that TikTok also has a detrimental impact on short-term memory and attention spans.   Using TikTok as a study break (which many students do) undermines the value of studies that immediately follow. It reduces attention spans, in general.

(6) Some use of "random chat" apps among teenagers

Chatroulette, MeetMe, Skout, and Omegle are all social media apps that randomly pair a user with a stranger for video chat conversations. The apps pledge to enable users to chat live and meet new people. Some children, who are looking for connection, have started using these apps as a way to make friendships. Unfortunately, kids can interact with random adults from all over the world on these apps. Young people can engage in inappropriate sexual behavior on these apps. Focus groups did not say use of these apps is common among teenagers but did say their usage has increased, and thus parents should have them on their radar.

II. GOOD ADVICE FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS

A. GOOD ADVICE FROM HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

The high school group had great advice and strong warnings for parents. They reflected on best practices and mistakes they've observed parents using with their kids and tech.

Elementary and junior high students "do not have a clue of the long term implications of their actions online."

High school students repeatedly said that they observe junior high and elementary students posting things or behaving in ways that could have lasting consequences. They encouraged parents to educate their children about the digital footprint that they build with everything they post. One student said, "Kids do not have the foresight to understand that nothing [you post or send] goes away." Their lack of awareness of the long-term consequences is one reason we recommend students not have access to social media, where they can post publicly, prior to tenth grade.

High school students had strong words for parents.

The high school focus group had candid advice for parents. They urged parents to restrict elementary students from any social media. One student said, "There are people in the world that are looking to attack kids, and their parents make them vulnerable by appeasing their kids." Another child remarked, "It's sad that fifth graders are getting TikTok." The students validated the principle of restricting students from social media that enables them to interact with strangers or harmful content.

High school students recommended educating kids through stories and using a slow-tech, incremental approach.

These students found retrospectively that the most effective way to help young people understand the dangers of social media is through real-life stories. Anecdotes of troubles and dangers young people have encountered via social media had the strongest impact on their responsible use of technology.

High school students also recommended that parents use an incremental approach to tech privileges. They said the smartest thing their parents (or other parents) did was giving students privileges and access very slowly, one-at-a-time—this incentivized responsible behavior so they could earn more privileges down the road.

Prohibit your child's ability to download apps.

High school kids said parents must create a restrictions code and disable a student's ability to download apps. They said, otherwise, kids will download apps away from home and delete them upon returning. (Here is a YouTube video about how to set up parental controls and here is one about how to prevent a child from downloading apps.)

B. GOOD ADVICE FROM LAW ENFORCEMENT

Law enforcement individuals that we talked with had good advice, particularly about how to deal with situations where a child has made a big mistake.

Do not presume that your child will not make a "big mistake" on the computer. Be proactive.

No parent expects that their child will ever send an inappropriate image, fall victim to sextortion, or possess incriminating pictures. Law enforcement strongly recommends that <u>all</u> parents take a proactive stance and educate their kids on how to respond if they ever cross a line. One police officer said, "The channel has to be open. Kids have to feel like they can talk to their parents." He also said, "It's critical to have a plan beforehand." One officer said that suburban kids are targeted in particular because criminals presume they have access to money. Here are some of the tips to share with kids:

- Do not receive friend requests or "chat" with any strangers online. "Stranger danger" online. Avoid or, at the very least, be hesitant to play video games with strangers. If a stranger starts to get "too friendly," you should cut off contact with them, as many predators use video games as a means to groom kids.

- If you ever make a mistake, DO NOT try to fix it on your own. Go to your parents and then go to the authorities.

- If you send an inappropriate picture and a person starts to extort you for money, do not send money. The criminal receiving money will not prevent them from distributing the pictures. In that situation, turn the phone to airplane mode and take the phone to the police. They can continue the conversation and potentially catch the criminal.

- If you receive an inappropriate picture: (1) do not send it to anyone else, (2) do not take a screen shot, and (3) do not hesitate to go to the police.

C. GOOD ADVICE FROM YOUTH PASTORS

The youth pastors had several good pieces of advice for parents:
- Kids watch their parents' phone use and will see a double standard. For a parent to have kids with healthy technology habits requires parents modeling them.

- "You cannot underestimate how unaware your teenager is of how dangerous or destructive their online choices can be."

- Youth pastors agreed that parentally imposed screen time limits are a very wise move when a child first gets social media.

- Youth pastors universally agreed that kids whose parents limited their screen time tended to have a greater ability to make eye contact, build solid relationships, and have meaningful conversations.

III. UPDATED PATHWAY

Pathway – General Phases

This table provides phases that parents can use to adopt a proactive approach to technology and social media. These phases integrate and apply what we know about developmental psychology, research, and the risks and complexities presented by different apps.

PHASE	AGES	CHARACTERISTICS / MINDSET
Phase 1 *Simple Plan:* *"Keep it simple."*	4th - 6th Grade	In this phase, we encourage parents to keep technology simple. According to the discretion of the parents and needs of the family, we recommend that children in this phase abstain from smart phones and social media. (The Wait Till 8th Campaign recommends that children not have a smart phone at least until 8th grade.) If a family decides that their child needs a phone of some sort, we recommend that it be a simple device, such as a Gizmo Watch , where a child can only call or text and their contacts are limited and controlled by the parents.
Phase 2 *Slow Foundations:* *"Slow, age-appropriate introduction"*	7th - 9th Grade	In this phase, we encourage slow, stepwise, technology adoption. We are discouraging the "0 to 90 in 1 second" onslaught of technology that overwhelms kids. We are also trying to abstain from riskier social media apps due to the vulnerability of middle school children, a product of developmental factors. If a family decides to let a child have safer social media apps during this period, we recommend that they introduce them one-at-a-time with periods of time between apps. An approach a family may espouse is to tell a child with each app that if they demonstrate mature use, then they can earn more technology privileges down the road. This incentivizes kids to use responsibly.
Phase 3 *Finishing Touches:* *"Preparing for the real-world with parents' guidance."*	10th - 12th Grade	In this phase, parents use their discretion, according to their personal knowledge of their child and their instincts, to prepare children for independent use of technology after graduation. Consequently, the approaches that different families take will vary widely.

Pathway – Specific Technologies in Each Phase

This table is in line with the general phases in the previous section. In this table, however, we are more specific about apps that may or may not be included in each phase. The recommendations in this table come from the information included in the "Information about Social Media" section. We include the recommendations of research and focus groups on when certain apps should be introduced.

PHASE	AGES	SPECIFIC
Phase 1 *Simple Plan:* *"Keep it simple."*	4th - 6th Grade	**Included:** Simple phone devices, such as Gizmo watches or Gabb phones, that only allow calling and texting. No apps and no exchanging pictures and videos. **Excluded:** Smart phones All social media
Phase 2 *Slow Foundations:* *"Slow, age-appropriate introduction."*	7th - 9th Grade	**Included:** Be Real (not before 7th grade) Smart phones (not before 8th Grade) Internet browsers with strictest parental controls (not before 8th) YouTube Kids (until 9th grade, then possibly regular YouTube) **Excluded:** Snapchat, TikTok, Discord, Twitter, Reddit, Instagram
Phase 3 *Finishing Touches:* *"Preparing for the real-world with parents' guidance."*	10th - 12th Grade	Parents can consider at this point, based on their child's maturity and their own instincts, how to prepare their kids for independent use when they finish high school. We do think parents should remain vigilant about their children using gambling apps or websites. We also would recommend keeping an eye on "random chat" apps such as Chatroulette, MeetMe, Skout, and Omegle.

Changes to Notice

• For the aforementioned reasons stated in the report, we have moved Instagram down to an app to avoid until after the 9th grade.

• Last year's report had little to say after 9th grade other than allowing a child more freedoms with some supervision and coaching from parents. In Phase 3, we do recommend that parents be vigilant about online gambling and "random chat" apps that are listed in the table.

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