Beyond "Lock Down" and "Hands Off:" Nurturing Digital Citizens

Many people who work with youth have a love/hate relationship with technology. This ambivalence makes a lot of sense! If you synthesize the mountain of research on technology's impact on youth it boils down to this: there is a lot of incredible opportunity and a lot of stuff young people could do without.

So how do we respond?

The "Lock-Down" vs. the "Hands Off" Approach

A lot of youth workers tend to adopt polarized approaches to digital technologies. I call these two approaches the "lock down" and the "hands off" approaches. Neither is ideal for helping young people develop healthy habits.

Adults who fear technology and its impact on their kids often adopt a "lock down" approach. They tend to micromanage digital activities and assume that all online and media-related activities are a waste of time. On the other hand, adults who adopt the "hands off" approach assume that they don't have much control or influence over young people's digital lives (good or bad) and do very little to try to influence their online behavior and media habits.

The Middle Way: Nurturing Digital Citizens

The good news is that you don't have to choose between being a digital grump or a technology champion. There is a middle way!

We believe that digital technologies aren't inherently good or bad forces in the lives of youth, but that they are powerful. Neither the "lock down" nor the "hands off" approaches strike the balance that is needed to help young people harness this incredible power for good. Kids rely on parents and other caring adults to both nurture their digital skills and outline the boundaries of appropriate behavior. A balanced approach where adults encourages positive media habits, take interest in young people's digital

lives, and set firm limits and consequences around both time and content set youth up for success in the digital age.
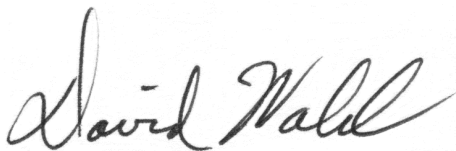
It's Not About the Tools, It's About Us and Our Kids
At the end of the day, we know that technology is going to be key to young people's 21st century success. We also know that age-old skills like deep focus, concentration, quiet reflection, and good communication are also essential. This means that kids need more than access to technology. They also need to learn the discipline, ethics, and problem solving that will enable them to use digital tools in ways that are useful and meaningful to them and to the world.

The thing is - youth aren't going to develop these skills in a digital desert nor out at sea in a digital ocean without a rudder. They are looking to us to get beyond both the 'lockdown' and the 'hands-off' approaches. They are looking to us to help them become caring, resilient, and responsible humans. In the 21st century, we might call these humans thoughtful digital citizens. And our schools, communities, and conference rooms need more of them!

The middle way may be more of a balancing act, but I think it's worth it.

Thanks,

Dr. Dave Walsh and Erin Walsh