



EVERY PARENT'S GUIDE TO

NAVIGATING OUR DIGITAL WORLD

KARA POWELL | ART BAMFORD
BRAD M. GRIFFIN

FULLER YOUTH INSTITUTE

Every Parent's Guide to Navigating Our Digital World

Originally published as:

Right Click: Parenting Your Teenager in a Digital Media World

A Sticky Faith Guide

Copyright © 2015, 2018 by Kara Powell, Art Bamford, & Brad M. Griffin
All Rights Reserved

Sticky Faith is a trademark of the Fuller Youth Institute at Fuller Theological Seminary and is registered with the United States Patent and Trademark Office.

Published in the United States of America by

Fuller Youth Institute, 135 N. Oakland Ave., Pasadena, CA 91182
fulleryouthinstitute.org

ISBN 978-0-9914880-7-0

Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.®

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for those parts intended as distributable handouts or digital resources, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Cover and Interior Design: Macy Phenix Davis, Fuller Youth Institute

Copy Editor: Dana Wilkerson (for the original work)
Printed in the United States of America

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LOGIN [Preface]

16 **CHAPTER: 1**

What is the real goal?

34 **CHAPTER: 2**

Why do my kids constantly check their phones?

54 **CHAPTER: 3**

How can I help my family actually be together when we're in the same room?

72 **CHAPTER: 4**

How can I supervise what my kids are saying and sharing without making them feel like they're under surveillance?

94 **CHAPTER: 5**

How can I help my kids become good digital citizens?

114 **CHAPTER: 6**

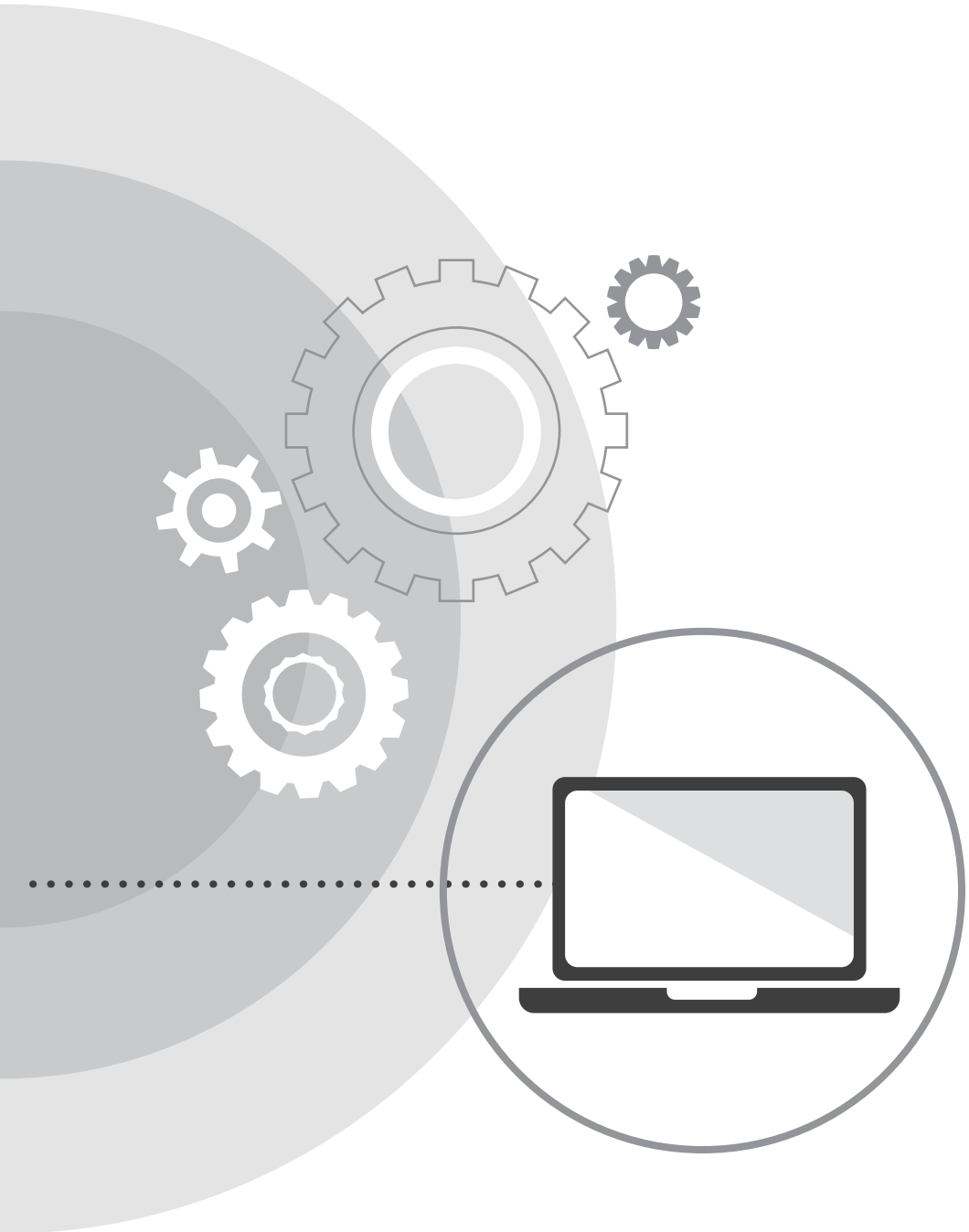
How (and when) can I gracefully take off the media training wheels?

APPENDIX: 10 things every parent should know about gaming

01

**WHAT IS THE REAL
GOAL?**





IT WAS EVERY PARENT'S NIGHTMARE COME TRUE.

“One afternoon the vice principal called me,” Tammy said.¹ “He overheard a rumor that our son, Eric, had taken a photo of a particular body part with his phone and sent it to a girl in his class.”

“I thought you might want to talk with him about it after school,” the vice principal told this utterly mortified mom.

As you can imagine, Tammy’s son emphatically denied sending the photo. They argued. Eric stood by his side of the story and accurately reminded his mom that he had never been in trouble at school before. But Tammy, who had always felt like she was close to Eric, knew she needed to dig deeper. She checked the statement from their service provider to see how many texts

he had sent and compared that to how many were on his phone. Sure enough, she found that he had deleted several messages. After showing him this evidence, Eric finally admitted that he had, in fact, sent the picture.

Unfortunately his confession only led to another frustrating argument. In Eric’s opinion, what he had done was “no big deal.” Tammy decided to call a friend who works for the local police department to set up a meeting. “Eric either didn’t get it or didn’t care—I needed to do something more than just talk *at* him,” she explained. Eric expected to sit through a quick lecture from their family friend at the precinct, but when they arrived, he was whisked into an interrogation room. A detective sternly explained the possible implications of sending these types of photos—which many states view as distribution of child pornography.

We asked Tammy, “So did he learn a lesson from that?”

“You bet he did. All three of our boys did.”

Tammy handled the incident admirably. But most of us have *no idea* what we're supposed to do in situations like this. Kids have always made mistakes while they're growing up—that part is *normal*. But as Tammy bemoaned, **“This feels like a whole different level.”** Mistakes like these can have very serious consequences, and as parents this is the water we swim in every day with our kids and their digital devices.

“I’D LIKE TO MEET THE GENIUS WHO THOUGHT, ‘LET’S GIVE TEENAGE BOYS A CAMERA THEY CAN CARRY AROUND WITH THEM AND THEN GIVE THEM THE ABILITY TO SHARE PHOTOS ON A WHIM.’ TALK ABOUT A COLOSSALLY BAD IDEA.”

—ANDRES, DAD OF TWO

IDENTIFY THE ISSUE

WHERE DOES TECHNOLOGY BELONG?

The pace of technological change has surpassed anyone’s capacity to develop enough wisdom to handle it.”

—Andy Crouch²

For several decades, with what feels like ever-increasing momentum, families have ushered one game-changing new system, appliance, or device after another into our homes—some into our kitchens, others into our garages.

But the ones that have caused parents some of the biggest headaches are those that land directly in kids’ hands.³

WHAT IS THE REAL GOAL?

We typically refer to a lot of our kids' technology as *media*. The origin of the word *media* essentially just means "middle."⁴ And that fits, doesn't it? Media is intended to be an intermediary that connects people with one another, but often it ends up doing the opposite.⁵ **It gets in the middle and drives a wedge between us instead.**

More recently, we've added new words to our media vocabulary: *social* and *digital*.

In both cases, these words differentiate our newer devices from the older *analog* ones we've been using for a while like radio, TV, film, and recorded music. Analog and digital may look and act pretty similar on the surface, but they actually have fundamentally different principles behind how they work (we'll spare you the details).⁶ **The bottom line is that *analog* is a polite way of saying *old media*.**

When we say *digital media*, we're talking about a puzzle of computers, microchips, software, video games, and the Internet that coalesced together as one

big phenomenon in the early 2000s.⁷ Today this has grown to include laptops, smartphones, tablets, and any other interactive devices capable of connecting to the Internet. The two key distinctions that separate digital from analog are the ways in which digital media is *interactive* and *interconnected*.

What has been so tricky for parents about digital media is that **while it may look and feel a lot like the analog media we're used to, it's actually a whole new world.** The move to digital media is a way bigger paradigm shift than moving from cassette tapes to CDs, as radical as that felt a couple of decades ago.⁸

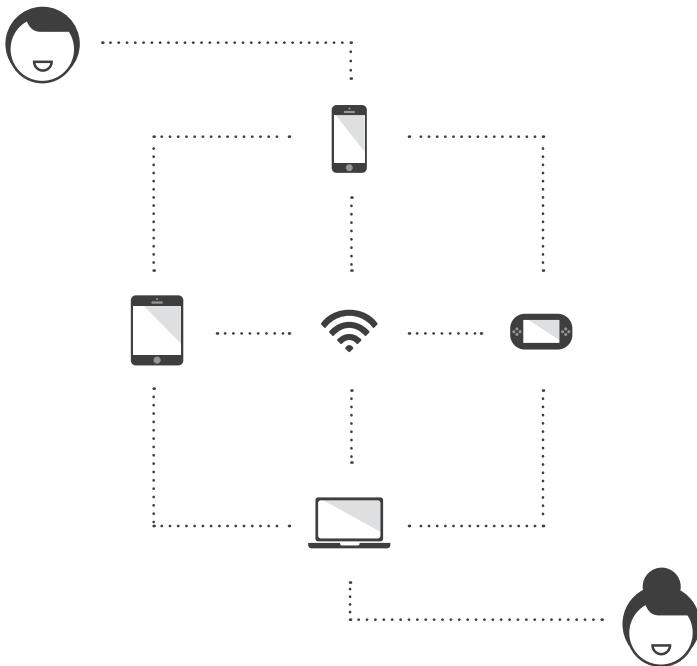
To use another analogy, we haven't just upgraded our baseball bat from wood to aluminum. We started playing hockey instead.

New paradigms require whole new perspectives to answer a whole new set of questions. But this is the rub: We only have old-perspective answers to new-perspective questions. This is why it can feel so

disorienting. Scholars and experts used to be able to provide parents with straightforward and practical answers to their media questions. Parents had the sense that there were certain right and wrong parenting strategies when it came to media. Those waters are far murkier today.

Maybe you've felt this too. One mom we spoke with told us, "I'm so sick of the rules! We keep getting all this stuff from our kids' schools about what to do and it is usually *totally* unrealistic. It's no help." Similarly, this year my kids' school sent home one newsletter encouraging us that kids shouldn't have more than an hour of screen time each day, and another newsletter saying they are supposed to spend at least an hour a day doing work on computer-based reading and math programs.

What's a parent supposed to do?



NOT “THE” RIGHT CHOICE, BUT YOUR RIGHT CHOICE

When we talk about digital media in this book, we are not suggesting there is ONE right way to handle decisions. **This is an invitation to step into the digital world of kids with greater understanding and create a plan that’s right for your family.** Just like when we “right click” on our devices a menu appears that prompts us to choose what we want to do next, throughout this book we’ve sprinkled a host of options and suggestions. But ultimately you need to choose what fits your family best. We know families, but we don’t know *your* family.

In the process of helping you devise a strategy that works for your family, we hope this resource helps you to step back, look at the big picture, and think about your options together. From this new perspective, you will hopefully find a handful of suggestions that alleviate some of your family’s conflict or frustration over technology. If you have younger kids, you might even implement new ideas now that will help lay the groundwork for when they’re older.

More than anything else, our prayer is that technology will move from being something that drives your family apart to something that brings your family together.



REFRAME OUR VIEW

SHIFTING MENTAL MODELS



ONCE UPON A TIME ...

Imagine a charming little village like the ones you see in fairy tales. It is part of a kingdom within which citizens travel and trade. Everyone speaks the same language, uses the same currency, marries within the same social circles, and holds the same values. Since the borders of the kingdom are well defined, its citizens enjoy both stability and peace.

Now imagine that one day the prince of this kingdom decides to marry a princess from a faraway land. At first, this is exciting news! People feel a thrill as they watch the strangers from this exotic new culture parade through their town on the way to the wedding. The royal couple even promises that this will be an era filled with all sorts of new opportunities that benefit citizens of both countries.

But after the honeymoon, the royal marriage slowly starts changing life across the kingdom—and life in our little village—more than anticipated. The culture that has been treasured now has to adapt in order to accommodate new patterns of life. People start adopting practices from an unfamiliar new culture. A shift this monumental takes years, or even decades, before the dust finally settles.

THE END.

PRETTY UNSATISFYING ENDING, HUH?

Well, this is where we live.⁹

Centuries ago, when one kingdom was conquered by or united with another, a long process of change would begin that touched on almost every aspect of people's lives. **We are currently in the midst of a similar shift as our existing world slowly adopts and adapts to its new partner in the wake of the digital revolution.** We remember how things were and the excitement of the wedding day (Remember your first smartphone?). But now we find ourselves caught in a world changing more rapidly than we imagined possible. The majority of marriages that end in divorce do so between the third and tenth year—that's where we are with digital media. There are good days and bad days. We're not sure how well this is really going to work out.

This presents us with quite a different set of challenges from those faced by our own parents and grandparents. The earlier transitions from print to radio, or from radio to television, were significant and had implications for how parents raised their kids. But these were all steps along the same path. Ours is a unique challenge because digital media has not simply taken the next step forward; it has leapt onto a totally new continent.

It is helpful to stop and let this sink in.

So often we worry how we're doing as parents when it comes to media and our kids, but we truly are trailblazers. **If it feels like you're making it up as you go along ... that's because you are!**

It is also valuable to point out that our kids didn't ask for this. They're trailblazers too, but they just want to grow up safely and happily. This is more of a burden than we realize. When one group of researchers asked kids about their experiences online, they mentioned things like:

“Propositions to meet from people I do not know.”

–BOY, AGE TWELVE

“One time I was looking for a game and rude pictures came on the computer, people without clothes on.”

–GIRL, AGE TEN

“Pop up things where you have to buy something.”

–BOY, AGE TEN¹⁰

The digital world can be a scary and confusing place for kids. As adults, we have perspectives of a world both with and without digital media. Our kids may sense that we miss how things used to be, but they’ll never understand why.

.....They’re just trying to make sense of the only world they know.....

A TALE OF TWO PERSPECTIVES

Kids are learning to understand and use media in radically new ways. **The biggest stumbling block for parents is often not what we do, but how we think about media.** When we fail to understand how our kids think about it, our conversations about boundaries, rules, and good decisions get lost in translation.



THE FAULT IN OUR STATS -----

Throughout this book, we are providing research-based benchmarks to help you think about when and how to allow kids to begin using certain digital media. It is important that we include a caveat here. Based on the existing research, it is difficult for us to make these recommendations for three reasons:

1. *DIGITAL MEDIA IS STILL RELATIVELY NEW.*

It's changing rapidly enough that there isn't much solid research available yet. A few years ago, I heard a scholar present his recently completed PhD dissertation at an academic conference. He had done a rather brilliant study ... on MySpace. Immediately after he finished, every hand in the room shot up, eager to ask the obvious question, "What about Facebook?!" Today the questions would reflect the multitude of social media platforms challenging Facebook's prominence.

The kind of "media effects" research that is used to support usage recommendations gets better and better as more scholars are able to weigh in, tinker with variables, and retest certain hypotheses in different contexts.¹¹

2. *A LOT OF EXISTING RESEARCH TREATS MINORS, COLLEGE STUDENTS, OR PARENTS AND ADULTS AS SEPARATE CATEGORIES.*

It doesn't look at families as a whole or trace any progression from one developmental stage to the next.¹² This means that we do not yet have a clear sense of how much of what young people are doing online is just a digital version of acting like adolescents and how much reflects behaviors they will carry with them into adulthood.

3. *THIS IS ESPECIALLY TRUE WHEN IT COMES TO RESEARCH ON SEX, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND YOUNG PEOPLE.*

Topics related to sex and young people are notoriously difficult to investigate.¹³ Most researchers steer clear of projects involving minors' sexual behaviors because of all the approvals, permissions, and paperwork involved. That's why most of what we see in popular media is based on informal online polls rather than actual empirical study.

Even in the limited amount of studies we do have, it is difficult to trust the data. Imagine your kids being interviewed by a random adult stranger about their sexual behaviors, identity, or attitudes. Do you think they would feel comfortable or answer honestly? Does a seventeen-year-old boy respond differently to questions about his sex life when talking with a young adult female interviewer versus an older male one? Totally! It is very difficult to account for how the various age- and gender-related dynamics in these studies skew the results.

People in our position, translating this type of research into resources, don't do parents any favors by reducing complex studies into deceptively straightforward statistics. We advise parents to take what they see in the news or hear about from others with a grain of salt and make sure they pay close attention to their own families.

We spoke about this with parents, and one mom, the wife of a research scientist, summed it up quite nicely: **"We don't worry about all that. They've done studies on kids, but they haven't done a study on *our* kids."**

NAME THE GOAL

RELATIONSHIPS, NOT JUST RULES



Gaining a big-picture grasp of what makes digital technology so different from what's come before helps us as parents to be equipped to deal with the questions and concerns we have now *and* be able to address future issues as they arise.¹⁴ **The goal is to have great relationships with our kids. Media will be in the middle of that somehow.**

Rather than a divider, we want it to be a middle ground—a *common ground* where families connect.

One dad we spoke with made a helpful observation about his own video gaming habits. Nicolas said, "It's funny because I always assumed I would outgrow video games at a certain point. I guess I thought that because my dad and my

grandfathers never played them. But now I still love games and so do the kids, and that has been a big connection for us. We get to do it together." Nicolas noticed how, alongside the challenges we face as trailblazers, we also have a lot of great new opportunities to connect with our kids.

Megan, a mom from Michigan, actually thanked me at the end of our interview for a chance to pause and think about this. "You know, we've been struggling a lot lately, and I forget sometimes how we do enjoy technology together and even benefit from it. I'm grateful for that. I get frustrated at times, but at the end of the day, am I glad we have this stuff? Definitely."

“I was struggling recently with some things, and my nineteen year-old sent me a lot of encouragements by text. I thought, ‘Wow, this has come full circle. I’m getting fed back spiritually now.’ I try to tell parents that, because I think it’s encouraging to know that it does come full circle.” *—AMY, MOM OF THREE*

NAVIGATE

COVENANT RELATIONSHIPS



Many families, including our own, have found common media ground through covenant agreements. A covenant or “media contract” gives your family an opportunity to craft some language that describes how all of you will—and will not—use media. It helps create a consistent, shared way of life together—one in which everyone feels heard, valued, and where boundaries exist to connect us, not separate. Through the course of this book, we hope to help you create a covenant that is tailor-made for your unique family—your own “common media ground.”

If an actual written covenant doesn’t seem like a good fit for your family, that’s totally fine. One mom of now college-aged kids told us, “We didn’t do a written covenant, but I do think we had a kind of verbal covenant and consensus about what our expectations were.” **That is the goal here: consistent consensus about your family’s expectations.** In many cases, our prompts center around phrases like “Ask your kids ...” and “Think about how ...” Intentional reflection and conversation about media can itself provide a valuable “restart” for our current practices.

At points we will also suggest some changes in how we parents live out our own media use. That's the hard medicine to swallow here. As different as digital media is, our kids still observe and imitate how we use it. One of the things we learned through our Sticky Faith research is applicable to media: **You tend to get what you are.**¹⁵ What we mean is that *our* faith is often the best predictor of our kids' faith. When it comes to digital media, it's likely that a similar principle is at work.¹⁶ But our modeling is often unspoken, evolving, and involves our everyday lives and work.

IT TAKES A NETWORK

When we sat down with parents in focus groups expecting to get some great questions and practical ideas, we often found that simply having a discussion about digital media was extremely helpful for parents. It provided an opportunity to share tips and strategies, many of which ended up in this book. Several of these church-based parent groups also realized that their kids were part of tightly connected social networks online, but they as parents were not.

With analog media in the past, families only felt responsible for the media decisions made in their own homes. In one sense, it was an age of "every family for themselves." **Digital media has connected us to other families locally and globally in ways we've never before imagined.** That also means new doors have opened for parents to support each other more than we may realize. The more tightly knit and well connected your family's social network is both on and offline, the easier it will be to deal with digital media. We heard this theme in our conversations with parents. So as you read this book and think about the implications for your own family, consider expanding these conversations to include others, or even think about using this resource as a group study guide.

At the end of each chapter, we have included discussion questions to help us think together about digital media. You can use these with your spouse, friends, a book club, a small group, or your whole family. Our hope is that we can be more open and honest with each other about what we're struggling with in the midst of our changing world.

“I THINK I FAILED AS A PARENT. TOTALLY.”

Tammy was willing to share her story with us, and with other parents at church, even though it was an embarrassing “total fail” moment for her as a mom. She was comfortable admitting that when it comes to digital media, “I fail at it every time, but I have to keep trying. A lot of parents just look the other way, but I don’t want to do that.”

We are all struggling with feelings of failure and fatigue when it comes to the constant challenges we face because of digital media.

As we spoke with parents, we were struck by how negatively so many of them evaluated their own performance. These were folks who were recommended to us by their pastors and peers at church. And based on our research, we knew that many of these parents were all-stars. Yet in their own minds, they often thought the opposite was true.

So if nothing else, we hope you will be *encouraged* as you keep reading. You're probably already doing a much better job than you think! **Investing your time in reading this book is evidence that you refuse to parent in autopilot mode, and that's half the battle when it comes to digital media.** Let's get to work on this together! Our kids need us in this part of their world more than ever.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 When you hear the terms “social media” and “digital technology,” what are the first few words, feelings, or thoughts that come to mind?
- 2 Imagine a typical day in the life of your family when it comes to using media. If we were flies on the wall at your house, who would we see using which devices, in what parts of the house, at which times during the day?
TIP: Ask your kids this question—they might surprise you with their answers.
- 3 At this point, what are your family’s biggest struggles or tensions when it comes to technology?

4 How do you feel about your responses to these three questions? With whom else do you need to share those reactions?

5 Make a list of several ways you think your family's life is *better* because of digital media. What are some positives that you can celebrate and be grateful for?

6 If you are married, do you feel like you and your spouse are on the same page when it comes to digital technology? Why or why not?

*WANT MORE INFORMATION ABOUT
EVERY PARENT'S GUIDE TO NAVIGATING
OUR DIGITAL WORLD?*

[LEARN MORE](#)