

# THE DIGITIZED FAMILY

#disconnectedfromeachother

A look at the dangers of too much screen time and how Katy families can find the right balance for connecting and socializing with family

*Written by Katy Magazine's Editors*

Go to any restaurant and you'll see it: an entire family, silent, all looking down at their devices instead of talking with each other. Some "hip" new restaurants are even offering media-inspired entertainment at the table to keep everyone occupied throughout the meal. As we spend more and more time checking Facebook, Instagram, and playing Candy Crush Saga, we are spending less and less time connecting as a family.

"Technology can provide wonderful educational experiences, but parents need to be wary of allowing technology to take the place of family time."

- Karen Jagers, MS, NCC, LPC



With the ease of access to the Internet and the constant feeling of being in-touch with friends through social media, many Katyites, from kids to adults, admit to being tempted to be “on” digitally all hours of the day. Teens aren’t the only ones glued to their smart phones. Parents are also facing attention-span issues between their tablets with games, movies, work emails, app notifications; and the cries of young children that are pacified by handing over the device. But experts say this attempt to socially multitask is actually leaving negative imprints in families as they struggle to find ways to connect.

### ESCAPING REAL LIFE

“I think that families are learning to escape from the stress of life behind their iPhones and tablets. We are learning that instead of looking at a sunset, it is more enjoyable to scroll through our Facebook feed,” observes certified Katy counselor Susan Sowell, MA, LPC-S. “We have exchanged the blessing of connecting with our loved ones with disconnecting in front of a screen. It is an easy trap to get into and robs the family of having true community.”

### LACK OF ENGAGEMENT

The first step is to recognize the problem and admit if you or others in the family are getting a little obsessed with your digital devices to the detriment of real-life human interaction. “I see the problem as being not just kids who are spending too much screen time,” says George Jolliff of Faith West Academy. “Parents are often guilty of spending too much time checking smartphones and email when not on the clock.”

Dinner with the family used to be a time for bonding, connecting, and discussing everyone’s highs and lows, but today everyone seems to be on their own screen. “When you go out as a family leave the devices at home and be present with those who are around you,” advises Darlene Rankin, director of instruction innovations for Katy ISD.

We’ve all been in a conversation with a friend, when they look down and check their phone. You suddenly sense how unimportant your conversation must be. Imagine how a child feels when mom is listening with one ear, but looking down at the cell phone instead of looking in his or her eyes.

Who knows what the long-term detrimental impact on today’s children will be?

“What we are creating is a generation that is far more comfortable talking via text than talking in person. What is being lost is the art of personal relationships,” adds Jagers.

### SETTING DIGITAL BOUNDARIES

“We implemented a ‘no-electronics rule’ during family meals so we can focus solely on each other,” says Tony Rivera, a Katy father of two. The Riveras recently returned from a long road trip where they actually turned off the DVD player and played license plate bingo together. Other Katy parents never allow kids to have phones or tablets at mealtimes, homework time, or bedtime. Collecting kids’ and teens’ cell phones at the end of the day is a standard in many Katy homes.

### FORMING NEW HABITS

“If we want our children to form new habits, then we need to take the lead,” adds Sowell. “We need to be willing to put our phones down when we are spending time with them.” She suggests waiting to respond to text messages, emails, and even phone calls when you are engaged in spending time with your children. “As parents, we need to lead by example and that means limiting our screen time as well,” she adds.

Katy mom Angie Waller helps her family avoid experiencing technology overload by balancing her childrens’ screen time with face-to-face socialization. “For my younger ones, ages 8 and 10, they have to play outside either at the pool or just with friends in the yard before Internet time,” says Waller. She also makes sure they’re involved in extracurricular activities and clubs. Waller says they are in “either a club at school, sports, or music. I have a football player and guitar player and a theatre student.”

Families may even want to challenge themselves to a “media fast,” where they take a break from their normal digital routine to help them form new, healthy habits.

### THE DEEPER ISSUE

As a family, you may need to evaluate why you are spending excessive amounts of time on and behind the screen. For example, is it simply a bad habit or could you be escaping



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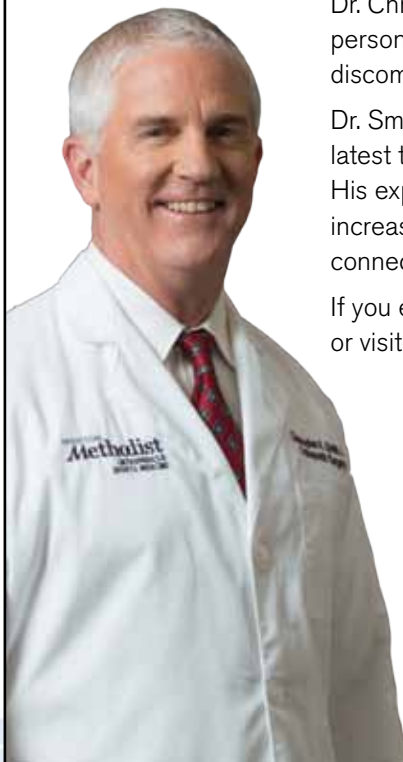
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from stressful situations or issues within the family that need to be addressed?

“Evaluating why we do what we do is a great place to start,” says Sowell. “The next step is to make a decision to make a change. Discuss this as a family and brainstorm together.”

You may find that your children would rather spend time with you participating in a fun family activity, or you may realize that you need to invest more in your child so that they will be more excited about wanting to spend time together as a family.

### TECHNOLOGY'S RIGHTFUL PLACE

Limit Internet time at home, and insist on family time. Area mom India Smith says her children have responded well to a point system where they earn screen time by reading. “The length of reading determines how much video game time that [my son] is allotted,” says Smith. “For instance, 30 minutes of reading equals 15 minutes of technology, one hour equals 30 minutes and so on.” Smith also finds that scheduling screen time for the latter part of the day keeps the family more in tune with each other and ensures more face-to-face time earlier in the day.

“Children of all ages learn by watching what their parents do with their time. Model to them that you are not ‘glued’ to your devices,” Sowell suggests.

“In our schools, we use the ‘red light, green light system,’ and parents can easily incorporate this,” says Rankin. “Green means full access to devices, yellow means at parents’ discretion, and red is no access.”

Technology is a wonderful tool, but as with anything, it should be used in moderation and not as a replacement for one-on-one socializing. Sit down as a family and discuss your rules for digital devices, how you will use them, and what the limitations are. As parents, be sure you are following the rules as well, setting a strong example for your children to follow. You will all be thankful for the memories and conversations you will create together. Jagers adds, “In the end, no one will look back on their life and say, ‘I wish I had spent more time online.’” KM

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## TIPS FOR FINDING DIGITAL BALANCE



### BE IN THE MOMENT

When a child (or anyone for that matter) is talking to you, try to stop and put down your device and look at him or her, and engage no matter what. Teach children to always do the same.

### SET DIGITAL BOUNDARIES

Set device times and zones. For example, all devices are off limits during family meals, church, vacations, social gatherings, or bedtime.

### PRIORITIZE PEOPLE

You may have to check your email because you work all day, but you can probably skip a day on Candy Crush Saga and Pinterest if it means more one-on-one time with family.

### FAMILY DIGITAL TIME

Instead of each family member watching their own screens in their own areas of the house, get everyone together to have digital time in the living room. Go around and chat about what everyone is doing.

### LEAD BY EXAMPLE

If you can't put down your device, how can you expect your child to? Let them see you prioritize them, so they will learn to do the same to others.

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## DIGITIZED QUIZ

### Is your digital use out of control?

Do you feel nervous, lost, or naked without your phone in sight? yes\_\_ no\_\_

Do you sleep with your phone? yes\_\_ no\_\_

Are you unable to turn your phone or computer off without "worrying?" yes\_\_ no\_\_

Do you find yourself watching TV or a movie, but also being on your phone or tablet? yes\_\_ no\_\_

Have you ever given your phone or tablet to your child to pacify them? yes\_\_ no\_\_

Do you often find yourself checking your phone while waiting in line at the grocery store or for your coffee order? yes\_\_ no\_\_

Do you find it hard to sit at a stoplight without checking your phone? yes\_\_ no\_\_

While on the Internet, have you told your spouse or children to, "Hold on just a minute," when they ask for your attention? yes\_\_ no\_\_

*If you answered "yes" to any of the above questions, or if you weren't able to make it through this page without checking your phone, it might be time to set boundaries on screen time.*

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