

Instagram, Snapchat, Fortnite: The distractions are endless. Here's how to help kids cope.

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Over the past year, there has been a deafening debate over the importance of creating tools to promote responsible technology use. In January, two of Apple's shareholder groups asked the company to look at the addictive effects of iPhones on children. Google's recent developer conference highlighted tools to help users better control smartphone usage. For our youngest generations, there's certainly reason to believe that a focus on managing distractions is just as important as promoting good digital citizenship.

When I speak with middle school and high school students about organization and time management, I often begin with a simple question: How many of you would like an extra seven to 10 hours of free time per week? Nearly all hands go up, and students are quickly excited by the possibility that they could get their work done faster, understand it better, and have more time to spend on other activities, hobbies or even sleep.

I've spent the past 17 years working with students on organization, time management and general executive-functioning skills. When I began my work, students would tell me their biggest distractions were their siblings, their pets, food and daydreaming. Today students are more likely to tell me they are distracted by Instagram, Snapchat, Fortnite, YouTube, Netflix and general messaging.

As more schools use technology in the classroom, including programs in which each child has their own device, students face a challenging paradox: The very tools they use to get their work done - tablets and computers - often provide the biggest distraction from completing their work and retaining information. In our rush to bring technology into the classroom, we've failed to help students develop habits to manage their digital workflow and get their work done more effectively.

A 2015 survey of more than 1,800 teachers and 400 principals in Alberta, B.C., found that nearly three-fourths of teachers frequently or very frequently observed students multitasking with technology, and 67 percent of teachers believed that the number of students negatively distracted by digital technologies in the classroom was growing.

It's easy to become angry and frustrated when it comes to students' inability to manage distractions, but today's students are faced with a constant stream of digital temptations that thwart their ability to complete work in a timely manner. A 2017 study published in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science* tracked college students' progress on their goals over the course of a semester and found that successful goal attainment was less about self-control and more about blocking and eliminating potential distractions.

The study's results suggest it is typically more productive to step back and figure out how to block or remove digital distractions, rather than get angry and frustrated with someone for not having the self-control to avoid the distractions. The best approach is to use empathy, compassion and collaboration to help the young people in your life find ways to manage their digital workflow.

Here are five strategies for doing that.

1. Encourage visualization for inspiration and motivation. The first step is getting students to buy in and to want to make behavioral changes. This step can be easily overlooked. Students (and adults, too) are more likely to make changes when they are intrinsically motivated. That's why I often begin by asking students what they would do if they had more free time. Attitude and approach matter, and in my years of presenting to tens of thousands of students, I can say they usually come away excited about avoiding distractions when they realize it's a way to have more time to do what they want to do.
2. Focus on compartmentalization. A 2009 study from Stanford researchers found that people who juggled several streams of electronic information were not able to pay attention, remember key information or switch tasks as effectively as those who completed one task at a time. I talk to students about compartmentalizing their time so that when they are doing work, they focus on the task at hand for a set block of time. This helps them get their work done more quickly so that they can then focus on having fun. Using the Pomodoro technique of spending 25 minutes focused on one task followed by a five-minute break can be an easy way to have students begin to shift from a multitasking to a monotasking mind-set. Over time, students can build up to working for 35 or 40 minutes without distractions.
3. Make focus fun. There are now numerous ways to use technology to help us be more productive with technology, and it doesn't have to be arduous. Students in my office use apps such as Forest or Flipd to motivate them to stay off their phones during class or when doing homework. Forest has a simple interface that will build a digital tree for users who stay off their phones. Flipd allows users to hide certain apps, allot time off their phone based on their schedule and, for a premium, track their progress over time.
4. Provide structured support as needed. A middle school student with whom I worked recently was relieved when his mother used the Mac OS app SelfControl to block YouTube and ESPN while he was doing his homework (Cold Turkey is a similar PC-based app). Even students who want to self-regulate may find it tough without parental support and consistency. Structured support could include setting a time and place for work to be done, coming up with ways to block certain apps or sites during specific times of the day, or taking devices away at night.
5. Allow opportunities for regrouping. Even the best plans can go awry (for adults and kids alike). It's important to focus on progress rather than perfection. Create time daily or weekly for students to think about what went well in terms of managing distractions and improving productivity, and what they would like to do better. Ask open-ended questions without judgment or expectation - which can sometimes be hard - to help students reflect and think of solutions that work. Beginning with the end goal in mind - that is, thinking about getting work done more efficiently so that there is more time for rest and play - can be more effective than we realize.

We make a mistake in assuming that middle school and high school students aren't interested in or don't want ways to help them manage distractions. A few weeks ago, after I gave a presentation to middle school and high school students in the Midwest, a high school boy stopped me in the hallway. "Excuse me, ma'am," he said. "What was the name of that app you recommended to help get my work done faster?"

Kids, like adults, want and need these strategies more than they might readily admit. If we encourage kids to use devices to complete their work, we also need to provide them with the tools to manage potential distractions - digital and otherwise. Our failure to actively help them develop these habits will have ripple effects for generations to come.

Let's focus.

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