Kids’ media use needs parent guidance

By James P. Steyer

As media and technology evolve at a dizzying pace, this new world can seem overwhelming for parents. Many kids use and understand these devices and platforms better than we do. But their technological abilities are often ahead of their emotional maturity and judgment.

It is our responsibility as parents to help our children make good choices online. We can’t protect them from every possible danger—but, just as our kids learn to swim, eat properly and drive a car, they need to know how to live in the digital world safely and ethically.

The bottom line is clear. We need to know what’s going on in our kids’ digital lives. We need to talk with them about what they’re seeing and experiencing. We need to teach them to think critically about the images and messages they encounter. When our children are very young, we need to limit their access to certain media and technology. And we have to stay involved in how they process messages and images as they gain independence.

The organization I founded, Common Sense Media (commonsensemedia.org), provides simple tips and guidance for parents to help build a healthy, balanced media diet. Here are some ideas for ways to help children up to age 7 navigate new media safely. (On our Parenting page next month, we’ll talk about kids 7 to 10.)

From birth to age 2

It’s tempting for parents to think that technology can make babies smarter, and there’s a big industry trying to sell that idea. But the reality is just the opposite. Watching a TV, smartphone, video game or computer screen has no benefit whatsoever for babies. For every hour a day that infants spent watching baby videos and DVD’s, they learned six to eight fewer vocabulary words.

In fact, digital media is not helpful in any way for children under 2. Babies and toddlers learn by interacting with real people, by moving and manipulating objects, by exploring and doing. For example, playing with

Playing an Internet game together can be lots of fun for parents as well as kids.
blocks has been linked with higher language and math scores. So, to boost your baby’s brain power, turn off the gadgets. Bring out the blocks and other interactive toys and read real books with and to them as often as you can.

**Limit Screen Time.** During a child’s early years, you can set patterns and habits that will endure. And if there’s one tip to remember when it comes to media, it’s to limit screen time. That’s good advice if your child is 3 or 13. And if you don’t start using screen media as a babysitter, you have a chance of avoiding the habit altogether.

**Technology is a Tool, Not a Toy.** If your child thinks your smartphone is her toy, she may demand it, yelling “mine” and have meltdowns when you tell her “no” because you need it. It’s tempting for proud parents to encourage digital mastery, but addictive behavior can start at a young age.

**Spend Unplugged Time with Your Child.** We’re used to doing a lot at the same time, but parenting a baby or toddler requires focus and concentration. We have to be patient, present and undistracted—and we can’t do that with one eye on a BlackBerry or the TV.

**At ages 3 and 4**
By the time kids are 3 and 4, they’re curious, chatty, creative and in constant motion. They learn from everything: active and imaginary play, music, stories, games, talk and digital media.

High-quality, age-appropriate DVD’s, TV shows and electronic games can be educational for 3 and 4 year olds, in minimal doses. There’s no shortage of great programming on PBS Kids, the Disney Channel, Nick Jr. and the Discovery Channel, and there are lots of non-commercial, educational games for young kids on computers, Wii and mobile devices.

But the wrong kinds of media, especially violent programming, can create problems. A landmark study at the University of Washington showed that for every hour per day that preschool boys spent watching violent TV shows, they had three times the risk of developing behavioral problems at age 7. This was true even when they were watching cartoons on commercial channels, which often have more violence than adult shows.

**Be Selective.** Check the age-appropriateness of shows and games at www.commonsensemedia.org before you let your preschooler see or play with them.

**Limit Media.** It’s still the most important tip, and the earlier we set and enforce rules, the easier it is to stick to them as kids get older and habits are harder to break.

Teach your child to ask permission before watching TV or a DVD or playing an app or electronic game, so she or he understands that media use is a privilege. Be consistent and make sure there are consequences if your preschooler breaks the rules.

**Here’s What Research Shows**
- For each hour of TV young kids watch, they have a 10 percent higher chance of attention problems at age 7, including restlessness, trouble concentrating and impulsive behavior.
- Visual images may overstimulate and rewire preschoolers’ developing brains. Learning to read and write takes time and patience. Kids who are used to the fast pace and instant gratification of screen media may get easily bored.
- More than two hours daily of screen time also increases the odds that kids will be overweight. They are exposed to a barrage of ads for high-calorie, sugary foods—and when they’re sitting in front of a screen, they’re also not running, jumping and moving around.

**Keep a Preschooler’s Bedroom Screen Free:** No TV, DVD player or digital game. Having these devices available guarantees kids will spend more time watching them. Make an effort to limit your own media use when your child is around. Even when a TV is on in the background, kids use language less. Again, don’t let a preschooler think of your smartphone or iPad as a toy. Make any use a special treat, with your permission.

**At ages 5 and 6**
At this age, kids know more, can do more and are more independent. They are also immersed in a virtual universe of digital media. They can type in Google search terms, ski on a Wii balance board and play “Cut the Rope” on a smartphone. It’s easy for them to spend hours watching TV or playing digital games.

Digital media is accessible, entertaining, habit-forming and an easy way for parents to have some time to themselves. So now is the time to get very serious about rules and boundaries.

**Limit the Amount and Kind of Media Your Child Consumes** and keep the two-hour rule intact. If your child has an older sibling, set family media rules, which include specific consequences for watching an inappropriate show in front of a younger child. Be clear also about what’s not okay when your child is on a playdate or with a babysitter.

**Stay on Top of Computer Use.** Keep the family computer in an area where you can easily see what your child is doing and set up age-appropriate filtering options on your browser. Go on the Web with your child for short times. Media can reinforce stereotypes and influence kids’ expectations. If you’re sitting beside your child while he or she is browsing or playing an Internet game, you can balance what’s being seen on the screen with your own ideas about body image, positive role models and gender stereotypes.

If your child sees something inappropriate, make it a teaching moment. Share something about your values and point of view, what’s real or make-believe—and what’s important. At ages 5 and 6 kids are learning from everything they see and do. Let them learn lessons about life, values, behavior and expectations from you.

**Watch Commercial-Free TV.** There are terrific shows for kids this age: PBS Kids, The Electric Company, Design Squad Nation, Dragonfly TV and Cyberchase. And they’re even more educational if you watch them together.

**If You Post Photos and Videos,** be careful. Don’t share the names of your child or anyone else’s. And, if you haven’t already done so, change your privacy settings so that only people you’ve designated can see your postings.

—Adapted from the author’s book “Talking Back to Facebook” (Scribner). See We Recommend on page 8.
‘Is my child’s backpack too heavy?’

Q I keep hearing about the trend to digital textbooks, but it hasn’t happened yet at the middle school my kids go to. They carry backpacks that seem way too heavy for growing muscles and bones. Am I right to be concerned? 

G.L., Dayton, Ohio

Yes. If a backpack weighs more than 10 percent of your child’s weight, it probably is too heavy. Studies in the U.S. and Europe have found that toting heavy backpacks can sap kids’ energy and damage bones and muscles that are still forming. Here’s some of the latest information:

SPORTS MEDICINE SPECIALIST Dr. Pierre D’Hemecourt of Children’s Hospital Boston has found that carrying too-heavy backpacks can lead to stress fractures in the back, inflammation of growth cartilage, back and neck strain, and nerve damage in the neck and shoulder. A M I L A N S T U D Y R E P O R T E D that loads carried by sixth graders were equivalent to a 176-pound man toting a 39-pound pack. A study in Spain found that girls faced a greater risk of back pain than boys, and the risk increased with age. If your child is leaning forward when walking with a loaded back- pack, that’s a sign it’s too heavy and, at the very least, a recipe for poor posture and neck pain. Encourage your kids to store their books in a locker during the day, and take a minute or two after school to determine what they actually need to bring home. Never carry a backpack on one shoulder, even for a short time.

CHOOSE A BACKPACK that’s well designed and sits properly on your child’s back. It should have wide, padded, adjustable shoulder straps, a padded back, and compartments inside so the heaviest items can rest against the child’s back. 

Q I see ads about backpacks that seem way too heavy. Should I make sure my backpack isn’t too heavy? 

Pierre D’Hemecourt, M.D., F.A.C.S., of Children’s Hospital Boston

D’Hemecourt advises that you consider how much a child has to carry, whether that child is strong enough to carry it, and how long the kid will be carrying the load. “If a child is too young to carry it, then it’s too heavy,” he says. “And if a child is carrying too much, then it’s too heavy.”

Q How can I decide if my child’s backpack is too heavy? 

Ellen Gobinsky, M.S., Executive Editor of Work & Family Life, is President of the Families and Work Institute, a researcher on national and international studies, and author of more than 40 books and reports including “Wind in the Making” (HarperCollins).

This is your column. We invite you to send questions about work and family life or tell us how you solved a problem that you think a lot of people face. Write: Dr. Susan Ginsberg, Work & Family Life, 305 Madison Avenue, Suite 1143, New York, NY 10165. E-mail: workfam@aol.com.

RESEARCH REVIEW

It helps to know your personality type

W e assume that our health is determined more or less by our genes, diet, weight and whether we exercise or smoke. But another, less obvious, factor has emerged: our personality. Researchers are suggesting a correlation between personality type, health and longevity.

One of the leading theories about personalities is that they can be grouped in five main types: agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism and openness. Each type has many facets, of course. For example, trust is an aspect of agreeableness and anxiety is an aspect of neuroticism. People can also be a combination of different types.

As we get older, traits that emerged in childhood tend to endure—and the personality type that correlates most consistently with good health is conscientiousness. Researchers have linked conscientiousness to lower blood pressures, lower rates of diabetes and stroke, and fewer joint problems.

A study reported in the Harvard Health Letter found that 8 year olds who had been rated as “conscientious” by their parents and teachers tended to live longer. Even after adjusting for other factors such as education, the trait of conscientiousness continued to be associated with better health.

There’s a certain common sense to this. After all, if you have a conscientious personality, you’re probably more likely to develop good habits and less likely to engage in harmful behaviors. Stress too has an impact on our health, and a conscientious personality tends to avoid stressful situations while the neurotic personality may actually be drawn to them. Conscientiousness can also shape our career, friendship and marriage choices, and it may have cognitive benefits as well, according to psychologist Patrick L. Hill of the University of Illinois. Those cognitive benefits, he says, “are part of the reason conscientiousness is related to living longer.”

What are the implications of this research? We can’t decide to change our personality. It’s too ingrained. But perhaps we can study the behaviors of a conscientious type and tinker a bit with our own tendencies.

For example, conscientious people focus on specifics. They make daily plans and try to stick to them. They use reminders and tend to be social. That means staying in touch with family members and having friends who can encourage behaviors such as being on time and expressing gratitude.

WFL September 2012 ♦ www.workandfamilylife.com
‘Grandma said I could…but Mommy said no’

By Susan Newman, Ph.D.

Having grandparents in your children’s life provides a supportive thread. They hold the family history: they pass on traditions and they are the principal cheerleaders for both adult children and grandchildren.

If they live with you or nearby, they can help eliminate disruption of routines and changes in caregivers that can be stressful for both parents and young kids.

But whether they’re close to you or far away, there are some issues to be aware of in your family’s relationship with grandparents.

Your safety concerns

Many grandparents think they know more about safety than parents do. Others think their adult children are too safety conscious and will turn their grandchildren into scared, risk-averse wimps with an endless list of worries, safety gadgets and protective gear.

In fact, child care practices have changed in the last 20 years, making some parental concerns legitimate. Grandparents should be informed of new approaches to safety—from sleeping positions to feeding protocols and playground rules.

A parent might say: “You may think I’m crazy but I don’t feel comfortable.” Or “It makes me nervous doing it your way.”

Or “Here’s an article I read (or downloaded) that explains the best way to….” Or “The doctor says we should be doing this with the baby” or “The doctor doesn’t want our child doing that.”

Too much interference?

Interference from a grandparent can feel like a criticism of adult children’s parenting decisions, and children learn to play parents off against grandparents when the adults don’t adhere to the same rules. “Grandma said I could but Mom and Dad said I couldn’t.”

Sometimes visiting grandparents like to take over reprimanding kids or insist on apologies when a child misbehaves or is rude. Have an agreed-upon procedure for times when no parent is around: otherwise, parents should handle the problem.

A parent might say: “I know you have the kids’ best interests at heart, but we can’t keep sending different messages.” Or “Please don’t take my child’s side when I’m disciplining him.”

Or “I know you want to protect her, but it undermines my job as a parent.” Or “If you think I’m being unfair, please tell me later when the kids aren’t around.”

Overindulging grandkids

Indulging grandchildren is a great joy for many grandparents, and parents don’t want to take that pleasure away. But parents need to underscore the values they want their kids to have and ask grand-parents to respect their wishes. (If adult children go along with grandparents’ indulging kids excessively, that’s another story, of course. Ask yourself, “Why am I approving this?”)

A parent might say: “It’s lovely that you want to do that, but we feel strongly that it’s too much.” Or “It might be better if you gave him part for his birthday and part for the holidays.”

Listen attentively to what a grandparent has to say or wants to tell you about your children. Admit when you’re wrong and a grandparent is correct about something pertaining to your kids.

Acknowledge grandparents’ efforts, both large and small. Speak favorably about them in front of your children.

Remind your kids to follow their grandparents’ instructions when you’re not there. And don’t be jealous of the time grandparents and grandchildren spend together.

Grandparents’ checklist for working together

Be willing to give up the control you had when you were raising your children.

Ask what parents expect and how they want requests to be handled. Don’t try to solve a grandchild’s problems on your own.

Include parents in decisions affecting kids’ education, health and happiness. Don’t interfere in parents’ issues with kids.

Give a detailed report about a grandchild’s day to his parents.

Offer help when a parent is pre-occupied or exhausted. Review spelling words with a grandchild so a parent can relax after work or take a child home for a sleepover.

Never underestimate your contributions. You are needed.

Multi-generational relationships make families closer. The time grandparents spend with grandchildren will be recalled warmly by young kids, teens and adults for their entire lives.


The Grandparent Credo

Grandparents give time. Grandparents give love. Grandparents give gifts.

Grandparents think big. Grandparents are good sports.

Grandparents are fun. Grandparents are patient and understanding.

Grandparents are always supportive and enthusiastic.

Grandparents pass on traditions and share their family history.

Grandparents don’t disagree with parents in front of grandchildren.

Grandparents don’t interfere with the upbringing of grandchildren.

Grandparents are devoted to their grandchildren.

Grandparents are indispensable.

‘Can I sleep over at Grandma’s house tonight?’

The time

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Grandparents are indispensable.
By Fretta Reitzes and Beth Teitelman

Children spend so much time with media these days, we all need to be reminded that play—and lots of it—is so important in their lives. Through play, they build knowledge and understanding as they learn about how the world works.

Play is a creative outlet for a young child’s fantasy and imagination. Taking in all that they observe and experience, children try out rules and construct models of the world.

Play contributes to their sense of mastery and competence and gives them joy, pride and a growing sense of self. And one of the best things about play is that it doesn’t require a lot of costly props or gimmicky mechanized toys.

It develops language skills

Play and language are closely connected. While young children are busy at play, they express their feelings, create and tell stories, explain the rules of a game and communicate with friends.

Rhymes, word games, puppet shows and storytelling all contribute to language development. This connection is essential as young children are getting ready to read and write.

Children benefit from unhurried time to create, explore and invent at their own pace. There’s no “right” or “wrong” way to play. Welcome your child’s creativity, playfulness and imaginative view of the world.

Tell make-believe stories that you imagine and invent. Take a trip to the moon, go on an adventure walk through the jungle, search for lost treasure or join the circus. Tell your stories over and over again, adding new details each time.

Give children opportunities to “read” to you by turning the pages and telling the stories they know so well from hearing them over and over again.

Setting the stage for play

Nurture your child’s play by providing blocks, dress-up clothes, stuffed animals, puppets, cars and trucks, legos, miniature figures and picture books. These all stimulate the imagination as kids invent their own world and create their own adventures.

Join in the fun. Follow your child’s lead. Be a customer in your child’s store, the audience for a puppet show, guest at a tea party, or patient in the doctor’s office.

Water, water everywhere. Water play excites and delights young kids. They can pour, measure, float, spray and splash. Fill a sink or bucket with water for inside or outside play. Keep a small collection of plastic pitchers, spray bottles, measuring cups, funnels, strainers, corks, sponges and bubbles. Young children can choose a few items to play with each time. Toy boats, dolls and animals offer even more possibilities.

Some interactive games to play with children

Count and do. Take out a set of dice and get ready to roll. The first player rolls the dice and counts the number that comes up. The second player thinks of something about an object that’s under the cloth until the players have named them all. Play again, adding more objects as you go.

In a variation for older kids, one player describes something about one of the objects, such as its color or what it’s used for. The second player has to name the object described.

Once upon a time. A storyteller begins with the words, “Once upon a time…”. The next storyteller adds to it. The story grows and unfolds as everyone takes a turn and continues to “The End.”

Younger children may tell simple, short stories and older children may embellish and add details. The same story may go on for a few days or even longer, with added characters and adventures.

Can you find it? Choose a familiar object. Describe one thing about it such as its color, what it does or how it is used. Next, your child must find something that fits the description. For example: “I’m thinking of something you draw with.” Your child might find a pencil, marker or crayon.

As the game continues, describe two things about an object. “I’m thinking of something you draw with that is yellow.” Now your child might find a yellow pencil, marker or crayon. Once children understand the game, switch roles and give them a chance to get you thinking.

—Adapted from the authors’ book “Wonderplay, Too! Cooking, Science, Music, Games, Art, Dance from the 92nd Street Y” (Perseus Press).
Why ‘generous listening’ offers rich rewards

By Anne Baber & Lynne Waymon

The opposite of talking isn’t listening, quips writer Fran Lebowitz. “The opposite of talking is waiting.”

Many people act that way. Instead of listening, they’re just waiting to have their say in the conversation.

It’s not a passive activity

People do think of listening as merely not talking. But it’s not a passive activity requiring the occasional nod as we wait for our turn to speak. Active listening means giving another person our undivided attention.

We speak at a rate of about 150 words a minute, but we can think at more than 800 words a minute. That’s one reason why it takes some self-training to focus on what’s being said rather than wander off on a mental tangent.

Listening’s many benefits

Here are some of the benefits of generous, thoughtful listening:

• You’ll stand out. Giving someone your full attention is increasingly rare in our highly distracting world. Do it and you’ll make a positive impression. People will remember talking with you.

• You’ll sound smarter. If you listen for people’s interests, enthusiasms and challenges, as well as their agendas, you’ll be able to respond with more intelligence and wit.

• You’ll make connections. If you start listening for what people have in common, you’ll develop a reputation as a connector. And if you bring people together, they will want to reciprocate.

• You’ll be a better talker. You will be able to make your own points more effectively. Careful listening will make you a more nimble conversationalist. It will allow you to segue to the issues you would like to raise without sounding too abrupt.

Learn to take turns

Some people talk too little, others too much. Make an effort to have your fair share of air time and encourage others to talk as well. Here are some ideas for getting people to open up:

• Be more observant. Take the time to notice and comment on something positive about another person—something the person has done or said or is wearing perhaps. This shows your commitment to starting a conversation and to getting to know the other person.

• Be appreciative. When was the last time someone told you (out of the blue, for no reason at all) something that she or he appreciated about you? Maybe you were a little embarrassed. But didn’t it feel good? The willingness to express your appreciation is a sign of confidence and strength.

• Avoid oversized questions. Big, open-ended questions like “How are you?” or “Anything new?” often invite one-word responses. One way to get the conversational ball rolling is to ask questions that start with one of journalism’s famous five W’s: Who? What? When? Where? Why?

• Explore icebergs. Some statements are like icebergs: only the tip is visible, begging for you to explore what’s hidden under the water. If someone says, “What a week!” or “I’ve never seen that before,” don’t respond with the cliché, “I know what you mean.” Show a little curiosity: “Tell me more. What happened?”

Remember the world abounds with good information if you will take the time to be seriously curious, encourage others to talk and listen generously.

—Adapted from “Making Your Contacts Count” (Amacom Books). Used with permission. All rights reserved. See www.amacombooks.org

Here are 9 conversational turnoffs to avoid

1. TIMI: too much information, too many fine details. Hit the high points. Sketch in the broad outlines.

2. MONOLOGUES. Resist the urge to rattle on and on. Encourage other people to say something. If they don’t, ask a question and wait for their answer.

3. INTERROGATION. Know the difference between expressing sincere interest and probing. Tact is the knack of making a point without making an enemy.

4. I CAN TOP THIS. Don’t play this game. Folks who always have a better story use conversation to make themselves look wonderful.

5. INTERRUPTING. Try not to trouble others with your nonstop verbiage. Don’t insist on having first, second and the last word.

6. HIDING. Some people are the opposite extreme. You have to pry information out of them.

7. KNOW-IT-ALL SYNDROME. People who act like they know everything about everything really just want you to agree with their opinions.

8. MISINFORMATION. Don’t waste people’s time and suggest resources you haven’t checked out.

9. INAPPROPRIATE INTIMACY. Don’t burden others with information about your divorce or how much money you spent on your last vacation.
New research on pregnancy and stress

If you are pregnant, thinking about getting pregnant or you know someone who is, here’s something new to think about. A mounting body of evidence links too much stress during pregnancy to a higher risk for childhood physical, emotional and behavioral problems.

Mothers-to-be commonly experience mood swings and worry. Stress-producing events are everywhere and unavoidable—and, of course, not all stress is negative. It can stimulate us and help us stretch and grow. What we’re talking about instead is sustained high levels of stress and anxiety.

Why are we just learning about this?

We have not heard much about this issue before for a couple of reasons.

First, this research is coming out of a new field of study called maternal-fetal medicine. Second, there are complex interactions, not just one factor that shape a baby’s development. And having a stressful pregnancy does not necessarily mean that a baby will have problems. These are risk factors that are being described, not simple cause-and-effect relationships.

The breakthrough research on the effects of prenatal stress on children is based on the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPC), the longest running and largest medical study in the world. Also known as “The Children of the 90’s,” the study originated in the Avon area of England and involved 14,000 children who are still being followed.

What the study suggests

ALSPC has found that children of highly anxious mothers are two to three times more likely to have problems with attention and behavior than children of moms with low anxiety.

So while there’s still more research to be done, it is clearly wise to pay a little extra attention to stress levels during this time. The combination of internal changes and external pressures while pregnant simply means that it is more essential than ever to check in with yourself.

If you can determine when your stress levels are high, you can take the necessary steps to reduce the potential effects of that stress on yourself and your child.

Creating a personal stress solutions plan

We all have different likes, dislikes, habits and needs—and there are many effective and easy-to-use stress-reduction strategies to help pregnant women quickly measure and gently manage their stress levels. They include a wide variety of breathing techniques, music, meditation, exercises, yoga, biofeedback, massage and good old-fashioned sleep.

There’s also a Stress Solutions Resource Guide in the wonderful new book by Susan Andrews, Ph.D., Stress Solutions for Pregnant Mothers. It describes ways of carrying out these and many more techniques.

“Keep in mind,” says Dr. Andrews, “that the techniques are not meant to replace proper medical care. Always seek the care of a health professional when you are expecting.”

Read Dr. Andrews’s blog at www.StressSolutionsforPregnantMoms.com, offer your comments and share your own favorite stress-reducing techniques.

Making it easier to choose whole-grain foods

Crunchy, munchy crackers can be a good source of fiber and whole grains, which have been shown to lower the risk of type 2 diabetes, heart disease and stroke—and to help keep body weight at a healthy level.

Because a whole grain has been processed minimally, it contains more of the naturally occurring fiber and nutrients than a grain that has undergone more processing. But the labeling on crackers can be deceiving. For example, the word “wheat” by itself doesn’t mean much. And many products contain a lot added sodium and fats.

Check the side or back of the box for the ingredient list. A whole grain should appear as the first or second item. If it de-

Labels and serving size

Check product

Each stamp also has a number that indicates how many grams of whole grain ingredients are in a serving. Sixteen grams count as one serving.

A healthy you

Know where your sodium’s coming from?

The No. 1 source of sodium in the American diet is bread, according to a study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). It averages nearly twice the sodium as chips and other salty snacks.

It’s not that bread is so high in salt. It’s just that we eat so much of it.

Other foods in the Top 10 list (in descending order) are: cold cuts and cured meats, pizza, poultry, soups, sandwiches and burgers, cheese, pasta dishes, meat, mixed dishes and snacks.

“What’s really important on an individual level is what are your major sources of sodium and how to develop a strategy to reduce your intake,” says Dr. Alice H. Lichtenstein of the Tufts University Cardiovascular Nutrition Lab.

In their analysis of data from the “What We Eat” portion of a national health and nutrition survey of Americans age two and older, CDC researchers found the following:

In general, foods from restaurants contain more sodium per calorie than the same category of food bought at a supermarket.

More than 75 percent of the sodium we consume is in the food before it reaches the kitchen or is purchased in restaurants.

Home cooking is your best defense. Be wary of “enhanced” meat products, high-sodium sauces and breading. Check product labels and serving size.

—Adapted from Tufts University Health & Nutrition Letter
A guide for parents on kids’ use of new media

Can you believe the big technology challenge parents faced in 1990 was controlling their children’s use of telephone landlines? Boy, have things changed. Like it or not, kids are now spending far more time with media and technology than they are with their families or in school.

Talking Back to Facebook is a new, very important book that all parents should read. It’s by James P. Steyer, the nation’s leading authority on children and technology and founding CEO of Common Sense Media, a wonderful online resource that helps parents deal with the many questions that come up around their children and the media. As parents, how do we help kids navigate their new media safely? How do we even know what they’re being exposed to, what to worry about and what common-sense rules to set?

Steyer covers it all. In the first half of the book, he gives us an overview of the issues related to digital media and kids and the background to understand what’s happening and why. The second half gives tips and guidance for kids from birth through age 15 to help you and your family make good decisions about parenting kids in a digital world.

If you wonder whether your 2 year old should play games on your iPad (see our front page article) or you just discovered that your 11 year old has been looking at X-rated websites, this is the book for you.

Steyer also answers questions such as: At what age should my child have a cellphone? An iPod? Access to Facebook? Is my child being cyberbullied? Is my child a cyberbully? How can I protect my child’s online privacy?

Tips are organized by kids’ age group, but Steyer’s most important advice applies to all ages: limit the time your child can spend in front of a screen. Keep the TV and computers in an open area, not in kids’ bedrooms. Watch TV and go online with your child together sometimes, so you can talk to them about what they’re seeing and doing.

Talking Back to Facebook: The Common Sense Guide to Raising Kids in the Digital Age (Scribner, softcover, $15) is in bookstores, online and an e-book edition. ✴

Work & Family Life provides information and practical solutions to a wide range of family, job, and health issues. Our purpose is to help our readers reduce their stress and find pleasure and satisfaction in their many roles at work, at home, and in their communities.