



BACK TO SCHOOL WITH

The Digital Citizenship Project

A Few Minutes with Dr. Eli Shapiro

BY SUSAN SCHWAMM

It is no secret that advances in the availability and affordability of technology devices has had a profound impact on our daily experience. From the ability to connect with family and friends anytime and anywhere to the convenience of managing our personal finances from a device the size of a deck of playing cards, technology brings us tremendous opportunity. With that opportunity comes challenges, as we all know that we can become over-connected with our technology at the expense of real world connections, impulsive texts or emails can have unanticipated consequences, and managing our children's devices and technology experiences is a task few of us have been prepared for.

As we prepare for the back to school season, we sat down with Dr. Eli Shapiro, licensed Clinical Social Worker and Doctor of Education, to discuss how technology is impacting our children and to explore practical strategies to managing it effectively.

Dr. Shapiro is the creator and director of The Digital Citizenship Project, which teaches healthy and responsible use of technology in the digital age, and has been writing and lecturing on the topic extensively. This past year alone Dr. Shapiro has spoken at conferences for The Jewish Education Project (BJE), The North American Jewish Day School Conference, Torah Umesorah, and The Consortium of Jewish Day Schools.

TJH: *Dr. Shapiro, thank you for taking the time to meet with us to discuss the important issue of kids and technology. What is the biggest challenge we are facing with technology today?*

ES: It really isn't a singular challenge. We are living in an unprecedented time where the speed at which technology advances is far faster than our ability to understand its impact and create the norms and rules to effectively regulate it. Our children are the first generation growing up in this perpetually "connected" society, making them digital natives, and we are the first generation of parents trying to guide them as digital immigrants. That generational disconnect and a lack of prior experiences in how to parent the digital generation makes the challenge unique.

I was recently working with a parent whose child was struggling academically and having trouble maintaining focus in class. Through our conversation I discovered that this sixth grader was frequently up until 3 in the morning on his iPad. When I suggested to the mother that her child should be responsible to bring her the iPad every night at 10pm, she responded by saying, "But it's his." Such are the parental challenges for managing our children's technology in a generation of entitlement. When we are constantly hearing from our children that "everyone has one" or "everyone is allowed to" it becomes difficult to set the policies that maximize the likeli-



Dr. Shapiro speaking at Yeshiva University

hood of their success. On a side note, when the parent felt empowered to implement rules regarding technology, the child's academic experience vastly improved.

TJH: *We have been hearing for years about the need for filters, doesn't that address most of the problems of the Internet safety?*

ES: One of our big goals at The Digital Citizenship Project is to shift the communal paradigm from "Internet Safety" to "Digital Citizenship." Internet safety has traditionally focused on protecting people from graphic imagery available on the Internet. Filters and parental monitoring software are critical tools in managing that aspect of technology but it fails to teach Digital Citizenship and address the broader issue of technology's impact on social, psychological and behavioral functioning.

TJH: *How do you define Digital Citizenship and what specifically is technology's impact on social, psychological and behavioral functioning?*

ES: Digital Citizenship can be defined as the norms of appropriate and responsible behavior with regards to technology use. What that means is how we utilize technology in a socially, psychologically and behaviorally responsible way for both others and ourselves. Socially we have the opportunity to connect with more people, but we also run the risk of being distracted by our devices. Many recent studies find that basic social skills such as eye contact, which is critical for establishing a meaningful connection between people, has diminished as a result of technology. In fact, a recent study by UCLA found that after only 5 days of being separated from technology in overnight camp, middle schools students markedly improved their ability to read social cues and engage in healthier social interactions. The key is balance and maximizing what technology has to offer while minimizing its negative impacts.

TJH: *You mentioned a psychological effect. How does technology impact that?*

ES: Numerous studies find correlations between avid cellphone and Internet use and increased anxiety and depression. There are also studies that find that connection with excessive gaming. Writing something down often cements our perceptions of experiences and ultimately our overall outlooks. A study by Peterson and Seligman, founders of the Positive Psychology movement, found that people who wrote down five things at the end of the day that they were grateful for tended to be happier. The opposite is true as well; if we tweet, text, blog, and comment negative experiences, we tend to see things negatively and ultimately are more prone to dissatisfaction and lower levels of subjective wellbeing. A study of twitter hashtags found that for every positive hashtag (#ilove, #bestever, etc.) there are two negative (#ihate, #worstever, etc.). In a sense, poor digital citizenship contributes to our negative wellbeing.

For teens and pre-teens, in addition to comments and posts, we see this negativity manifesting itself in cyberbullying and other aggressive online behavior.

TJH: *Tell us about The Digital Citizenship Project and how it addresses these difficult challenges.*

ES: The Digital Citizenship Project is a school- and community-based program designed to provide

parents, children and school personnel with the tools to manage children's technology use. We educate them on technology's impact and give them a common language and strategies to be better digital citizens. Since children today do not know what it means to live without the constant connectivity they have no way of self-assessing when their behavior has become problematic. That is where the common language becomes critical. Parents and students can identify disinhibition, impulsivity, or digital distraction and address it before it becomes a problem.

We educate the school community through a comprehensive curriculum, specifically designed for different age groups, that empowers everyone to effectively manage their technology ownership and behaviors.

TJH: *What are some examples from the curriculum?*

ES: In addition to the general educational knowledge provided, the curriculum includes modules on

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topics like "responsible photo sharing," "being a good consumer of online information," and "the public and permanent nature of your digital footprint," to name a few. It comes as a shock to many students and parents as well that their digital footprint will have more of an impact on their college and career opportunities than their actual grades.

For parents, we provide practical strategies for managing their children's device usage including family policy setting and promoting more effective dialogues to discuss technology issues with their children.

TJH: *You mentioned parents and children. As schools shift to technology-based learning models what kind of impact can we expect there and what should schools be doing about it?*

ES: Great question. Blended learning, which combines traditional classroom teaching methods with technology-based activities, is a great opportunity for customizing learning plans for students and for tracking individual student progress and achievement. However, the same screen time challenges apply. The position of The Digital Citizenship Project has always been if we are promoting technology use for its benefits, it must be paired with digital responsibility education. We have and continue to work with many schools that are taking a blended learning approach and, whether they are utilizing the full Digital Citizenship Project program, scheduling parent lectures, staff development programs or consulting with us on their policies on technology use and social media, they are clearly engaged in a thoughtful and deliberative pro-

cess with regards to student technology use.

TJH: *You bring up an interesting point: there are vast differences to a school community's engagement in technology with some schools providing students with handheld devices even in school while other schools have policies that students cannot have handheld devices even at home. How does The Digital Citizenship Project address such a broad spectrum of needs?*

ES: Our program is research-based and data driven. Before beginning work with any school community, we conduct a formative assessment to understand the unique digital profile of that community. We designed a comprehensive survey that paints a very clear picture of technology ownership, attitudes and behaviors, and that data is what informs the content of the parents' presentations, student workshops, and staff development programs. Not only does the technology profile differ from schools to school, but we see differences from grade to grade. While there are common issues amongst all schools, our statistical analysis allows us to address communal issues with significantly greater precision than an "off the rack" program might.

TJH: *What are some of the most significant findings in your research?*

ES: In our study of Jewish middle schools, nearly 70% of respondents reported owning a smartphone and 59% owning a computer tablet device, but only 15% reported having any filters or parental control settings activated on those devices. 50% of respondents reported having accidentally ended up on a website that their parents would disapprove of, and over 14% in total and 27% of eighth graders reporting intentionally looking up a website.

When asked, "Have you ever seen an image or video clip that disturbed you?", more than 50% in total and nearly 69% of eighth graders replied, "Yes." Other areas of concern are that 60% of respondents report sleeping with their cellphone within reach and going to bed late as a result of their online activity, and 44% of students reported "often" playing games or staying online longer than they intended.

What we are definitely seeing is that kids today need empowered and informed adults to help them manage their technology in a healthy way, and that is what The Digital Citizenship Project is here to do.

TJH: *Thank you for your time today. It is my understanding that you will be working numerous schools across the country this year. How can a school or community sign up for The Digital Citizenship Project?*

ES: Yes, we will be working with a number of schools in the New York metro area, greater Los Angeles area, and communities in between. Schools will also have the opportunity to participate in a full day training for both elementary and high schools educators on October 12, which leads to our "Tech Smart" certification in Digital Citizenship education. Training participants will receive our Digital Citizenship curriculum as well as the knowledge and skills to implement effective Digital Citizenship programming in their school communities. For more information we can be reached via email at info@thedigitalcitizenship.com or through our website, www.thedigitalcitizenship.com. ▲