Guiding Your Kids to Be Wise in a **Digital World**

Parenting Generation Screen

Jonathan McKee

Parenting Generation Screen Endorsements

This is *the* book for helping parents create a media safe home and *the* book to help you lead your kids toward making good decisions about their digital life. In my opinion, Jonathan McKee is one of the leading experts in the world of guiding our kids through this important part of their life. This will be my go-to book.

JIM BURNS, PHD, president of HomeWord; author of *The Purity Code* and *Understanding Your Teen*

I think I will keep a stack of Jonathan's *Parenting Generation Screen* in my car to hand to parents I dialogue with each week . . . because it deals with the exact issues they ask me about: When do I give my kids a phone? Should I let them have it in their bedroom? How much social media is too much? I love the wisdom and practicality Jonathan brings to his books . . . and wish I had this one five to ten years ago!

SHAUNTI FELDHAHN, bestselling author of For Women Only and For Parents Only

Parenting Generation Screen is the book I have been waiting for. As a parent of high school, junior high, and elementary students, it helped me tremendously to think through reasonable technological boundaries with my kids. I appreciate that Jonathan offers some practical, research-based suggestions, yet he focuses on the importance of relationships. Every parent needs to read this book and discuss it with others.

SEAN MCDOWELL, PHD, associate professor of apologetics at Talbot School of Theology; author of *Chasing Love: Sex, Love and Relationships in a Confused Culture*

If your kid is about to graduate grade school or high school—or is anywhere in between—then you need Jonathan McKee's *Parenting Generation Screen*. McKee jams practical wisdom on every page and even offers discussion questions at the end of each chapter that will jumpstart conversations between you and your teens. Get this book—and get your kid back!

DAVID R. SMITH, author of *Christianity* . . . *It's Like This: An Uncomplicated Look at What It Means to Be a Christ-Follower*

In a world where the average age that kids get their first smartphone is just ten years old, parents are struggling to keep up with their children's interaction with screens. *Parenting Generation Screen* gives moms and dads the tools they need not only to provide healthy screen limits but also to engage their kids in ongoing conversations about becoming screen-wise.

DOUG FIELDS, author of Intentional Parenting

No generation of young people has ever been so impacted by technology. It may be years before we understand the true impact of screen devices on our kids. In the meantime, Jonathan McKee—my go-to youth expert—has written a powerful and concise primer to help you navigate the world of screens. *Parenting Generation Screen* will help you engage your kids, understand their challenges, and set proper boundaries. If you've got young people in your life, *Parenting Generation Screen* is yet another essential resource from Jonathan McKee.

J. WARNER WALLACE, detective featured on *Dateline*; author of *So the Next Generation Will Know: Preparing Young Christians for a Challenging World*

I'm so thankful that Jonathan wrote this book! It's a literal guide to navigating cultural differences created by screens. Not only is it a great resource for parents, but I would especially encourage grandparents to read it as well.

GREG ALDERMAN, senior pastor of Christ Community Church, California

As a parent, we can often feel uninformed and overwhelmed when it comes to the world of smart phones and social media. Jonathan has given us yet another valuable resource, weaving compelling information with practical action steps and biblical wisdom. This is the handbook parents have been searching for to provide help navigating the challenges of parenting Generation Screen.

ROB CHAGDES, family ministry pastor of Prairie Lakes Church, Iowa

The content of the book will equip and guide you as parents in a digital world. I believe that Jonathan's book needs to be in every parent's hand as it will make you thrive in helping your kids make wise decisions.

ANDREW MCCOURT, senior pastor of Bayside Church

Improper use of screens is the most serious threat to our kids' emotional, intellectual, and physical health in this decade. Every parent knows that screens

can be devastating for kids but has no idea how to set boundaries that kids will actually honor. We are afraid. In *Parenting Generation Screen*, Jonathan gives advice that not only dissipates that fear but teaches us step by step how to set those boundaries. Most extraordinary is that his method actually helps kids grow closer to their parents. No parent in the 21st century can afford not to read this book.

MEG MEEKER, MD, national bestselling author of *Strong Fathers*, *Strong Daughters*; find her at: meekerparenting.com

Jonathan McKee offers a gift all 21st-century parents need—practical tips of what to say and do that convert technology from a barrier that keeps families apart to a bridge that draws us closer together.

KARA POWELL, PHD, executive director of the Fuller Youth Institute; chief of leadership formation at Fuller Seminary; co-author of *3 Big Questions That Change Every Teenager*

If there was such a thing as an adolescence survival kit for parents, this book would be in it. The wisdom here goes well beyond dealing with teens and screens and speaks to the hearts of parents and parenting. Read this book and you'll not only be prepared for the road ahead, but you'll also have a stronger relationship with your kids.

PETE SUTTON, pastor of student ministry at The Compass Church

Jonathan McKee has become a trusted voice for parents and teens striving to navigate 21st-century culture in wise and discerning ways. In his latest book, he examines screen use and identifies ways families can avoid technology's biggest stumbling blocks. This is a comprehensive, must-read handbook for any parent whose kids have screens in their hands.

JIM DALY, president of Focus on the Family

While there is much to be said about screens and the impact these new frontiers have on our teens, I am even more appreciative of this tool that Jonathan McKee is putting in the hands of parents. He reminds us all that conversations and relationships are better than rules and that parents can still have the greatest influence in the lives of their teens. Don't rush through this book and don't react; but after things sink in, I encourage you to act. Even though limiting screen time matters, communicating with your teen about it matters more.

JONATHAN MEYER, founder of Ignite Youth Leadership Conference; veteran youth pastor of 25+ years

Wow—every parent needs this book! Not only will it answer a multitude of questions you have, but it will help you ask and answer questions you have never even thought about. Jonathan's book is the most practical and comprehensive book I've ever read on this topic. Once you read it, you'll want to give it to every parent you know.

CYNTHIA ULRICH TOBIAS, bestselling author of 14 books, including *You Can't Make Me* (But I Can Be Persuaded), The Way They Learn, The Way We Work, Every Child Can Succeed, and A Woman of Strength and Purpose

Read this easy-to-read-and-learn-from book now. Jonathan's insights will encourage both your heart and your mind. His compassion for parents and children of all ages comes through on every page. He won't shame you, and you'll feel no guilt—no matter what you have or haven't done. His ideas are important, founded on solid research and many relevant experiences, and absolutely achievable. Best of all, he shows you how to involve your children in planning to be more screen-wise. You and they will know what to do, when to do it, how to do it, and why to do it. You will all have plenty of hope for the future!

DR. KATHY KOCH, founder of Celebrate Kids, Inc.; author of *Screens and Teens*, 8 Great Smarts, Start with the Heart, and Five to Thrive

Practical. Concrete. Relational. Realistic. Jonathan McKee's new book *Parenting Generation Screen: Guiding Your Kids to Be Wise in a Digital World* delivers winsome wisdom for parents grappling with the omnipresent issue of tweens and teens, screens and social media. If you feel like you've already made big mistakes or if your kids are on the cusp of the getting their first phone, Jonathan McKee's insights from years of ministering to parents will offer you and your family guidance and hope.

ADAM R. HOLZ, director of Focus on the Family's entertainment and technology website *Plugged In*

We are in the midst of a digital revolution that is fundamentally changing our world, and our children are at the frontlines. As a pastor and father, I desperately need help navigating this unknown, ever-changing digital landscape. Jonathan's ability to see through the eyes of young people while simultaneously being able to see beyond this perspective as a parent and youth ministry expert makes him the near perfect guide for navigating the challenges of parenting Generation Screen. His practical, relationship-oriented, and well-researched

approach has helped me invite my family and my congregation into crucial conversations about how we might become screen-wise. I want to get this book into the hands of every parent in my congregation.

PAUL ANDERSON, lead pastor of Grace Valley Fellowship

I realize that you expect an endorsement to say "this book is great, you should read it . . . "; but I'm telling you if you have a kid who likes their phone, this book is fantastic, and I'd beg you to read it! Not only does Jonathan give you insider info on things that so many parents aren't aware of, but he gives superpractical ideas for navigating phone-life. He's not just some distant "expert"; he's an experienced dad who has counseled parents nationwide. You already know that parenting is not for the faint of heart . . . but I believe this book can give your heart more courage and wisdom—and help your kids win!

SCOTT RUBIN, next generation director of EastSide Christian Church

You don't have to parent Generation Screen out of fear, frustration, or a lack of knowledge anymore. Years of working with teenagers (and raising his own kids) have made Jonathan McKee a voice of reason and source of wisdom. Instead of rationalizing the warning signs of too much screen time, you'll be inspired to engage with your child with renewed purpose. There's too much at stake to let screens take over your child's life. It's time to truly connect again face to face in families, and this book will help you do that.

ARLENE PELLICANE, author of *Parents Rising* and co-author of *Screen Kids* (with Dr. Gary Chapman)

Parenting teenagers is the single hardest thing I've ever done in my life. Any parent who doesn't agree isn't doing it right, and almost no parent alive would say that screens and smartphones (and everything those include) make it easier. We need help! That's what Jonathan offers—practical, humble, honest, and rooted-in-excellence parenting principles that supersede the details.

MARK OESTREICHER, founder and partner of The Youth Cartel; author of *Understanding Your Young Teen, A Parent's Guide to Understanding Teenage Brains* and other books.

The title of this book could be: *Everything I Need to Know about Setting Limits on Screens AND Building a Relationship with My Children*. Seriously, I haven't read a more practical, easy-to-read guide on helping parents understand

everything they need to know about kids and screens and still manage the relationship in a respectful, not controlling manner. This guide answers every question you've ever asked about screen time and gives you the tools for building trust in your kids as you help them learn how to be responsible. Every parent needs to read this book before buying their child a phone.

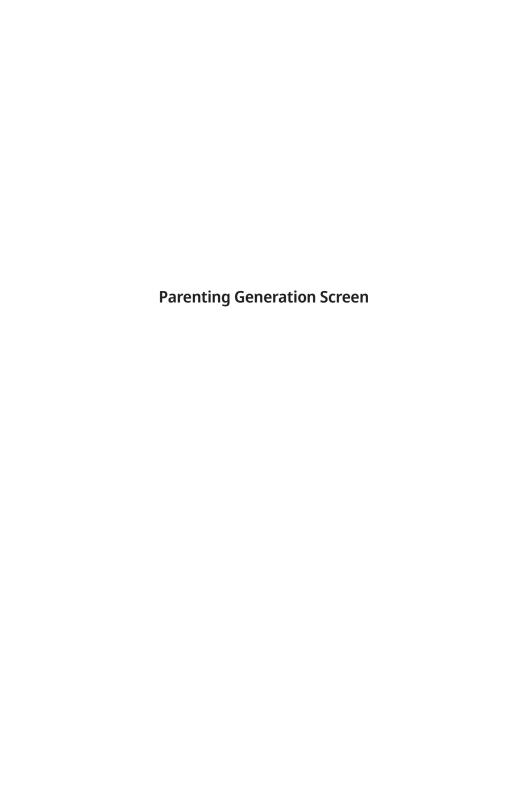
JOSHUA STRAUB, PHD, cofounder and president of Famous at Home

Every parent needs this insightful, easy-to-use guidebook to navigate the confusing and sometimes dangerous digital world of screens. Jonathan McKee is a trusted source for parents, and in *Parenting Generation Screen: Guiding Your Kids to Be Wise in a Digital World*, he shines in his element. Utilizing the latest research and years of experience, he weaves thoughtful parenting advice, how-to blueprints for those difficult conversations, and hope-filled wisdom, giving you success in setting boundaries while teaching the "why" without damaging relationships. Here are some of the many wisdom threads woven throughout this book: Limits don't work without love; boundaries are meaningless without bonding; correction is ineffective without connection. Jonathan utilizes these principles masterfully throughout the book to help you keep the main thing the main thing: strengthening your relationships with your kids as you guide them through the digital maze. This book is a must for your parenting toolbelt!

CARRIE ABBOTT, president of The Legacy Institute; host of *Relationship Insights* radio and podcast

Once again, Jonathan McKee delivers a helpful resource for parents. *Parenting Generation Screen* is must-read for parents as they navigate the uncertain waters of smart phones and teens. It's a 21st-century conundrum of screens and social media and the ill-equipped kids who have them. Herein this book lies a ton of wisdom for parents—enabling them to take a well-thought-out approach to this issue that must be faced.

BOB JOHNS, youth pastor at First Woodway Baptist Church



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FOCUS PAMILY.



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Most of the stories presented in this book are fictional composites based on the author's experience with hundreds of people through the years. Any resemblance between these fictional characters and actual persons is coincidental.

When the stories are not composites, people's names and certain details of their stories have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved. However, the facts of what happened and the underlying principles have been conveyed as accurately as possible.

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CHAPTER 1

They Don't Tell You This Stuff

Everything you wish you'd known before you bought your kids their first screen

"DAD, CAN I HAVE THE KEYS TO THE SUV?"

This question doesn't sound unusual—unless it comes from your ten-year-old.

Picture it. Your daughter walks into the room and says, "Dad, I'd like the keys so I can drive over to pick up my friends and then go meet a bunch of guys we've never met before and see what happens."

How would you respond?

The answer is pretty clear. I don't know a parent who would give their ten-year-old this kind of freedom.

But the majority of parents do . . . when they give their child a phone.

Good Intentions

Don't feel bad if you've already handed your kid a smartphone. Most moms and dads didn't have a clue about the dangers when they did that.

In fact, most parents I meet at my parenting workshops tell me that the whole reason they gave smartphones to their kids was to keep them safe.

"I just wanted them to be able to call me in case of an emergency."

"This way I can connect with them at all times."

"My kids are in sports and need to call me for a ride home."

I honestly think these parents' intentions were pure. They just had no idea that they were "throwing the keys" to their ten-year-old.

I'm using this example intentionally because ten is the average age a kid gets a phone in this country. In fact, the number of kids who have smartphones only increases with age:

- 53 percent of eleven-year-olds
- 69 percent of twelve-year-olds
- 72 percent of thirteen-year-olds1

Those numbers represent the kids who aren't even in high school yet.

By high school, the overwhelming majority of teens are "connected." Eighty-nine percent of teenagers (ages thirteen to seventeen) have smartphones,² and 95 percent have access to the most popular social media platforms.³

The kids who *don't* have devices feel a little out of place, and other kids tease them. "What do you mean you don't have a phone? Are you kidding? What are you, Amish or something? Hey, everyone, check it out. Braden's mommy doesn't let him have a phone!"

So for whatever reason, most of us have given our kids a device with potential far beyond what we ever would have predicted.

Like the mom of a kid I'll call Christine. This mom approached me at one of my parenting workshops after everyone else had left. I'd seen her standing off in the distance, noticeably anxious.

"Can I ask you a question?" she asked.

[&]quot;Sure."

"It's about my daughter, Christine."

"How old is she?" I asked.

"Thirteen. And she currently isn't allowed to use her phone. I've taken it away."

"When did she first get a phone?"

"A year ago. But I told her no social media or any of that bad stuff."

"How'd that work out?"

"It didn't," she answered candidly. "She downloaded some social media app I didn't even know about."

"Did you have any parental controls set on her phone?"

She hung her head. "No. I didn't know how to do that."

"I totally understand," I offered in an attempt to comfort her. "It's hard to keep up today. So what happened?"

"She met some guy who told her everything she wanted to hear, and she'd talk with him until all hours of the night."

"How old did the guy claim he was?" (Keyword: claim.)

"Seventeen," she answered. "He said he went to our local high school. She's homeschooled."

Finishing her story for her, I said, "But you found out he wasn't a teenager at all, right?"

"Yeah." She looked at me with the "How did you know?" expression I usually see at my parenting workshops.

"So did he ask for a nude?" Again, I noticed the "How did you know?" look. "I ask because this happens all the time," I explained. "You're not alone. I've heard stories like yours from moms all over the country."

"Yes," she replied, answering my question about the nude photo. "He did."

"And did she send him a pic?"

The mom looked down. "Yes. Her"—she struggled for words—"her top."

"And everything changed once she sent the pic, right?"

"Yes. He started insisting they meet, or else he would show the photo to everyone."

"So did she meet up with him?"

"She set up a time, but then she told her friend, who told her mom, who in turn told me. We called the police. They're still trying to find him." She wiped away a single tear trickling down her cheek. "They don't tell you this stuff when you buy your kid a phone."

"No, they certainly don't."

The next week, another mom approached me after one of my workshops on the opposite side of the country.

"So how can I get my son to stop playing video games literally all day?" she asked.

"How long does he typically play?" I probed.

"During the school year, he plays from the time he gets home until late at night. Homework is an afterthought. In the summer, it's even worse. He wakes up at noon and picks up his controller before his feet hit the floor. If we don't call him down for dinner, he won't leave his room at all until he quits playing after midnight."

"Have you tried limiting his game time?" I asked.

"Yeah. But we found that he just sneaks it in when we're at work or at his sister's gymnastics. We've tried to take him with us, but he just complains and makes us all miserable. I hate to admit it, but it's just easier to let him stay in his room and play his stupid games."

And then she said it.

"I wish I'd known this before I bought him that stupid game system."

A few weeks later, twelve hundred miles away, another mom pulled me aside and asked, "How do I convince my daughter that her grades still matter, even if she wants to be a social media influencer?"

"What platform does she use?" I asked. "YouTube? TikTok?"

"YouTube. She posts a weekly vlog and has about nine hundred

followers. She read an article somewhere that you only need five hundred to be an influencer. She's scrapped her plans to become a teacher and wants to be a full-time influencer now. She won't even look at college applications."

"You're not alone," I assured the mom. "Eighty-six percent of young people want to be an influencer of some sort today.⁴ But less than one-twentieth of one percent are able to do it full-time."

Then she said it.

"The school didn't tell me this stuff when they issued her a laptop for distance learning."

A month later, in my home state, a dad asked me, "What do you do when you discover your son looking at inappropriate pictures in his room late at night?"

"Does he always have his phone in his bedroom?" I asked.

"Not now. But when I took it away, I caught him again, this time with an old phone that wasn't even activated. We didn't remember he still had that phone."

"Yeah, old phones or tablets can still connect to Wi-Fi even if they don't have an active data plan. I constantly hear parents telling me stories of kids using old devices in their bedrooms."

And then I heard it again: "How come no one tells you this stuff?" That's exactly why I wrote this book.

A Tap Away

It's true. No one tells you this stuff when you're buying your kids their first screens for Christmas. And kids aren't required to learn anything about becoming screenwise before they get a device. Most parents just throw their kids the keys.

Sadly, the examples I just shared aren't unique. I'm being completely honest when I tell you I hear stories like these in *every* city where I speak,

and not just from parents. In fact, whenever I speak about this at school assemblies, kids will come up to me afterward and ask questions about something that just happened at their school . . . on their device . . . that Mom and Dad didn't know about . . . that's causing an unprecedented amount of anxiety, depression, and tears.

That's just it. It's not that screens are bad, but they've unarguably exposed kids to greater risks to their physical safety and mental health. And even though many of us experienced similar risks when we were young, our modern devices have only amplified the risks for two simple reasons:

- They've increased accessibility to harmful content and dangerous people.
- · They've decreased accountability.

Porn was available when I was a teenager, but kids had to actually make an effort to find it. Today, it's just a tap away, with the devices we all carry in our pockets. Pedophiles have existed for millennia, but now they have unrestricted access to kids who are sharing way too much about themselves and are desperate for "followers." Young people have always

Porn was available when I was a teenager, but kids had to actually make an effort to find it. Today, it's just a tap away. struggled with self-esteem, but now they carry devices with them that tell them exactly how many more friends other people have, how many more followers others have, and precisely how they measure up to everyone else who is more popular, better looking, and more

creative than they are. And these devices follow our kids literally everywhere: school, home, the bedroom, the bathroom . . .

Increased accessibility; decreased accountability.

It's no wonder many mental-health experts, like Dr. Jean Twenge, claim that smartphones may be destroying a generation of teens.⁵

But it doesn't have to be this way.

It's Not Too Late

Parents *can* do something to protect their children. And no, the answer isn't banning your kids from screens until they're adults and out of the house. Far from it.

But at the same time, you don't need to "throw the keys" to your ten-year-old.

Consider Christine for just a moment—the true story I shared earlier about a thirteen-year-old girl whose mom ended up taking away her phone. If Christine's mom had a do-over, I know she would rethink her parenting decisions and would probably handle the following issues differently:

- 1. Christine's mom chose to give Christine a phone at the age of twelve, while most experts advise parents to wait until their kids are older and a little more mature. (We'll cover this in detail in chapter 3.) Christine's mom didn't know this. In fact, Christine was one of the last kids in her church youth group to get a phone. The pressure was on. So her mom finally caved and bought her a phone. She threw her twelve-year-old the keys.
- 2. Christine's mom told Christine, "No social media or any of that bad stuff," but she never enforced the rule. So it wasn't long before Christine cheated and got on social media. A lot of parents allow young kids to use social media, such as Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter, but are unaware that kids under thirteen can't even download those apps without lying about their age. (More on that in chapter 3.) Kids under thirteen shouldn't be on social media, period. At least Christine's mom said no to social media, but . . .

- 3. She didn't set any parental controls. Christine was free to do whatever she wanted with her device. Imagine if her device were a car. She'd be free to drive as fast as she wanted, seat belt off, radio blasting, friends hanging out the sunroof—with no cops patrolling the roads. (We'll talk more about helpful parental controls in chapter 8.)
- 4. She didn't set limits. Christine's mom said that Christine was talking with this guy "until all hours of the night." That's a lot of hours. We live in a world where teens average nine hours and forty-nine minutes a day soaking in entertainment media, including seven hours and twenty-two minutes of screen media. But almost every expert out there recommends that parents limit screen time to some degree, especially social media. Yes, there has been a lot of debate about this topic, with overreactions on both sides, but you'll discover that almost all experts agree on a few undebatable guidelines about screen time—including the point that endless access to social media throughout the night should definitely not be allowed. (More on screen time in chapter 6.)
- 5. She allowed Christine to have the phone in her bedroom at night. Christine wasn't just clocking the hours on her phone; she was clocking "after hours" when she was supposed to be sleeping. That means she was one of 79 percent of young people who keep their phones in their bedrooms every night, even though every mental-health professional would say this is a very bad idea. (We'll talk more about the effects of allowing phones in the bedroom in chapter 4.)
- 6. Christine's mom never told her daughter what predatory behaviors look like. So Christine wasn't suspicious when a stranger direct-messaged (DM'ed) her, asking all the right questions while

avoiding FaceTime or other platforms where she could see him in real time. She wasn't even alarmed when he asked her to send a "nude" and eventually meet in person. This guy was following the predator's handbook word for word, but Christine didn't know how to recognize predatory behaviors. (We'll talk about these in detail in chapter 7.)

7. Christine had no idea any of these things would happen, because her mom never talked with her about them. Even if her mom had set every boundary and parental control available (remember that Christine was a very sheltered homeschool kid), the decision about how to use social media was ultimately Christine's.

Rules won't raise your kids. You actually need to teach them discernment so they can make decisions on their own. (We'll flesh this out throughout the book.)

Rules won't raise your kids.

You actually need to teach them discernment so they can make decisions on their own.

It's not too late for Christine and her

mom. The two of them are starting over. Christine's mom is waiting a while before returning her phone. In fact, they're now meeting for breakfast once a week, reading my book *The Teen's Guide to Social Media and Mobile Devices* together, and talking about real-world issues, including what Christine is posting, whom she's friending, and what she's streaming. Christine's mom is balancing boundaries and bonding. She's not just enforcing rules; she's also being proactive by engaging Christine in meaningful conversations about stuff that matters.

If you're a parent (or guardian) who wants to be proactive about social media use, you've probably asked yourself these questions:

- At what age should I give my kids a phone, or any other device for that matter? After all, their friends already have phones.
- What if I've already given my kids a phone? What now? Do I take their phones away until they're older?
- Should I set parental controls? And if so, which ones? Should these controls change as my kids get older?
- At what age should I allow my kids on social media? What effect does social media actually have on their mental health? Is it even safe?
- What about screen time? Does it really affect kids? How many hours are too many? Does the number of hours change on the weekends, during the summer, or when our country quarantines everyone in their homes with nothing to do?
- What if my kids want to take their devices into their bedrooms at night? The overwhelming majority of kids do, so are my kids going to be the class oddballs if I require them to give me their phones every night?
- How do I guard my kids from online predators? Young people all want more followers today, so they "friend" anyone and everyone.
 What are the ramifications of this, and how can I help my kids recognize predatory behaviors?
- Most importantly, how am I supposed to help my kids with all of this when they seem to know more about technology than I do? How can I teach discernment with a device I don't even understand?

Good questions. Let me comfort you right away by letting you know that it's almost impossible to keep up with technology . . . and you don't need to. You don't need to be an expert on every new app released and every

musical artist your kids encounter. You only need to understand some broad safety principles that apply to all devices, apps, and entertainment and then exercise discernment.

If you have this basic understanding, when your kid asks you some random question, such as "Mom, Dad . . . can I download the app Houseparty?" you'll be able to answer, "I don't know. But let's check it out together."

And you'll know exactly what to check for.

So let's dive in. The best way to begin is by connecting before correcting.

Discussion Questions

- 1. Be honest: what's your favorite screen device and why?
- 2. What are your kids' favorite screen devices and screen activities?
- 3. Why do you think parents are giving their kids devices at increasingly younger ages, without providing any guidance as to how to be wise with their screens?
- 4. How have you noticed the increased accessibility to harmful content via screens decreasing young people's accountability regarding the kinds of entertainment they're streaming?
- 5. Jonathan cited seven issues that Christine's mom would probably rethink and handle differently if she had a do-over. Name just one of these issues that stood out to you as vitally important.
- 6. Jonathan said, "Rules won't raise your kids. You actually need to teach them discernment so they can make decisions on their own." What is one way you could try this with your kids this week?