Students Unplugged

By Jeff Siener

Over the course of nearly 20 years teaching at Liberty, I have seen many changes. Testing on computers, the explosion of the Internet, and using email as the primary source of communication with families name just a few. Yet some aspects of the field of education have remained very constant. I have observed a common thread in many of the students who have thrived, not only academically, but also socially, and thereby become better prepared for college and the working world. Interestingly, this commonality is not something taught at school. It is an action and philosophy from their home lives. Many of the most successful and driven students I have had the privilege of working with and watching pass through the halls of our school have been brought up in an environment with limited screen time and exposure to video games and other gaming devices.

For most children and young adults, electronics have addictive qualities. Their high levels of visual stimulation and immediate feedback cause many "plugged-in" students to become less engaged with daily tasks at home and at school.

There are many studies and articles circulating about the pros and cons of video games in relation to reaction time and problem solving abilities. Additionally, I have used my own unofficial study group over nearly two decades, my students. The negative implications for students who regularly play video games and excessively watch television far outweigh the benefits.

On and off over the last 10 years, I have given a challenge to my students. At the beginning of second semester, I challenge them to completely refrain from watching TV, movies, and playing video games at home, even on the weekends and during breaks from school. The results of this challenge are always the same. Many students are unable to hold out beyond the initial five day school week. For the motivated students who push through the first two weeks, there is a noticeable transformation. At home, they spend more time outside, reading, and playing with siblings. At school, I find the students are better rested, more focused on tasks, have better class participation, and display improved work quality. The students that persevere beyond one month begin to develop new habits and take on new hobbies or sports. They seem to be physically healthier because their attendance at school improves. The most profound change for every student that pushes beyond one month is the immense growth in his or her reading skills.

In the 21st century, it is very difficult, and unrealistic, for all of us to completely "unplug", especially when so much of our daily lives are conducted through these convenient, yet addictive, devices. Below are several small steps that can have a huge impact for reducing distracting screen time and improving long term success.

- Avoid movie-sitters. Keep a stack of books in a bag to take with you when you go somewhere that may involve sitting and waiting. Save movies in the car for road trips if watched at all. Audiobooks always make a great alternative.
- Do not put a television or computer in a child's bedroom at any age.
- Avoid getting children their own cell phones, tablets, or computers as long as possible. Base the timing on family needs, not social pressures or a begging child. Having an extra "family" phone is a possible solution.
- Avoid screen time from Sunday evening until Friday afternoon unless it is school related, such as studying, practicing skills, or doing research.

- Avoid cell phones or tablets in the bedroom at least one hour before bedtime. Many studies have shown how detrimental the use of electronic devices before bed is to sleep quality and duration.
- When your children's friends come to your home to visit, help them develop healthy social skills by asking them to leave their electronic devices in a basket by the door.

We live in an amazing time with so many great tools and a vast amount of information at our fingertips. As parents and educators, it will be a continuous endeavor to balance the use of such tools and devices while setting reasonable and realistic boundaries for our children.

"When I was a kid, my social network was outside."
- *Unknown*