

Want to keep your kids safe online? First, take them on Digital Black Box Tour

Today is Safer Internet Day – a good time to give your child a guided tour of your own digital device, showing what you do on it and talking through the choices you make.



Lim Sun Sun

The hall was thick with tension as Meta boss Mark Zuckerberg apologised to parents who had lost their children to social media-related tragedies during the recent United States congressional hearing on alleged online harms to children.

Social media posts on the apology condemned Mr Zuckerberg and Big Tech companies for their role in this sad state of affairs. But there were others who criticised the parents present at the hearing: “Don’t blame Big Tech for your bad parenting” or “They’re your kids, why didn’t you watch them?”

As harsh as these comments may be, they reflect the grim reality that, as parents, we cannot escape prime responsibility for our children’s media use, but not because our responsibility for our children’s online safety should be absolute. Far from it.

I recognise that tech companies have a critical role to play in shoring up online safety, but until they step up more completely and quickly, we parents are still our children’s best bets for sharpening their online skills.

Technological advancements to enable more safety features to moderate adverse content and facilitate reporting of violations will invariably play catch-up with the ever-growing scourge of online vitriol, harassment and disinformation.

Governments around the world, including in Singapore, have also made valiant attempts to introduce new regulations and governance requirements to rein in Big Tech corporations and hold them to higher standards in ensuring online trust and safety.

However, these policies are slow to take effect and, experientially, consumers cannot easily discern their efficacy when they personally encounter disturbing content or harassment.

Hence, even as Big Tech corporations and governments need to intensify efforts for online safety, there is a great deal parents can do to boost our children’s security and well-being as they go online. And on this Safer Internet Day, there is actually nothing more effective than taking your child on your very own Digital Black Box Tour.

Essentially, this involves giving your child a guided tour of your own digital device, whether it is your smartphone, tablet or laptop, showing them what you do on it and talking through the choices you make.

HOW THE BLACK BOX CAME ABOUT

Why is this a meaningful exercise? Consider how childhoods and the home environment have evolved over the decades.

As a precocious youngest sister to three older siblings, I grew up constantly curious about what they were doing because I never wanted to be left out. I came to know about Jacques Cousteau and Carl Sagan documentaries that my science-loving brother adored as we fought over access to the family television, and found myself enjoying the programmes. I devoured the historical and spy novels belonging to my book-mad older sisters because their covers piqued my interest.

I badgered my father about intriguing headlines in the newspapers as he was reading them and asked my mother incessant questions about the radio programmes she blared from the family hi-fi set, or the Cantonese dramas she and I watched late into the night.

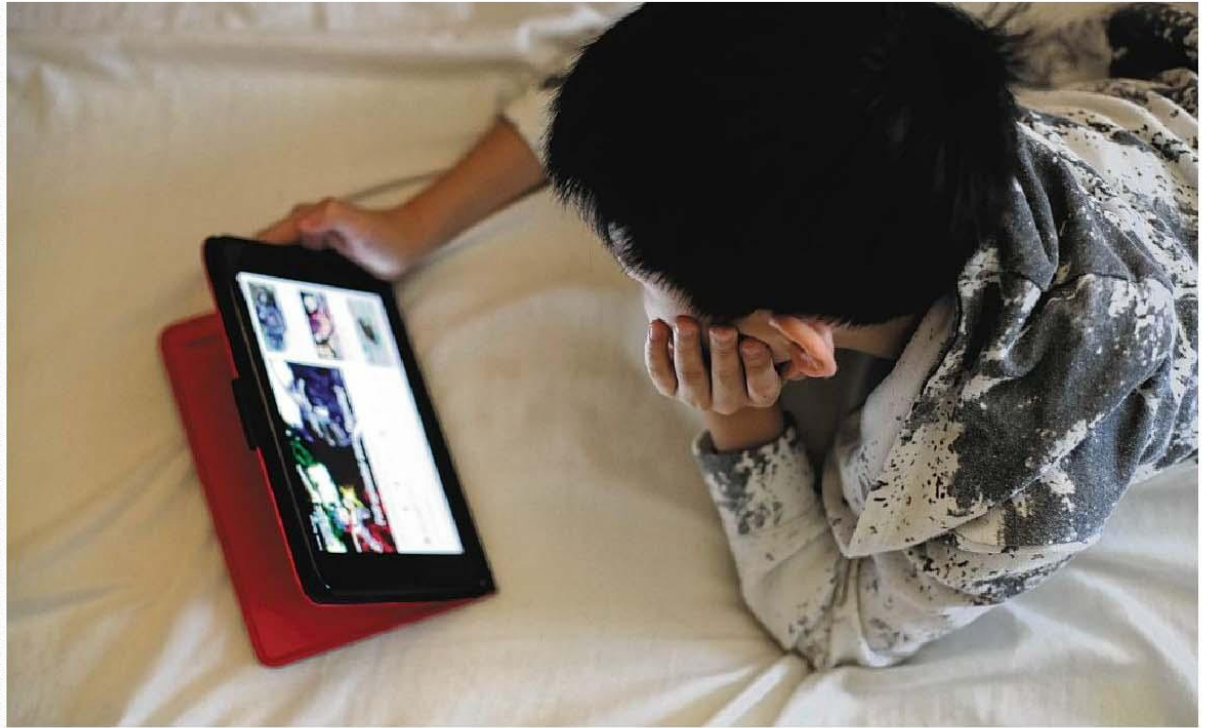
Magazines were strewn all over the house, inviting exploration by idle hands and minds, and I went through heaps of Look and Learn, Reader’s Digest, Time and Newsweek. Such was the tactile, shared media content of halcyon, pre-Internet days.

With the irrevocable turn to digitalisation, our homes look quite different today. Even though families now have way more media than we can consume, the number of books, magazines and other diversions, such as board games, may be fewer.

A growing number of households consume most of their media digitally, with smartphones, iPads and laptops containing everything from Netflix to Spotify playlists, to e-books, video games and social media.

Personalisation is the order of the day, with family subscriptions to video or audio streaming services allowing each member to watch and listen to only what they like, as algorithms busily drive customised and targeted recommendations.

For children today, it must be hard to appreciate the long tail of media that their parents and siblings consume because all they see most of the time are



The rise of individualised and personalised devices has ensconced every family member in an exclusive and exclusionary media bubble, says the writer. Each of us has our very own digital black box, so parents must put in extra effort to make our positive media consumption habits visible to our children. ST FILE PHOTO

grown-ups on their devices, even though we could be reading a book, keeping up with news, replying to work-related messages, completing an online learning module or trading stocks.

Unlike tangible physical media, where children can easily observe what adults do, and imbibe ideas as they watch what we watch and read what we read, all they see today are us and our devices.

Indeed, with the rise of individualised and personalised devices, coupled with the use of headsets, every family member is ensconced in an exclusive and exclusionary media bubble.

Each of us has our very own digital black box. So parents must put in extra effort to make our positive media consumption habits visible to our children.

WHAT’S ON THE TOUR?

As you take your children on your Digital Black Box Tour, share with them the different kinds of apps

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and programmes you use for work, learning, recreation, wellness, social interaction and content creation.

It is during such tours that parents should explain why not all screen time is equal.

Clearly, some screen time activities are more essential and edifying, whereas others may be unhealthy if done in excess.

Explain how you curate the media content you consider more enjoyable and meaningful, and the benefits you derive. Introduce to them the e-books you are reading, podcasts you listen to, and the social media accounts you follow. Show them how you customise your interests on these apps so that the recommendation engines work harder and better.

Beyond introducing them to the diversity of media content you consume and how they are of varying utility and quality, helping your children understand how you organise your device is also invaluable. You can also highlight some fundamentals around how you manage the content you store in the cloud, group your apps by function and genre, turn on features to help manage your screen time, and switch off notifications to minimise their frequency and potential for distraction.

Safety and security measures, especially for transactional apps, are also worth explaining.

To be sure, with technology evolving so rapidly and some jobs being more digitally focused than others, not all parents will be

equally adept in their device use.

But there are free resources to plug the gap. These include helpful online guides produced by the Media Literacy Council, Infocomm Media Development Authority, National Library Board and Cyber Security Agency of Singapore on media literacy and online safety. These agencies also conduct roadshows and training programmes where parents can acquire essential digital competencies.

BENEFITS OF A SHARED EXPERIENCE

In addition to giving your children the Digital Black Box Tour, invite them to reciprocate by having them show you around their devices. Embark on this after coming to a mutual agreement about respecting each other’s privacy, especially for older children who naturally crave more independence.

Your children will likely have their own content management tricks, productivity hacks and screen time management techniques that you can definitely emulate. If you have a family WhatsApp chat, share links of interesting content you encounter, but judiciously, to avoid spamming.

And by all means, if you have poor media habits of any kind, take the opportunity to admit this to them. There is nothing quite like calling out your own shortcomings to forge a stronger connection with your child whose

bad habits you are constantly correcting.

Use such points of resonance to encourage each other in improving your device use. If you feel that you are on your devices too much, make it a fun challenge to motivate each other to better manage your screen time.

Academic research on parental mediation is rich with evidence on the benefits of media co-use, where parents and children watch television programmes or play video games together not just to bond, but also to enhance mutual understanding.

It also allows parents to offer useful advice to their children in their media choices and to impart family values. The Digital Black Box Tour is an excellent form of co-use, and can lay the ground for deeper conversations and stronger family connections. It is far better than any parental control or content filter you could install on your child’s device.

So before you pack your bags for Hokkaido or book your tickets for Bali, consider taking your children on the Digital Black Box Tour. It’s the best tour you could organise for them, and, better yet, it’s free.

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