



THE GROWING BRAIN

Episode 7: Technology and Kids: What You Need to Know

Guest: Dena Kohleriter

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Pre-teen begging for a smart phone? Toddler anxious for more screen time? In this episode, we talk about the good and the bad with technology, including social media, texting, cyber bullying, and more.

Welcome to The Growing Brain, a social emotional health podcast. This podcast is produced by Momentous Institute, a nonprofit in Dallas, Texas, dedicated to social emotional health for kids, families, adults, and communities. This first season of The Growing Brain is dedicated to parents. We will explore the joys, challenges and mysteries of parenthood through the lens of social emotional health. In this series, we'll shed light on topics such as how kids' brains work and healthy discipline, all better equipping parents to grow healthy brains. I'm your host, Maureen Fernandez with Momentous Institute.

Maureen *Welcome back to the growing brain podcast. I'm so excited to talk today about technology with our guests, Dena Kohleriter. Dena is a licensed clinical social worker on our therapeutic services team at Momentous Institute. In her role, Dena works a lot with teenagers on developing healthy relationships and especially around issues related to dating violence, bullying, and cyber bullying. And she's here today to talk to us about, what is just an increasingly important and relevant topic, and that is the impact of technology on kids and teenagers. So thank you so much for being here, Dena.*

Dena *Sure. Thank you for having me.*

Maureen *I want to open up today's conversation by just sort of talking about how challenging this is for parents. And we know that too much technology of really any kind is damaging for kids in the same way that too much sugar is bad for our kids, right. And it's our job as parents to kind of set those limits. But with technology, it's a lot harder to set those limits than it is with, say, sugar. And that's because technology is everywhere.*

It's on our phones, it's in the tablets and laptops, TVs, you go out to dinner and there's a TV playing, you go to school and you use technology, your homework involves technology. So it's just a lot harder to manage than it then other issues. So, um, I just wanted to open with that sort of

acknowledgement that what we're talking about today feels a little overwhelming. And it doesn't seem like it's going to change anytime soon, it doesn't look like we're going to decrease our technology use. So there's something that we, we as parents have work to do and it, and it can feel a little overwhelming.

Dena Absolutely what I think what can be overwhelming about this is that oftentimes with our understanding of technology, it's our kids that are leading the charge. They are so much more knowledgeable about it than we are. And I can't tell you how many times I have to go to my, my teenage niece or nephew and ask them to show me something about my phone, because I don't understand.

Maureen *Right.*

Dena So how do we as parents and, and, um, people that are responsible for other children, how do we set limits and, and talk about these things in a knowledgeable way when they know more about it than we do, right?

Maureen *That's that is a challenge for sure. So let's, let's kind of start with the big one. Um, and that is cell phones.*

Dena Yeah.

Maureen *So we could spend the whole episode, I'm sure, talking about cell phones, but let's talk a little bit about the introduction of cell phones. So it seems to me that kids are younger and younger having access to cell phones, asking for cell phones. And what are some things that we as parents should be thinking about when it's appropriate to give our kids a cell phone?*

Dena Um, you know, I think what's important to think about is there aren't any hard and fast rules about it because I think a lot of times it's situational and what I encourage parents to think about is the need versus the want.

Um, so oftentimes, you know, kids, they want that cell phone because, you know, they want to have access to the internet. They want to have all these social media apps. They want to be able to message their friends or play games. But do they need the phones? And generally the rule I kind of go by is, um, unless there are circumstances where, you know, there are working parents and they need to contact their children that might be, um, going home or staying with someone else and they want them to have the cell phone for that reason. What type of phone is it that they need, you know, do they need the brand new iPhone or is there a basic flip phone that is good for calling and texting and that's how you can communicate with them?

The other piece of it is, um, I wouldn't, I wouldn't go based on an age or a grade. I think a lot of it has to do with maturity level. You know, what can

your child handle? And there are kids that are way more mature, um, at 10 than some of the 17-year-olds that you see.

Maureen *Right.*

Dena So you have to take those things into consideration. Um, kind of the rule in my household is that we're not even going to talk about it until middle school.

Maureen *Mmm. Yeah.*

Dena And I think that that's where we see a lot of the peer pressure, um, playing... playing a part in it. And that's where, how kids socialize really starts to change is when they get to middle school, because we've really seen an evolution, an evolution in how kids are socializing now. Um, vast majority of kids are gonna, uh, teenagers in particular, they're communicating via online technology, you know, they're messaging, messaging, each other. They're using communication apps like WhatsApp or Kik, and that's how they're socializing and connecting with one another. And you want your kid to be able to fit in, but can they use these things responsibly?

And so if we can look at that part of it is kind of an evolution where kids have always wanted to, you know, hang out. I remember I couldn't wait until I got my own phone line when I was little and I would go home and I would spend hours on the phone. Right, but it's different now how they're spending hours on the phone is by the screen.

Maureen *Right.*

Dena So, um, and is your kid ready? So you have to kind of look at the need versus the want, and then another piece of it as he, you have to decide how you're going to set that up.

Maureen *Okay. So let's, so let's talk about that. So say you decide to give your child a cell phone and you determine that they're ready and they need it. And, and then what?*

Dena This is, this is the thing, I think a lot of times people kind of, they just give their kids a cell phone and later on, they've got a lot of problems about it. So if we can be thoughtful on how we're going to do it and the rules that we set up beforehand, that's going to save you big headaches.

So, um, one thing that I encourage parents to let their kids know is that, um, hey, I'm really, really proud of you. You have shown a lot of maturity and responsibility, and because of that reason, we're going to trust you with something. We are going to get a cell phone for you to use, but I want to be clear. The cell phone is my cell phone and I am letting you use it because

you're showing good judgment and good maturity. And as long as you continue to do that, you're going to have use of the cell phone. But if we see things happening where we're showing lack of good judgment, and it's not following the rules that we set up for you for usage, then we're going to have to take our phone back.

Because I think a lot of times kids get into a power struggle. Like parents are like, no, you're on the phone too long. They're fighting over it. They take the phone away and the kid's like, that's my phone!

Maureen *Right. Yeah. That's good. Just a reframe.*

Dena Yup. Yep. And even if that has happened, you know, you can also put down, who's paying for the service? May be your phone but it's my service, but I think it eliminates a lot of the headache if you're clear from the beginning that this is, this is our property, that we're letting you use.

Maureen *And so you mentioned that that setting the expectations was a good idea. So what are some of the, kind of, ground rules that you would set with a phone?*

Dena Well, one thing that, you know, this is one of the blessings of technology is we have a lot of resources available to us at our fingertips.

So if you go online and look up a cell phone contracts, um, and I'm not talking about like your, your contract with AT&T, but, but there, there are contracts that you can set up with your child that says, you know, I'm really happy, um, that, that you're, you're getting this and here, these are the rules. The cell phone may be used between these hours, you know, at nine o'clock, the phone is to be turned into me where it's going to be charged in my room, and I'll be happy to give it to you the next day. Right? Um, you have to have conversations about, um, um, what is responsible, uh, texting and messaging. What's okay, what's, what's appropriate, what's inappropriate? Um, you know, I think we all kind of, uh, fear the idea of, of this idea of sexting with our young kids. But we have to talk about it because it's happening and talking with kids about nude photographs being sent out, you know, and if someone sends you that, what do you do with it? Because if you have that on your phone, that's considered child pornography, right.

Maureen *Even if you're just receiving it?*

Dena Even if you've just received it. So being clear with kids. If you receive something like this, you, you know, you need to show me right away and we're going to have to, we're going to have to turn the, well, maybe you'll tell them when it happens that you have to turn this into the police because you can't possess this. It's, it's a crime to possess this image. But also talking with kids about anything we put out there online on the internet, it's there forever. And there's no taking it back. So if you think that you're sending

something to a close friend or a boyfriend or a girlfriend, and it's only going to be between the two of you? That's not true because we've seen it over and over again where relationships end and they get mad at each other and, and pictures, or, um, messages get sent out to the, the community that it was not intended to.

Maureen *Right. And some, and some things give us false sense of security, like Snapchat, for example. Oh, it deletes after they view it. And we know that that's not true.*

Dena No, because you take a screenshot of it and then there you go, right? Yes. So you want to make sure that you're, you're being open and honest with your kids. I think a lot of times parents fear, if I bring this up, I'm going to put the idea in their head. But, I mean, let's be realistic here that we don't have control over all the things that are going on in their world and they're getting these messages out there. And if you can, if you can be brave and talk about those topics that are hard to talk about, that they're going to know that they can come and talk to you about the hard stuff. And so when they're in trouble, when something happens, they know that, you know, I can talk to my parents about that.

Maureen *Yeah, that, yeah, that's really good. And that kind of extends beyond just technology, but it's especially important in this conversation.*

Dena Well, and I think word we're talking about technology, um, but we're talking about healthy communication all the way around. This technology is the tool that they're using. So, so what we're talking about is it's a new concept in terms of how we're doing it, but really it's ancient. It's how do we communicate with each other? How do we develop relationships with our kids so that we can help guide them to a healthy lifestyle and to a safe adulthood?

Maureen *Right, right. That's a really good point. And so for us as parents, its sort of reframing some of the things that we, we already know, we have to help our kids communicate well with their peers and show up in a respectful and responsible way in the world. And, and just sort of extending that into the technology space instead of thinking of technology as a whole separate thing with its own rules.*

Dena Right.

Maureen *It has some separate rules, but really it's an extension of the lessons that we're imparting on our kids in general.*

Dena Absolutely. I think technology has gotten this rap as being this evil thing. You know, all of us as parents, we fear it. We fear launching our children into the world of technology, but technology is not good or bad. It's in how we use it. And there are lots of really positive things about technology too. I

mean, I've seen, um, kids that have been able to develop friendships and make connections with people that have a difficult time making connections in the real world.

Yeah. So it's not necessarily as good and there's bad. And we have to talk about how to get the good out of it and how to avoid the bad, right?

Maureen *Yeah, yeah. Yeah. That's really good. So, so just going back to phones, just for anyone who's listening, who's like, oops, I didn't do the cell phone contract. I didn't, I don't take it out of their room at night. And now my 16-year-old has a phone and maybe they're not using it appropriately. What advice would you give for parents who, who didn't probably set it up the way that maybe was recommended?*

Dena *Oops, my bad, you know, it comes down to like, we're constantly having to model for our children. Right. And we want our children to take responsibility and acknowledge when they've made mistakes. So we have to acknowledge this mistake and coming back to your child and saying, you know what? I just want you to know that I think I really made a mistake because there are some things that we should have talked about before I gave you the phone that we didn't, and so now there's some things that have come to my awareness that we needed to talk about.*

Yeah. And so this is a contract that's, that's being used. Like lots of parents are using this. If you look online, there's tons of these because there's so many people that are using it. And so you can reintroduce it. And if your child starts throwing a fit you can say, oh, I'm really sorry, but you know, if you continue like this, we might have to turn off the service. You know, that's another, that's another benefit of the technology is man - what a motivator.

Maureen *No kidding. That's true.*

Um, so let's talk about monitoring your child's use of technology. So you mentioned social media and, and how they use apps to communicate. Is it, in your opinion, appropriate for parents to sort of be reading their child's text messages or have access to their Instagram passwords or how, what level of, um, involvement do you think parents should have?

Dena *This is, um, these are the answers that some of my teenage clients are not going to be happy with me with. Um, but absolutely. And I would actually say that part of your cell phone contract is that you put in there that if you're adding social media apps, that I will have the passwords to any of those things. And I, I can be, I can access them at all times. That if you are on Facebook or Snapchat, um, or, um, Instagram that I am, I am one of your connections on that, and that I am able to see it. Because the thing that I want you to know is that I may or may not be reading them, but I don't want*

you putting anything out there that you would be embarrassed for me to read.

And so this is kind of a way for you to kind of check yourself and that I can make sure that you're healthy. And when you initially give them the, this phone, you *are* going to be checking. Cause it's kind of like when you're teaching a kid to ride a bike, you know, you don't just put them on the bike and say, have at it, right. There's these steps that whether you get on a balance bike first or they've got training wheels and then you're running along beside them holding them up and then you let go. You've got to ease them into it. And trust is not something that's just given. So trust is something that's earned. Yeah. And so sometimes, sometimes you gotta be a little, um, more vigilant, especially in it initially for everybody's comfort.

Maureen *And so I assume your teenage clients who would not like that answer would argue, you know, what about my privacy? Or would you read my journal? You know, is, is this a different conversation than, than general privacy for teenagers?*

Dena Well, and, and what I would say is, you know, what, I get your fear. You know, and I would be nervous about it too. Your journal is your own, right? When you write in a journal, that's private and moms and dads should not be reading your journal. Moms and dads, if you're listening, do not read your kid's journal. That is a safe place for them to just kind of put their thoughts out. But if you are posting something online, that is public domain. So if the entire world would have access to it, I'm part of the entire world. I have access to it.

Maureen *Yeah. Yeah. That's a good distinction. So let's imagine a scenario where a parent did all these things, right. They set up the contract and they did all the things. And then the child does make a mistake online. Maybe they post something inappropriate or they're engaged in some kind of texting conversation that's harmful or damaging. So, uh, how do parents go towards those?*

Dena This is a tough one because I think depending on the depth of it, right. You know, because there are some, there are some mistakes that takes a lot more, um, you know, some of those mistakes might need counseling and it might need some legal support as well, but let's, let's, let's dial it back and talk about the normal mistakes because here's the thing.

Nobody's perfect. And we're all human and what's, I think what's hard about, um, the screen is it's almost like it gives you permission to say things that you wouldn't normally say to someone face to face. And there's this feeling of intimacy and safety, you know? Cause you're in your own room and, and you're, you know, looking at your screen and you're imagining them in their own room and no one else is there. And then you think it's private. Um, and so sometimes people say or do things that they wouldn't

normally do. And when you have those oops moments, you gotta go towards it with your kids. And you say, look, um, you know, I saw that you wrote this and, um, what are our rules about this? You know, I want you to know, people make mistakes, but there are some mistakes that really have, have impacts. What can we do to fix this? And maybe there are consequences for that. You know, we had this contract and what it said is that you would use it responsibly. Does this follow that? Okay. So what, what was the agreement? Okay. So then you have to lose your phone for a week or whatever it is that you had decided, but what's important is if you have set up some rules and guidelines, and there has been a violation of that, you have to follow up.

I think a lot of times parents are like, oh, I feel bad. I don't want to completely cut them off from their friends. Or they keep saying that they need, they need it to do their homework. Right. That's a big one that I hear. Um, yeah, I'm sorry. These are part of the consequence. You need something for homework. Okay. Well, let's sit here in the kitchen together and I'm with you. What is it that you need?

Maureen *Right. That's what I was going to ask. So when they do need it and you've given them phone because there's a need, they need to call you for rides or they need it for their homework, then taking it away is harder.*

Dena Right.

Maureen *And so you're kind of providing some options.*

Dena Absolutely. Yeah. I mean, you just have to be prepared and part of it is, mistakes aren't bad thing. I mean, do you remember like growing up, do you remember the times that you did something right the first time, or do you remember the times that you really screwed up? It's those times that we make the big mistakes... those are our big learning lessons. And if we, if we don't give consequences for it, then then we don't remember those things and we're more likely to repeat it. But if we allow kids to make mistakes and then the experience, the consequences of it, they're a lot less likely to make the same mistake.

Maureen *You mentioned earlier about peer pressure. You were talking about that need to communicate. And that technology is the way teens communicate. So there's, there's another layer here when we're talking about this is if you give your kid a flip phone instead of an iPhone or you take away their phone, then it kind of can cut them off from some of those social, uh, social settings. And that, that peer pressure can be so intense. So how would you kind of walk through some of that?*

Dena Well, and, and, um, part of that is... you have to, you have to talk to your kids about it. And when I say talk to talk to your kids, one of my favorite

quotes is that God gave us two ears and one mouth and we should use them in that proportion.

We have to listen twice as much as we're talking to them. And so talk to them, ask them what they're afraid of missing out on. And, and help brainstorm. How can you navigate those things? Because the reality is you don't want to isolate your kid. You know, you don't want them to be the one that gets left out of everything.

Maureen *Yeah.*

Dena But, but, uh, what, what are realistic expectations? What are things that you can do so that they still have contact? And the reality of it is missing out for a week might be really, really hard, but it's not going to end their, their entire social life.

Maureen *Right. It might feel like it to them. But as adults, we know that.*

Dena And something to keep in mind too, just developmentally for, for, for teenagers, you know, that all of our emotions are bigger. It's huge. And you know, where we may feel like they're completely overreacting and overdramatizing for them. That's how they really feel. And it's important to acknowledge. I know this is really hard. I, you know, I hate that you're having to have this lesson. But, you know, we were pretty clear with the rules upfront and you kind of knew it, you made a choice, but, um, you know what, you're going to your, I know that I'm confident in you that you're going to make some changes and you're going to have the opportunity to have your phone again. And I know that you're not going to make the same mistake. So you're instilling confidence that they can learn from their mistakes and that you feel bad that they're having to suffer consequences too.

Maureen *Yeah, nice. That's good. So let's, let's move on a little bit to, uh, a wider conversation about screen time in general, and really starting with young kids. You know, I have three young kids. I know you have a young kid, so, uh, let's talk about the impact of that screen time on younger kids and acknowledging that, of course, this is a huge challenge for all of us to sort of figure out appropriate limits, but let's kind of, let's kind of talk about that a bit.*

Dena Absolutely. Well, and first off, I think as parents, we all have to acknowledge the fact that - man, it's an easy babysitter, isn't it?

Maureen *It really is.*

Dena I can't tell, you know, I've gone out to dinner with, with a friend and my daughter's sitting there, and so, you know, I'll give her my phone, so she's not bored because you know, she's sitting there and we're talking. So we,

we get in the habit of this is, this is the entertainment, right. You're at home, you've got some things that you needed to accomplish, well, let's just put them in front of the screen for a while cause it'll keep them occupied and out of our hair and we have to own that piece.

Maureen *Yeah. Yes. A hundred percent.*

Dena The other piece of it is we have to own our own usage of it. I don't know about you, but, um, anybody listening have your cell phone sitting right next to you? You know, I always tease my mom that she's gotten to be like Pavlov's dog. You know, she hears the, the buzz or the bell and she jumps up. It's like she's salivating. And when I was a kid growing up, mealtimes, we didn't answer the phone if it rang right. That's family time, that's where we sit down and now, you know, the family will get together and our cell phones are sitting at the table with us. And so we don't even recognize the, the, the model that we're setting for our own kids. And, you know, there are times you come home from work, you're tired. You just want to look at Facebook or you want to be on Pinterest and your kids are in the room and you're half listening to them. So what are we showing them, what's important?

Maureen *Yeah. I'm totally guilty of that. So one thing, I've been thinking a lot about that lately, just for myself, and so one thing I've started doing is putting my phone on the charger when I walk in from work. So, you know, I've been at work all day. I've been in front of a computer all day and. I don't, I don't really need that time to look at my phone and I can do it after my kids go to bed and I don't get it right every time - far from it. But what I'm trying to do is give myself a little block of time where my phone is not even in the room. So there's no temptation for me to even look at it.*

Dena Yeah. And I think that's a great idea too, out of sight, out of mind, right. Hopefully? You know, something that I'm thinking about too, is how, you know, how our brains are kind of adapting with the use of technology. I saw this thing, there's something known as, um, phantom vibration syndrome where our brains have actually started to perceive an itch as the vibration of our phone. So I don't know if any of you have ever, like, you know, you think your phone's ringing or vibrating... and it's not, and our, our brains are actually rewiring.

Maureen *That is so interesting. Yeah. I was thinking when I was coming in to talk about this today with you, I was thinking about how, um, you know, our kids are coming into, it's such a different world from us. Like we didn't even have a computer in our home. I didn't have a cell phone until I was an, almost an adult, you know, we just, and the kids, just the amount of technology that's just in their faces all the time. It's just a whole different world. It's hard for me to sort of step back and kind of think about that sometimes.*

Dena Right? Well, and it's, it's the good and the bad, because some of the apps that are out there are fabulous, you know, in helping with reading, you know, in helping, you know, developmentally with kids, it's great for entertainment purposes, but educational purposes. The amount of knowledge that they have access to...

Maureen *And they can FaceTime with their grandparents in another state. There's a lot of good.*

Dena It's amazing. It's amazing. Um, and there's the amount of time that's just spent wasted playing on it. And it's kind of embarrassing saying, okay, you have 30 minutes on but first, can you show me how to set the timer?

Maureen *My six year old knows how to use the TV remotes better than I do for sure.*

Dena Right. It's funny. But that's part of the challenge is, is once again, it's the kids that are leading the charge. They know so much more about it than we do. And so we have to be real clear about it. Um, and we have to be intentional. So, so it is, it's doing things like, um, like you said, putting your phone in the other room, having set times that are technology-free times, and that's just a given. Of course, there's going to be exceptions. You know, you may be expecting a really important call from work, but you explain that to them. Um, the other, the other piece of it too, is with kids, um, having them turn off like the, the alerts and the buzzers and silencing parts of their phone, because it is neurologically impossible to ignore it when it's going off.

Maureen *Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.*

Dena And so thinking about that in terms of helping them to focus. The other piece of it is if you're using the screen, you don't need more than one screen at a time. So I don't know about how many of you..

Maureen *Guilty! Guilty! I know where you're going with this...*

Dena You've got a movie playing and then you're sitting there and you're scrolling through... and one screen is stimulating enough.

Maureen Yes.

Dena But we're all guilty.

Maureen *So I think one of the big, you talked about how parents are afraid of technology and I think one of the biggest fears that parents have is that somehow their kids will be unsafe on the internet so that they'll get into some kind of situation that's just really dangerous. So are there apps that protect kids from some of those big fears that parents have?*

Dena Yes. There are absolutely there, um, apps available that you can install. And this is another thing to consider too, before giving your child a tablet or giving your child, um, a cell phone. That looking into what the apps are that are available. And the other thing is, you know, I could name a couple, but things are constantly changing and there's, there's always better ones that are being developed. Um, I know in cell phones that there's an app called, uh, *ignore no more* that you can, you can, if you have a teenager that you're, you're, you're calling or you're texting and they're not returning your call, what it does is it automatically locks their phone that they're only able to call you or 911.

Maureen *That is brilliant. A parent designed that.*

Dena Absolutely. There are other, um, uh, programs like watchdog that you can install on the phones. Um, I think Disney even has an app that kind of, it monitors the entire family screen time. And so you can, you can divvy out how much, uh, screen time per day for each person. And then once they reach that limit, their screen is locked.

One thing that I would, I would also just put out there to, um, you know, when I initially started kind of looking into this and researching it, there weren't, there weren't a whole lot of, um, books that were written. We're seeing it more and more because it's becoming a bigger issue. Um, there's a relatively new book out called *Tech Generation: Raising Balanced Kids in a Hyper-Connected World*. It's by Mike Brooks and John Lasser. Um, I haven't gotten all the way through it yet, but what I have read has actually been fabulous and there are some really good suggestions in there. So, um, I think we're all looking for more information on it and, uh, we all have a lot to learn continually.

Maureen *Yeah, definitely. Well, this has been super helpful for me in thinking about sort of next steps as my kids continue to grow up and use technology in sort of this increasingly kind of crazy tech world that we live in. So thank you so much for sharing all your insight. I really appreciate it.*

Dena Thanks for having me.

Thank you for joining us for The Growing Brain podcast. We hope you have enjoyed this discussion. Please be sure to subscribe for future episodes and to learn more about us and access additional resources and content, please visit us online at momentousinstitute.org.