THE WAY

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FROM THE DEPUTY PRINCIPAL

Finding Balance in a Digital World

Last week we welcomed parents to the College for a conversation about an issue increasingly occupying the attention of families, schools and governments.

How do we help young people develop a healthy relationship with technology? What role does screen use play in academic performance and young people's wellbeing?

The timing of the conversation was particularly relevant given recent media discussion about proposed limits on technology use in schools. Rather than presenting definitive answers, we wanted to invite parents to partner with us as we consider these issues and seek to support young people growing up in a world where technology and connectivity are ubiquitous, and where navigating that world requires significant discernment.

Our discussion began by recognising that simply reducing screen time to a daily limit can be both reductionist and impractical. Screen time is not the same as screen use, or technology use. The latter invites us to consider the purpose of the activity rather than simply the amount of time spent on a device. At Thomas Hassall, we are working hard to ensure our approach to technology mirrors our use of any learning tool. As educators, it is our responsibility to plan purposefully, selecting the right tool and approach to support the learning that is intended. This is a dynamic process that must be reviewed regularly and will depend on both the learning outcomes and the students doing the learning.

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Our discussion, therefore, moved beyond a simple debate about whether technology is "good" or "bad". Technology has enormous potential to enhance learning and creativity, while also presenting real challenges when it replaces thinking, encourages passive consumption or displaces face-to-face relationships. One of the keys is recognising that technology can affect learning very differently depending on how, why and how much it is used.

The conversation also considered social media and some of the different ways the online environment may affect young people. We explored research and commentary concerning the experiences of girls and boys, including social comparison, cyberbullying and relational aggression, as well as the attraction of increasingly immersive virtual environments. Importantly, these discussions reminded us that there is unlikely to be a single experience of technology that applies equally to every child.

Another helpful distinction was between the "real world" and the "virtual world". Online interactions can be immediate and accessible to large audiences, while our real-world relationships tend to be embodied, immediate and situated within communities where relationships develop over time. The challenge for families is therefore not simply managing minutes of screen time, but ensuring that the virtual world does not gradually crowd out the experiences through which children develop healthy relationships and a strong sense of self.

Perhaps the most important theme of the evening was partnership. There are no perfect formulas for parenting young people in a rapidly changing digital environment. What we can do is maintain open conversations between young people, parents and the College, and establish thoughtful boundaries appropriate to each child’s age and circumstances. At home, this might include conversations about the amount and purpose of screen use, the devices children have access to and where they are used, maintaining sufficient offline time, and appropriate levels of transparency around online activity.

As technology continues to change, particularly with the rapid development of Artificial Intelligence, our goal cannot simply be to protect young people from technology. We also need to prepare them to use it wisely and responsibly.

The discussion with parents was a great start to what we hope will be an ongoing conversation. These are complex questions, and neither the College nor families can navigate them alone. They are conversations we need to keep having together.

Thank you to the parents who joined us and contributed so openly to the discussion. We hope the evening was not the conclusion of the conversation, but another step in strengthening the partnership between home and College as we help our young people flourish in an increasingly digital world.

Resources for families

For parents interested in exploring these issues further, resources shared following the session included:

- - *The Anxious Generation* by Jonathan Haidt
- - *The Amazing Generation* by Jonathan Haidt and Catherine Price
- - *The Bonsai Child* by Judith Locke
- - *Ten Things I Wish You Knew About Your Child's Mental Health* by Dr Billy Garvey

Online resources:

- - eSafety Commissioner

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- - Family Online Safety Institute
- - Common Sense Media

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