

SIX WAYS TO AVOID BECOMING A VIRTUAL FAMILY

Posted by Randy Hain | Jul 14, 2022

THE VIRTUAL FAMILY: CONNECTED OR DISCONNECTED?

I took my family out to dinner one evening after my younger son's lacrosse practice. As we were catching up on each other's day and making plans for the coming weekend, I noticed a family had been seated at the table next to us. What struck me as odd was that the dad was on his iPhone answering an email, the mom was texting, and their teenage daughter was also texting—all at the same time! This went on for the duration of the meal. I don't think they had more than five minutes of conversation the entire time they were seated. It was almost surreal for me to see three people sharing a meal while absorbed in the worlds of their individual electronic devices. It occurred to me that I was observing a virtual family in action.

The memory of that evening has stuck with me. I have since observed, with far greater interest, kids and parents focused on the little screens in front of them as they walk, eat, and ride in cars. I brought this topic up at a recent lunch with friends. They shared that they were having significant challenges with how much their teens were texting, and that they would rather communicate via this medium versus having a real conversation.

Is this progress? Or are we taking a giant leap backward in the development of our children? Have we thrown in the towel and allowed the wired world in which we live to raise our children for us? Are we contributing to the problem through the examples we are setting for our children?

I want to be clear that I am not anti-technology. It could be that I am feeling a little overwhelmed by the very tools and devices which were meant to make our lives easier and more efficient. I struggle with my own iPhone addiction and responding to the avalanche of emails I receive each day. We have a Wii, computers, and iPhones in our home, and we all watch TV. But we also have clear limits. We restrict our kids' computer and TV time, their music choices, and the content they can view. It is a constant struggle for me and my wife to keep an eye on the potential negative influence of technology and media. But the alternative to being vigilant is the painful road to becoming a virtual family. We can't allow that to happen.

How do we fight back? What can parents do? First of all, let's acknowledge the obvious: our children are growing up with multiple and advanced forms of technology that didn't exist when we were kids. Studies show a clear connection between the explosion of ADD / ADHD cases and the addictive nature of complex video and computer games.

SOME FACTS

According to a 2018 Pew Research Center survey, 95% of teens say they have a smartphone or access to one. 45% of teens surveyed say they are online "almost constantly." And just think: this was before the pandemic! Almost two-thirds of teens admitted they check their messages or notifications as soon as they wake up, and 56% of them reported that they associate the absence of their phone with at least one of these emotions: anxiety, loneliness, or being upset.

Generation Y is also having problems with interpersonal communication. They struggle to relate to other human beings outside of texting and computers. For a sobering and informative look at the challenges facing this generation, read Dr. Tim Elmore's wonderful book, *Generation iY: Our Last Chance to Save Their Future*. These problems have only intensified since he first published it many years ago.

Now, I would like to take you down a different path. It would be easy for us to think, based on what you have read so far, that our children and the culture are largely responsible for the creation of the "virtual family." I am afraid not. My fellow parents, you and I are mostly to blame. In the same survey, 39% of parents of teens admitted their cellphone distracted them at work, and nearly that same number felt that they spend too much time on their cellphone.

The responsibility to set the right example, create appropriate limits, and offer healthier alternatives for our families rests squarely on our shoulders. We have to take ownership of the fact that we are enabling the problem, or it won't get better. We can't live in denial any longer; immediate action is needed.

Unless we plan to move to a remote cabin in the woods, we are going to face the inevitability of our families being constantly exposed to all forms of media and technology at school, work, and home. That is reality. But we have the ability and obligation to enforce a degree of moderation and offer our families more suitable choices. I am simply suggesting that we replace what is harmful with what is beneficial.

WHAT WE CAN DO

Here are six positive actions my wife and I are trying very hard to follow in raising our children.

1. Put away the idols. Every minute we devote to TV, texting, computers, video games, and our smartphones is time not spent in prayer and serving our Creator. We often forget that we are in the world, but not of the world. God made us for heaven, not this place called Earth. Do our daily actions reflect this?
2. Respond to our vocations. As Catholics, we should know that our vocation as parents is to help our families (and everyone else) get to heaven. This won't happen unless we put Christ first in our lives and certainly in our homes. If our children see us praying, joyfully attending Mass, going to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and volunteering our time to help others, they are more likely to follow our example. This is the most important influence we can have over our children. Besides, I don't think our families will attain heaven via email or a text message.
3. Read a book. Make time for reading and encourage our children to open a book, not a web page. Introduce gadget-free, family reading time. If they only see us on our laptops or watching TV, they will likely model that behavior.
4. Talk to each other. Generation Y struggles with interpersonal communication, perhaps because of addiction to texting or more likely because we don't reinforce this at home. We have to show genuine interest in our kid's lives and not accept "fine" as the

answer to every question. By the way, moms and dads need to talk to each other as well (the kids model what they see!).

5. Family dinner is sacred. This one is tough, but make a commitment to have dinner together—every night if possible. Even if it is a quick stop at Chick-fil-A on the way to football practice, meals (with devices turned off!) are the perfect time to catch up and stay involved in our children’s lives. Don’t forget to share your day as well. My kids are very curious about my work day and my sharing becomes a great teaching opportunity about life in the real world.
6. Don’t be a couch potato. It’s a beautiful Saturday afternoon, your favorite movie is on, and you are looking forward to a little down time—and you hear the kids playing video games in the basement. Parents deserve a break (we really do!), but we need to get the kids outside for a bike ride, a hike, throwing the football, or a simple walk as often as possible. Anything that engages them physically and provides meaningful interaction with another human being is a better alternative than Minecraft or Super Mario Brothers.

Let me ask you to imagine a time over twenty years from now. Perhaps the kids are married. They are engaged in meaningful careers and have children of their own. They are active in the practice of their Catholic faith, spend quality time with their families, and give their time unselfishly to help others in the community. This is a happy picture and one I hope we all would like to see become a reality. Now for the big questions: Are we doing everything humanly possible to help our children achieve this kind of future? Are we a “virtual family” or a well-balanced family with its priorities in order?

I don’t know about you, but my family still has some work to do.

Source: <https://integratedcatholiclife.org>