Some families have taken steps to avoid feeling overwhelmed by communications technologies, study shows

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An international study, led by Anna Mieczakowski, Tanya Goldhaber and Professor John Clarkson at the Engineering Design Centre (EDC) here at the Department of Engineering, has found that one in three people in the UK has felt overwhelmed by communications technologies, including texting, email and social networking, to the point that they feel they need to escape them. However, some simple steps have been identified to help improve well-being and to avoid technology overwhelming family life according to the BT-sponsored study.

The survey of 1,269 people and in-depth interviews with families in the UK revealed that those people who have frequently felt overwhelmed are also more likely to feel less satisfied with their life as a whole. Conversely, those who felt in control of their use of communications technology were more likely to report higher levels of overall life satisfaction. The study has used the findings to introduce a 'five-a-day' Balanced Communications Diet to help families get the most out of communications.

The study does a great deal to combat some of the prevalent fears about technology use, for example, the research shows that children in the UK still prefer to communicate face-to-face, dispelling the myth that they only communicate via technology or are losing the desire and ability to participate in in-person interactions. Moreover, 65% of adults and children surveyed in the UK cited face-to-face conversation as their

preferred method of communication. In addition, the study found that many people are consciously controlling their use of technology with 36% of adults and 43% of young people (aged 10 - 18) taking steps to limit usage. Just under half (42%) of adults and children surveyed have prioritised reducing usage of social networking sites, this was followed by a reduction in sending text messages (20%), and then emails (19%).

Professor John Clarkson, director of the Engineering Design Center and Principal Investigator of the study, believes that those families who had better understanding of their use of communications technology in general appeared to have a more balanced and positive relationship with technology. He said: "Communications technology is changing the way that society interacts and now, with the explosion in personal communications devices, WiFi and increasing broadband speeds, is a great time to start charting this change. There is much discussion about whether communications technology is affecting us for the better or worse. The research has shown that communications technology is seen by most as a positive tool but there are examples where people are not managing usage as well as they could be - it is not necessarily the amount but the way in which it is used."

Susannah Rolph, mother of three from Norwich, who was interviewed for the qualitative part of the study said: "Social networks, mobile email and online gaming are a positive part of modern family life. However, I am aware of being tempted to stay on Facebook or email, or whatever it is, and do 'just a little bit more' online. "As parents, it is our responsibility to set an example around technology usage, while setting guidelines to help our children maintain some balance. For example we only have one main computer for the family and so we are always aware of who is doing what and we are all physically together sharing the online experience. Also, I always make sure we regularly spend time together, completely away from technology."

As part of the research, 63 families from across the world kept a weekly diary of their hour-by-hour use of communications technology. Interestingly, many decided to make changes to their behaviour after filling out the diaries. Sarah Jones, mother of four from Newmarket commented after the study: "The weekly diary of communications was an eye opener for me and my family. It made me realize that I actually spend more time online than I thought. As a result, I have taken steps to reduce time spent online and, for example I now don't turn the computer on until lunchtime." To help adults and children maintain a 'Balanced Communications Diet', using the research the team have identified the 'five a day' which people might use to help them have a healthy relationship with these technologies.

The Balanced Communications Diet

Be aware

Before you can make any changes, you need to understand how you and your family are using technology. Many families who took part in the research were surprised and at times dismayed by their technology habits. Keeping a log of your family's use of technology will help you identify good and bad habits and also changes you may want to make.

Location, location, location

Think about where technology is located in the home. Parents often complained that their children abandoned family time to go on the computer or video game console in their room. Similarly, children reported feeling that they lost out on parents' attention when they were 'quickly' checking up on work in the home office. Keeping computers and consoles in a central location will allow your family to share what they are doing online, or at least all be in the same place while using technology.

Have rules

Set some boundaries about how, when and where technology is used. Our research showed that rules around technology usage reduced anxiety and feelings of being overwhelmed. The rules are up to you: try removing technology from the dinner table, organise a family games evening either with or without technology, use parental controls to manage use of social networks or the time spent on the family computer, or agree limits on the number of text messages sent in a day. Just remember, whatever rules are introduced, it's important to talk them through and agree them as a family - and parents sometimes need just as many rules as children!

Education

Be a good example: teach and demonstrate the importance of balance and safety in the way technology is used. It's important for parents to set good examples, so think about your own behaviour. For example, avoid checking your smart phone unnecessarily when with your family. It's easy for children to pick up bad habits from you. In addition, children are using technology at an increasingly early age and teaching safe and responsible use is vital from the outset, it's important to make sure your children are taking the right steps to keep themselves safe.

Find your Balance

Don't be concerned by overly positive or negative hype about communications technology. Every family and individual uses technology differently. We hope that this advice helps you find a healthy balance for you so that you have control of technology and are making the most of all forms of communication whether it's by phone, email, social media or face-to-face.

More information: More information about this research project can be found at: www-edc.eng.cam.ac.uk/projects/comms/

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