

# Bridging the digital divide

For Gen Xers, the universal example of the digital divide between kids and adults was that we were the only ones in the house who could program the VCR. For millennials, it was knowing how to text from a flip phone without having to memorize a single phone number. Now my friends with little ones report that their kids are their tiny tech support.

Technology can be intimidating in and of itself, and keeping up with what our kids are doing with it can feel like a battle against entropy. Here are four ways parents can keep themselves from becoming obsolete.

## 1. Ask

I put this question to my 10- and 13-year-old kids: “What advice would you give to parents who want to keep up with what their kids are doing online?” And they both gave me a surprising answer: “Well ... just ask me.” Which genuinely made me feel sort of dumb. No surprise, kids want to talk about the things that interest them (just ask any parent whose child has gone through a Minecraft phase). In a lot of cases, what interests them is the stuff they watch on YouTube and subscribe to on Reddit and laugh at on BuzzFeed. Sometimes the oldest advice is still the best.

## 2. Approach with Genuine Curiosity

When I worked in public radio, I used to joke that “the problem with authenticity is that it’s really hard to fake.” The key to success in No. 1, above, is actually being invested in the answers to the questions we ask. Do I really care that Animal Jam has dragons now? Or that Overwatch just released new DLC? I’d better. I may not even know what half of those words mean. But like learning a foreign language, I have to be genuinely interested in it to get comfortable with a whole new vocabulary. Kids can sniff out when we’re faking it.

### **3. Go Deep ... but maybe not too Deep**

This is the first generation that has almost no guaranteed shared pop-cultural touchstones. Apps like Netflix and Spotify mean that our kids haven't necessarily watched or listened to any of the same things as the kids next door, or the kids in the next bedroom. Moreover, it changes all the time. The key is to stay flexible. We need to accept that what's commanding our kids' attention today will absolutely be different tomorrow. That doesn't mean that all our asking and genuine curiosity has gone to waste. It just means that it's in a constant state of renewal.

### **4. Don't Expect Credit**

After all the above, we still may not "get" Snapchat, but we know that our kids are obsessed with making themselves look like deer and sound like Elmo. The next step is a graduate-level exercise in what I like to call "not blowing it." When my kids encouraged me to ask what they are into, they didn't grant me license to make it my own. They reminded me that my goal is to stay in touch, not to be the "cool" parent. Yes, we get to say what is and isn't appropriate content and behavior online, but as long as they're following the rules, we need to give them their space. If we embarrass them – if we co-opt their interests – they'll be reticent to share the next time.