Media Break: Building Social Skills in Today's Kids

At every dinner party, playdate and night out we've been on lately, our friends with kids end up asking the same question: What do you do about "screen time"?

As varied and unique as families are these days, parents are increasingly facing the same dilemma. While we worry about friendships and grades, self-esteem and Catholic values, mostly we wonder how to raise and teach kids to talk to one another in full sentences (without emojis). If you have to remind your children to take off their headphones at the kitchen table or that "talking to a friend" does not mean texting back and forth while in the same room, then these ideas are for you.

GO OUT TO DINNER AND MAKE YOUR KIDS ORDER. When the waiter or waitress comes to our table, we encourage our kids to say their order "loudly, with manners, while making eye contact with the server." This is insanely difficult for today's kids because it includes speaking to an adult, asking for what they want and doing so with gratitude and grace. It is a great way to teach that human interaction, especially with people who are serving us, is important.

CREATE REAL-LIFE EXPERIENCES. We take media breaks in our house. We insist that for a set amount of time – usually two to three hours – everyone needs to do something without a screen. They can do crafts, go outside, take the dog for a walk or get so bored that they rediscover old toys. (Hello, Legos gathering dust on the dresser.) Other parents change their wifi password weekly or enforce rules that certain chores must be completed before allowing screen time. However this might work in your house, the goal is to raise children who have the skills to actively participate in real life.

PRACTICE IN THE CAR. When we’re on our way to a family gathering such as a birthday party or a friends’ home for dinner, we talk with our kids in the car about what is expected of them socially – even role playing. We’ll say, “What do you say when your aunt asks what grade you’re going into in the fall?” and “What can you say to keep the conversation going?” And we let them know that “yes” and “no” are not full sentences. Conversation is a two-way street and these skills are best learned through practice.

WALK THE WALK (OR TALK THE TALK). We’ve heard it a million times: Kids pay attention to our behavior as much or more than they listen to our instructions. As parents, we need to put down our phones at the dinner table, turn off Netflix and model good conversation and social skills with one another. We can go back to ignoring each other after the kids are in bed. (J/K!)