

TECHNOLOGY THROUGH THE PHASES

Helping Parents Navigate Technology at Every Age

JON ACUFF



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This is going to make me sound like a dinosaur, but the biggest technological challenge I faced as a child was when my copy of Super Mario Bros. would stop working. The solution was pretty easy; you took it out of the Nintendo and blew on it like a caveman trying to stoke a fire. But your hope was that it was just a dust issue. Most times it was. Technology is a little different these days.

My parents never had to talk to me about sexting.

My parents never had to talk to me about strangers following me on Instagram.

My parents never had to talk to me about cyber bullying.

My parents never had to talk to me about online pornography.

They also never got to talk to me about immersive educational video games.

They also never got to talk to me about online devotionals.

They also never got to see me research colleges and new hobbies online.

The world is changing quickly right now. If you're not on Periscope yet, you might just want to wait until the Facebook live stream video service comes out. Although, given that it takes a few weeks for us to release these e-singles, there's probably already an awesome alternative to both by now.

As leaders, we don't get to partner with parents without partnering with technology first. The days of saying, "our students aren't online" are over. The questions parents are asking about navigating this new world are multiplying in volume every day. From simple things like, "When is it appropriate for my daughter to have an Instagram account?" to more complicated topics like, "I found something on my son's computer I wasn't expecting to find," we're in the middle of the parenting technology revolution. (The legal age for Instagram is 13, but that doesn't mean your child is ready. And if you find something on your kid's computer, start a conversation about it, not an accusation. And hey, if you're looking for something to hand your parents about how to talk about technology with their kids, here's a great place to start.)

The good news is that there are simple things we can all do to be ready.



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#GOWEELY

Despite the hype and the naysayers, there are wonderful things that come along with technology. If you imagine the end and partner with parents, you can both work toward helping students achieve a common goal: technological responsibility. What does that mean in practical terms? It means we find ways to leverage the potential of online experiences to enhance offline growth and success. We help preschool parents **enjoy the advantages** of technology. We equip elementary parents to **explore the possibilities** of technology. We teach middle school parents to **collaborate a plan** for technology. And finally, we encourage high school parents to use technology with their kids to **expand their potential**.

It's a brave, new world for parents and it's going to take brave, new approaches from leaders like you to make the most of it.

Let's get started right now.

PARTNERING WITH PARENTS OF PRESCHOOLERS: ENJOY THE ADVANTAGES

God bless Baby Einstein. If you're one of four people on the planet who didn't see a constant loop of that video when your kid was in preschool I just made the weirdest statement about a young Albert Einstein ever.

The Baby Einstein video series was a game changer for the Acuff family, a hail Mary thrown at the last second when my preschool kids were losing their minds. They didn't watch TV often, something you're supposed to write so you seem like the kind of parent who has it all together. But when they did, it was a wonderful use of technology.

You probably won't need to talk to a parent about whether their 2-year-old needs to be on Twitter. The answer is they don't. They can't even count to 140 never mind create a pithy comment worth posting. In this phase of life, your job is to help parents understand and enjoy the advantages technology offers. The list of opportunities technology offers grows longer every day, but here are three quick starting points.

CONNECT PARENTS TO OTHER PARENTS ONLINE.

There's a mom in your church who feels alone. She didn't sleep last night because her baby didn't sleep. The day was so crazy she didn't get a shower, only ate half of a bagel and collapsed into a chair instead of bed. In moments like that, it's easy for her to feel like the only parent who has bad days. But the Internet



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helps leaders like you beat back that lie. There's a rich community of moms and dads online. Parents who are facing the same challenges and have the same questions. There are resources your church can share online to remind parents they're not alone. Use your digital tools to create community for the parents you serve. Facebook groups, Instagram hashtags, group texts . . . there are a million ways to invite parents to a shared conversation. Get them plugged in to other parents who are in the same phase and watch what happens when parents of preschoolers discover that the village it takes to raise a kid has gone digital in a beautiful way.

TEACH PARENTS TO BUILD THEIR OWN INTERNET.

The Internet is massive. Have you noticed that? Probably. The size can be overwhelming to parents as they think about their small child engaging with it. Fortunately, we all get to determine how big the Internet is. In addition to tools like filters, you can turn off access to the entire Internet. Most web browsers allow you to start with a blank slate. Parents can then decide which sites to add back to their kid's personal Internet. Help them start small by suggesting a list of sites you've found useful. Pick five sites you know and trust. Give the list to parents as a free resource and conversation starter. As leaders, part of enjoying the advantages of technology is finding great sites and sharing them with parents.

IMMERSE YOURSELF IN IMMERSIVE LEARNING.

Sometimes we throw the baby out with the bathwater when it comes to technology. We laser in on the negatives and miss all the positives, like the immense educational opportunities. Fortunately, there are lots of great apps and educational sites that have recognized how engaged kids are with technology. In response, they've developed immersive educational games that do everything from teach kids the alphabet and math to manners and etiquette. For years, when parents asked you for a book recommendation, you were ready with a favorite. Take that same expert approach to digital education. Help parents be deliberate about screen time. There's a lot more to be gained than just a momentary break from a screaming preschooler. In addition to avoiding a meltdown, a few minutes of digital play could offer a wealth of education. Screen time can be a great way to sneak in some school time.

PARTNERING WITH PARENTS OF ELEMENTARY CHILDREN: EXPLORE THE POSSIBILITIES

“Dad, do you want to see the new video I made?”

This is a question my 4th grade daughter asks me regularly. She still colors and shows me those pictures too, but edited videos are definitely on the rise. With an old phone and an app that can probably do more than a \$10,000 editing studio could have done 10 years ago, she creates elaborate short films.

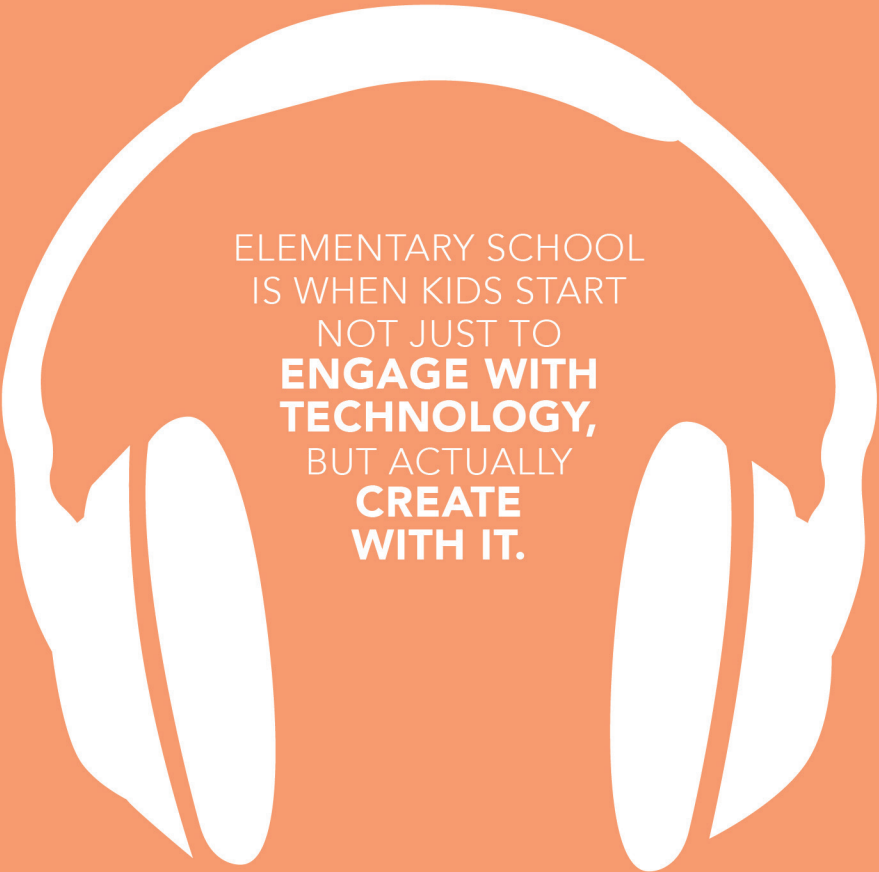
Elementary school is when kids start not just to engage with technology, but actually create with it.

It’s a big shift for parents. Monitoring how a preschooler engages with something like an iPad is easy. You put it on top of the refrigerator. They have short legs and if you lock the drawers in your kitchen they can’t climb up there. Done and done.

But in elementary school the parents you’re serving begin to bump into things like, “Bring Your Technology to School Day” and, “My friend has a phone, why can’t I?” The rewards are getting better—my daughter loves creating videos—but the risks are getting bigger too. It’s time to show parents some easy ways to explore the possibilities of this exciting phase.

ENCOURAGE PARENTS TO HAVE THE CONVERSATION EARLY AND OFTEN.

Everyone on the planet told me childhood goes by quickly. I nodded my head, but inside secretly thought, “It can’t possibly go by as fast as people say.” I was wrong and that fact hit me when I realized I had to talk about serious subjects with my kids a lot earlier than I intended. Technology is a topic parents have to be ready to discuss sooner than they all think. Explain it to parents this way: As your kids get older, you’ll give them driving advice long before they turn 16. Since you know that one day they’ll be behind the wheel by themselves, you’ll be deliberate about giving tips for years. The same goes for the Internet. Kindergarten and 1st grade might feel too early to start talking about the online world, but I promise it’s not. The foundation you help parents intentionally build now will help their kids for years and years to come.



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SHOW PARENTS HOW TO AIM FOR CONSISTENCY AND CLARITY.

By helping parents talk to their kids about technology early and often, you've laid the groundwork for consistency. But what's the goal of those conversations? Clarity. The best way to explore the possibilities of technology is to always have clear expectations as a family. Give them a picture of how to create clarity by beginning with a clear example yourself. Remind them that when their kids were toddlers they would give them a "two-minute warning" before they left the playground. Setting the expectation gave their kids room to transition and made the whole process easier. The same is true with pre-teens. They might not have asked yet, but they want to know when they'll be able to get their own phone, have their own social media profiles and interact with friends online. Gather around the table as a family and set clear expectations about when that could happen. They know they can get their license at 16, which gives them something to look forward to. Show parents how to set clear expectations about when kids can get their "technology license," too.

CREATE MORE TEAM MANAGERS AND LESS SECRET AGENTS.

As parents, we can get a little cloak-and-dagger when it comes to exploring the possibilities of technology. We snoop, we pry, we check up on our kids digitally when they least expect it. What if instead of that approach we showed parents how to be team managers instead of secret agents? What does a team manager do?

1. A team manager makes it clear that passwords and social media platforms will be shared—not private.
2. A team manager says, "I trust my kids, but I'm not ready to trust the 800 million other people on the Internet. I limit your use of technology because I love you."
3. A team manager knows that as kids continue to make great decisions with technology, it's possible to increase their freedom to use it alone. But for now, you're locking arms with them and sharing the responsibility.

Instead of spying to catch a kid misusing technology, you proactively build a team approach comprised of understanding and expectation.

PARTNERING WITH PARENTS OF MIDDLE SCHOOL CHILDREN: COLLABORATE A PLAN

I didn't think we would get my daughter a phone until she was in the 8th or 9th grade. I was convinced that we'd be the family fighting the good fight against the invasion of the phone. I wrote blog posts about our vision for a phone-free middle schooler and beat my chest like a self-righteous gorilla dad. Until the day my wife said one sentence to me:

"I wish L.E. could get the group texts from her small group."

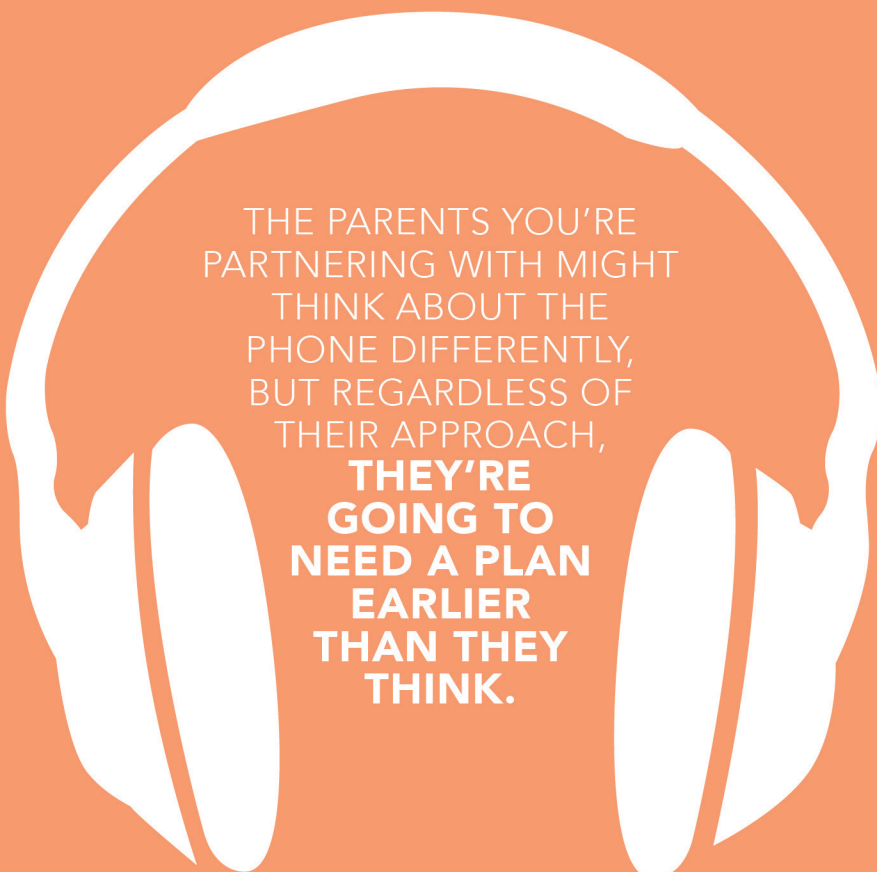
I asked her what she meant and she told me, "The small group she's in sends encouraging group texts during the week to each other. They share Bible verses and devotionals. L.E. doesn't have a phone yet so she's missing out on those."

I didn't realize until that moment what an important part of community a phone can be for kids. As a dad who didn't get a smartphone until his 30s, I thought her friends could just call my daughter on our house phone. The problem is, most of her friends don't own house phones and none of them want to actually talk on the phone. They want to text. By forcing my own history of not growing up with a smartphone on my daughter, I completely missed that times have significantly changed.

The parents you're partnering with might think about the phone differently, but regardless of their approach, they're going to need a plan earlier than they think. And the best plans are the ones that are a collaboration between the parent and the child. Here are four ways to do that:

START THE CONVERSATION WITH A CONTRACT.

When my daughter got her first phone, she also received a contract. It wasn't from her cell phone provider—it was from me. The contract started with a simple paragraph explaining why she was receiving her phone. We felt that over the years, she had demonstrated maturity and responsibility. Being allowed to use the phone was a reflection of our trust in her, but it was a privilege, not a right. We laid out a few clear principles that we saw in her life that we expected to be showcased in how she handled the phone. For example, she's a very kind person and she can continue to reflect that character trait in the way she texts her friends. After calling her to these principles and giving her examples of how to



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exhibit them with the phone, we let her know this would be an evolving conversation. This set expectations, allowed L.E. to ask questions and gave us all a common language to speak. (Begin a conversation with parents about contracts by downloading the one that reThink developed at TheParentCue.org/Contract.)

REMEMBER THAT PASSWORDS AND PROFILES ARE PUBLIC.

A parent in your church would never tell you, “My 7th grader installed a lock on their bedroom door. I’d take it down, but I want to respect their privacy.” And yet, parents often think they don’t have the right or the need to have access to their children’s passwords and social media profiles. Help parents remember that privacy is a terrible thing to thrust on a middle schooler. It’s not always an easy conversation to have with kids, especially if your parents didn’t use the team manager approach in elementary school, but it’s an important one. Tell parents how to talk about shared passwords and profiles. Tell kids to expect the conversation.

TEACH PARENTS THAT PUBLIC ISN’T PRIVATE.

Adults often lose their jobs because of something terrible they did online. They posted a comment about their boss, they criticized their company or posted a photo that should never have been shared on social media. Why did they do this? Because they forgot that public isn’t private. When you share something online, it exists forever and it has the potential to travel everywhere. If adults have a problem understanding this, how do you think middle schoolers are going to do? Give both groups—parents and students—a fighting chance by reminding them never to share private things in public forums. This includes texting. If you text something to a friend, you have no control over whether they’ll text it to someone else. In the age of the over share, a little caution goes a long way.

TALK ABOUT THE JERKS.

Most cases of bullying have one thing in common: the parents didn’t know it was going on. In story after story, you hear parents say, “My kid never told me they were being bullied.” Given the busyness of modern life, it’s no wonder parents sometimes miss the telltale signs of things like cyber bullying, but the reality is that it’s not the kid’s job to tell—it’s the parent’s job to ask. Teach parents to engage this conversation with one easy question, “Have you bumped into any jerks lately?” Students will usually ask, “What do you mean?” which allows the discussion to continue. A jerk is a stranger or a friend who makes you feel badly about yourself. A jerk is someone who cuts you down with a text or a comment

online. A jerk is someone who gossips about you. Bullying used to mean dumping someone's books in the hall or making Marty McFly do your homework, but we live in a digital world. Show parents how a simple question, asked consistently over time, can create a safe place for middle school students to engage.

PARTNERING WITH PARENTS OF HIGH SCHOOL CHILDREN: EXPAND THEIR POTENTIAL

As a parent, it's often tempting to ostrich ourselves when faced with change. We don't want to admit our kids are growing up quickly. We don't want to admit we seem to have more questions than we have answers. And, we don't want to admit the world we knew is not the world our kids will know.

But everyday, the world gets more digital.

Everyday, more people get online.

Everyday, more parts of the world leave paper behind and go virtual.

Everyday, apps accomplish more of what used to take a phone call or a visit somewhere.

There's no denying that the technology revolution is just beginning. How do we help parents recognize that—and more importantly—engage with it?

We show them how to expand the potential of their kids with tools we have today.

Our goal as leaders is to give parents a clear finish line for their kids. As I said at the beginning, that line is technological responsibility. When kids leave the house at the end of high school, we want to know we did everything we could to leverage the potential of online experiences to enhance offline growth and success.

Everything else was leading up to this moment. Don't miss it as a leader, because it's an exciting time to be involved in the life of a parent.



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COLLEGE PREP STARTS ONLINE.

The age parents must prep kids for college gets earlier and earlier every year. If the parents you work with are already having that discussion, make sure they include the online portion of things. Some studies have reported that up to 30% of college admissions said, "They had discovered information online that had negatively affected an applicant's prospects."¹ This is a great thing to remind the parents who have freshmen. Someday, when students are juniors, you want them to have a long history of great online behavior to bolster their admissions applications instead of damaging them.

HELP PARENTS CONNECT WITH WHAT YOUR CHURCH IS DOING.

As a leader, you wouldn't be reading this right now unless you were actively involved in helping serve parents in your church with technology. Help them understand how to find ways they can connect their kids to your ministry. Have small group leaders send out encouraging texts. Start a Facebook group for your youth group. Have an intern run your official Snapchat account. Post devotional messages with Bible apps and other resources. We helped parents of preschoolers connect online with other parents. Now it's time to help students connect with each other and your church. Create a bevy of options for students, and then make sure parents know about them. Never assume a parent knows how much your church is doing online. Find ways to show them how they can encourage their kids to get involved with all the digital resources you have, and then make sure you're posting consistently!

PLUG INTO HOBBIES ONLINE.

I once met a shy high school sophomore. He was quiet when our families had dinner until we started talking about LEGO blocks. At that topic, he lit up. For him, a LEGO wasn't just a toy, it was a doorway to self-expression and creativity. Recognizing that, his parents helped him start his own YouTube channel. For years, he had been reviewing new sets online. He had a small studio in his room, fans from around the world and a wonderful place to practice a passion. Everyone with access to the Internet has that same place too. Helping a parent find an online hobby for their kids is a great way to show them the potential of technology. A child who likes writing can start a blog. A fan of photography can build an online portfolio. A would-be traveler can take a language class with distance learning. A sports fan can join a fantasy football league with a parent. The amount of connection the Internet offers us is only limited by our creativity as leaders and parents.


¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/10/business/they-loved-your-gpa-then-they-saw-your-tweets.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>

CONNECT YOUR CHILD TO A CAUSE.

Leaders, parents, children . . . we all share the desire to be part of something bigger than ourselves. God designed us with the desire to be part of His story, to do things that matter and have lasting influence. Teach parents that an easy way to engage with a cause that lights their kids' hearts on fire is to get online. That could mean supporting someone from your church on Kickstarter who is raising money for a mission trip. It might mean making an Instagram video that raises awareness for an illness a girl in their school has. It might mean watching a YouTube video of kids receiving the goats their family purchased for them through a charity. It might mean praying for someone they'll never meet but feel like they know because of the way they write their blog. We redeem technology by the way we use it. Use it to help parents and students connect with a cause and watch the way they think about the world change beautifully in the process.

HELP PARENTS SEE WHEN IT'S TIME TO TURN THE KEYS OVER.

File this next paragraph under, "Things that are true, but frighten me as a parent." When kids first learn how to drive, there are restrictions on their licenses. They can't drive after certain hours. They can't have too many people in the car. The radius they get to drive in is small. But as they grow older and rack up a history of good decisions, the restrictions expand. The freedom they have grows bigger. It can always shrink if it needs to, but for the most part expanded privileges are what leaders like you and parents like me have been working on their entire childhood. The same happens online. A senior in high school only has one year left at home. (Cue terribly sad music.) Parents have one last year to give students a chance to practice freedom under the care of their roof. If they make a mistake this year, parents are there to help them get back on track. Remind parents that next year, they might not be able to say that. Although there are some digital restrictions that should never be loosened—no high schooler needs a dating app, for instance—it's time to increase the freedom. It's not about disengaging from what they're doing, it's about engaging in a different way.



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CONCLUSION

Technology is changing quickly. By the time you finish reading this short e-single there will already be some new social media platform you've never heard of that every kid wants. As leaders, we can't predict where technology will go next, but we can predict how we'll respond to it.

We'll help preschool parents *enjoy the advantages* of technology.

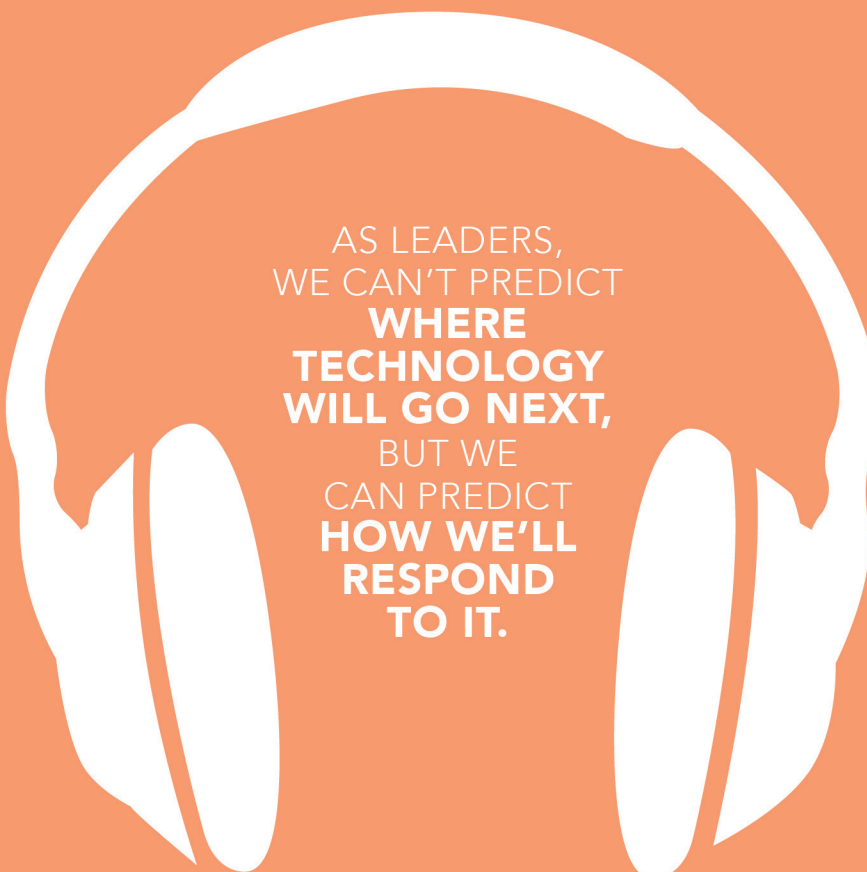
We'll equip elementary parents to *explore the possibilities* of technology.

We'll teach middle school parents to *collaborate a plan* for technology.

And finally, we'll encourage high school parents to use technology with their kids to *expand their potential*.

This e-single is just the start of the conversation. With Weekly, we're committed to helping you continue it with up-to-date resources like cell phone contracts, educational books and conversation guides.

Together, we can show parents how to navigate the new digital age. Together, we can help parents and students achieve a common goal: technological responsibility. Together, we can leverage the potential of online experiences to enhance offline growth and success.



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. **What are the ways we have used social media to engage with parents in the past?**
2. **What are some new things we can try to engage with parents using social media?**
3. **As a team, determine what your recommendations will be to a parent in every phase as it relates to technology.** Then decide how you will communicate those recommendations.
4. **What are some resources we can provide to families that would help parents win with technology?**
5. **What are some guidelines we can provide to small group leaders that would help them use social media with integrity?**