



Challenging the virtual world



We took his iPad away. It was a hard thing to do, but the right decision. Our 14-year-old, double-introvert son had been getting through secondary school with a mixture of humour and a cheeky smile. It had worked in Year 7, it had been wearing thin in Year 8 and by Year 9 both we and the teachers had had enough. Despite warnings, he continued to do the minimum work - sometimes less than the minimum. When we attended his parents evening (with him) in November of Year 9 to hear 12 times that, 'he's a

lovely lad, but....' we knew that we had to do something decisive.

The iPad had been a mistake - our mistake. His dyslexic older brother had had one at 13 to help him study, to read books on, to help him with academic work; we regularly hear him asking the virtual assistant Siri to spell things for him. He only asked for a Facebook account when he was 14 and still has about 20 friends on it. In the interests of treating the children fairly, we had then got one for our middle son when he turned 13, but he didn't have the same clear need for it and he wasn't interested in using it to help him to succeed in school. He rapidly joined Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, ooVoo, and any other cool social media site. Hours were spent sending 'snaps' or silly pictures, liking other people's posts and watching people attempt the bottle challenge whilst riding a skateboard. When he wasn't engaging virtually with the world he was playing one of his many games, all of which seemed to rely on daily engagement for his to 'succeed', and it was all sucking him in. He was distracted, inattentive and unfocused on the 'real' world as his reality became online. The rest of life, especially school and homework, became a distraction from what he really wanted to be doing - engaging with his iPad.

So, after the parents evening, the iPad went. He took it extremely well, as we had warned him that this was the deal, that he either started working to his potential or we would take it away. He could have chosen to sulk, or argue, or get angry, but he accepted that we were doing it for his own benefit and he knew that he needed our help to re-enter real life and to concentrate on what matters - doing well at school so he can fulfil his ambitious plans for his future.

That wasn't the end of our input. We began monitoring his school day more closely, with the support of his head of year who called with feedback from all his teachers every 2 weeks. We asked him every evening how each lesson that day had been and we checked every piece of homework. Weirdly, he has really enjoyed the experience. He has liked having us more involved and getting support with difficult days or challenging homework. Of course, he still moans when we point out that, as a higher level student he should be completing the higher level challenge part of the project, but he still does it and shows us the results proudly.

Giving him an iPad was the wrong thing to do. He wasn't ready for it and needed much more structure as to how and when to use it. The internet is addictive, the virtual world much more enticing than the real thing, and he had got badly sucked in. Taking it away was an easy decision in the end. We were ready to be the least popular parents in the world, but there was no battle, just an acceptance that we were doing what we thought best. This week there is the next parents evening and if it goes well, as we believe it will, the iPad will be back. That was the deal. We are being more proactive about its use this time, though. He has had it back for weekends for a few weeks now in preparation and has



written up his own guidelines for use. We already realise that he will need a lot of support to stick to his own rules, that online world still wants to pull him inexorably into its depths but we are better prepared now. And more than that, he also knows that we aren't nagging for the sake of it, or being boring parents. Giving up the iPad 'cold turkey' enabled him to see abruptly how much of life had disappeared or passed him by whilst he was online and he didn't like that reality. He now accepts that he needs to help to structure his iPad use and time online and that we will be there to monitor and support him with his new boundaries, unlike before when he just tried to get round us all the time. Now we hope that we will be working together to achieve a common goal, because we have proved to him in a very tangible way that we love him deeply and have his best interests at heart and are prepared to risk him not liking us, even being very angry with us, to make sure that he is supported to be the best that he can be. And he really appreciates that.

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