The Atlantic

Parents: Reject Technology Shame

The advantages of helping kids learn to navigate the digital world, rather than shielding them from it

David Zalubowski / AP

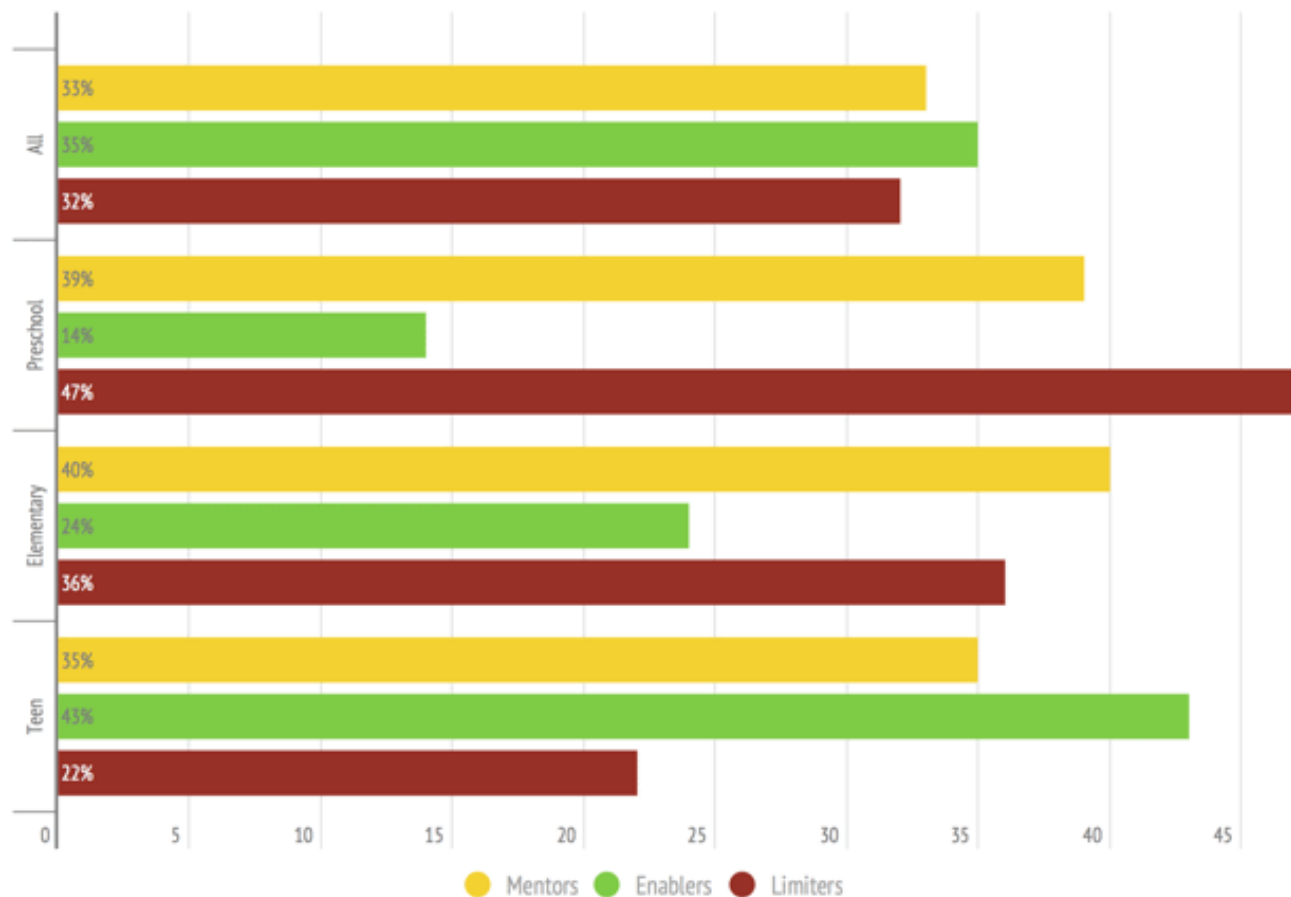**ALEXANDRA SAMUEL** | **NOV 4, 2015** |

Tune into the conversation about kids and screen time, and you'd be forgiven for thinking that before the invention of the iPhone, parents spent every waking moment engaging their kids in deep conversation, undertaking creatively

expressive arts-and-crafts projects, or growing their own vegetables in the backyard garden. There's a tendency to portray time spent away from screens as idyllic, and time spent in front of them as something to panic about.

But research shows that vilifying the devices' place in family life may be misguided. I've spent the past two years conducting a series of surveys on how families manage technology, gathering data from more than 10,000 North American parents. And it turns out that the most successful strategy, far from exiling technology, actually embraces it.

My data revealed that parents could be roughly divided into three groups based on how they limit or guide their kids' screen time, each group with its own distinct attitude towards technology. The first group is the digital *enablers*, whose kids have plenty of screen time and access to devices. Fueled by the hype around gadgets and apps, these parents take their cues from how other kids and families use technology. While only a third of the parents I surveyed were enablers, almost half the parents of teens adopt this approach: They've given in to their kids' expertise and allow them to set the family's tech agenda.

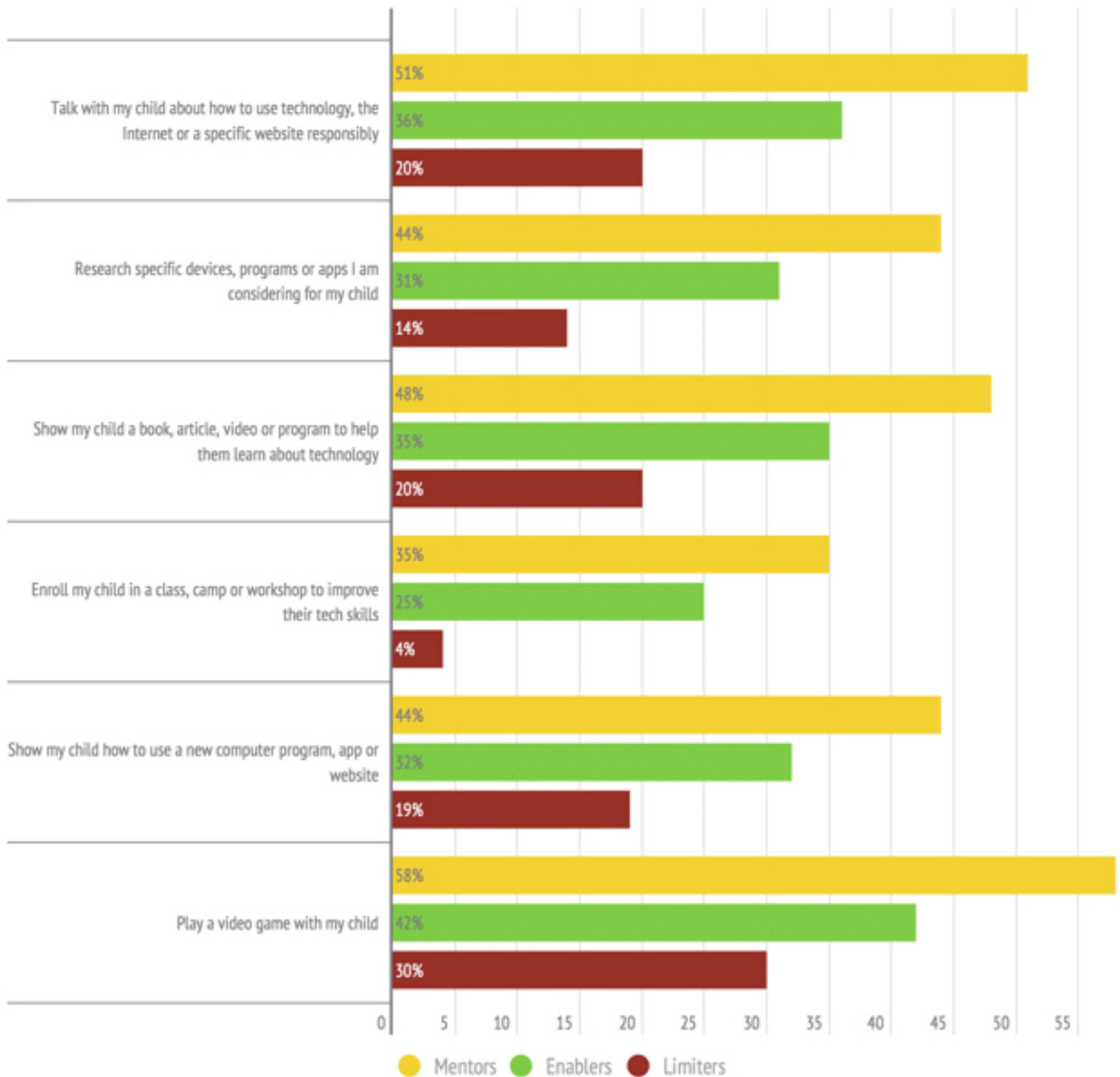## Styles of Digital Parenting by Child Age Group

All	33% (Mentors)	
	35% (Enablers)	
	32% (Limiters)	
Preschool	39% (Mentors)	
	14% (Enablers)	
	47% (Limiters)	
Elementary	40% (Mentors)	
	24% (Enablers)	
	36% (Limiters)	
Teen	35% (Mentors)	
	43% (Enablers)	
	22% (Limiters)	

● Mentors ● Enablers ● Limiters

Alexandra Samuel / Springboard of America and Angus Reid Forum

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==Digital *limiters*, by contrast, focus on minimizing their kids' use of technology.== This group was another third of the parents surveyed, though nearly half of parents of preschoolers take the limiting approach. Heeding widespread concerns about the impact of technology use on children's attention spans and interpersonal relationships, limiters take every opportunity to switch off screens.

But there's a third group of parents who recognize that if the "off" switch is the only tool parents use to shape their kids' experience of the Internet, they won't do a very good job of preparing them for a world in which more and more technologies are switched on every year. ==Digital *mentors* instead take an active role in guiding their kids onto the Internet.== They not only make up a third of

parents overall, but a little more than a third of parents in each age range—suggesting that this is an approach to digital-age parenting that can actually sustain a family long-term, from the time baby first lays her hands on a touchscreen all the way until she heads off for college.

Percentage of Parents Who Provide Technology Guidance at Least Once a Week

	Mentors	Enablers	Limiters
Talk with my child about how to use technology, the Internet or a specific website responsibly	51%	36%	20%
Research specific devices, programs or apps I am considering for my child	44%	31%	14%
Show my child a book, article, video or program to help them learn about technology	48%	35%	20%
Enroll my child in a class, camp or workshop to improve their tech skills	35%	25%	4%
Show my child how to use a new computer program, app or website	44%	32%	19%
Play a video game with my child	58%	42%	30%

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Note, in the above graph, the parents who report being "Mentors" report spending more time with their children online.

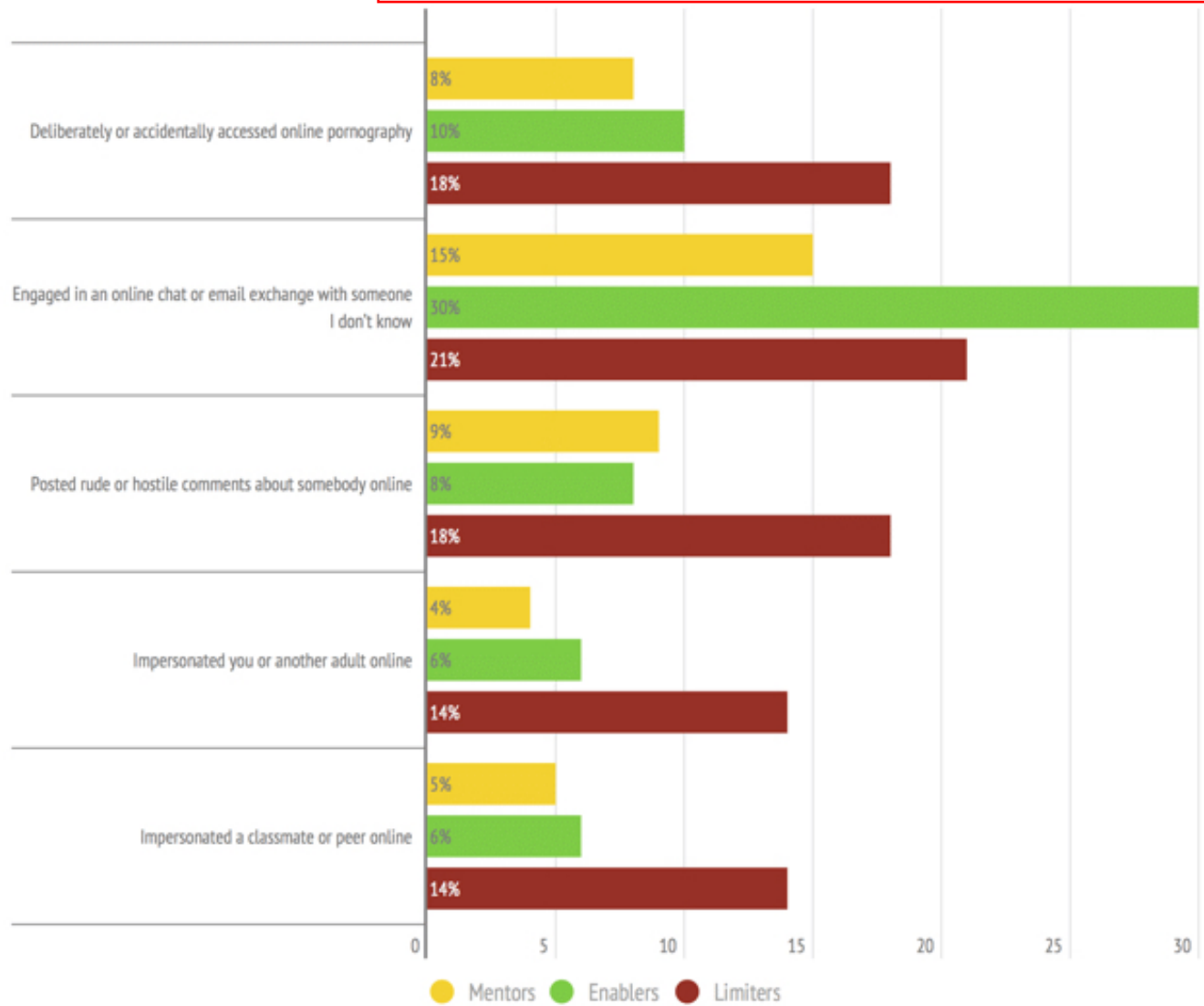Alexandra Samuel / Springboard America

==Mentors, in fact, may be the parents who are most successful in preparing their kids for a world filled with screens, working actively to shape their kids' online skills and experiences.== A survey of more than 700 American parents from within my larger dataset found that mentors are more likely than limiters to talk with their kids about how to use technology or the Internet responsibly—something

that half of mentors do at least once a week, compared to just 20 percent of limiters. They're also more likely to research specific devices or programs for their kids: 44 percent of mentors do that at least once a week, compared to 31 percent of enablers and 14 percent of limiters. They're also the most likely to connect with their kids *through* technology, rather than in spite of it: 58 percent of mentors play video games with their kids every week, compared to 42 percent of enablers and 30 percent of limiters.

That effort seems to pay off. In a survey that asked parents about where their kids get into trouble online, I found that among school-aged kids, children of limiters who are most likely to engage in problematic behavior: They're twice as likely as the children of mentors to access porn, or to post rude or hostile comments online; they're also three times as likely to go online and impersonate a classmate, peer, or adult. Shielding kids from the Internet may work for a time, but once they do get online, limiters' kids often lack the skills and habits that make for consistent, safe, and successful online interactions. Just as abstinence-only sex education doesn't prevent teen pregnancy, it seems that keeping kids away from the digital world just makes them more likely to make bad choices once they do get online.

Percentage of Kids Who Have Misbehaved Online

	Mentors	Enablers	Limiters
Deliberately or accidentally accessed online pornography	8%	10%	18%
Engaged in an online chat or email exchange with someone I don't know	15%	30%	21%
Posted rude or hostile comments about somebody online	9%	8%	18%
Impersonated you or another adult online	4%	6%	14%
Impersonated a classmate or peer online	5%	6%	14%

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While limiters may succeed in fostering their kids' capacity for face-to-face connection, they neglect the fact that a huge chunk of modern life is not actually lived face-to-face. They also miss an opportunity to teach their children the specific skills they need in order to live meaningful lives online as well as off— skills like compensating for the absence of visual cues in online communications; recognizing and adapting to the specific norms of different social platforms and sub-communities; adopting hashtags, emojis, and other cues to supplement text-

based communications; and learning to balance accountability with security in constructing an online identity.

None of these are skills that parents can teach to kids they insist on keeping offline, nor are they likely to be absorbed by a teen who receives his first words of parental online guidance when he is already well on his way to adulthood. We can't prepare our kids for the world they will inhabit as adults by dragging them back to the world we lived in as kids. It's not our job as parents to put away the phones. It's our job to take out the phones, and teach our kids how to use them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ALEXANDRA SAMUEL is a technology writer and researcher based in Vancouver, Canada. She is the author of *Work Smarter With Social Media*.