

A P A R E N T ' S
G U I D E
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Netflix

axis

The Streaming Giant

“In the online streaming business, there’s Netflix—and everybody else.”—[Business Insider](#)

At a time when more than 60% of U.S. households use at least one streaming service, Netflix has ripped past the competition to become not only [the most used service by adults](#), but particularly by teens. Business Insider reported that, as of mid-2017, nearly 40% of more than 5,000 surveyed teens said they watch Netflix daily. Only a quarter of those same teens said they watched YouTube that often, and even fewer watch cable TV or competing video streaming services, like Amazon or Hulu.

Parents rightfully have concerns about their kids’ time spent in front of screens, and video streaming like Netflix invents a whole new way to binge. What is Netflix, and what’s the appeal to teens? How much watching is too much? How do I gain control of something that seems to be everywhere without alienating my kids? Let’s explore together.

— What’s the background info on Netflix?

[Netflix describes itself](#) like this:

Netflix is the world’s leading Internet entertainment service with over 109 million members in over 190 countries enjoying more than 125 million hours of TV shows and movies per day, including original series, documentaries and feature films. Members can watch as much as they want, anytime, anywhere, on nearly any Internet-connected screen. Members can play, pause and resume watching, all without commercials or commitments.

Born in 1997 as a DVD-rental-by-mail company, Netflix began streaming second-run movies and syndicated TV series in 2007. It was one of the first in a now-very-long list of video streaming services allowing unlimited, commercial-free, contract-free video content, exclusive programming, and even downloadable videos for a very modest monthly fee. In 2010, they went international, and by 2013 Netflix had produced its first original series. In 2017, Netflix launched in more than 130 new markets and opened offices all over the world.

The service [can now be viewed from a very “device-friendly” app](#) on most smartphones and tablets; it even comes preloaded on many devices and with some cell contracts. Most industry specialists agree, with \$11 billion in revenue expected and a 24% increase in subscriptions in 2017, as well as the service’s ease of use when compared with traditional TV, the service will only become more popular, perhaps even the preferred method for watching movies and shows.

— Why is it so popular?

There are many factors that have increased Netflix’s popularity. First, unlike Hulu, you don’t have to pay extra to get rid of commercials. Instead, every level of subscription is commercial-free, making the user experience effortless and smooth.

In addition, the platform practically invented binge-watching (or just “bingeing”), a term [added to the Merriam-Webster dictionary in 2017](#) to describe the act of watching “many or

all episodes of (a TV series) in rapid succession.” It has become a common activity for many reasons, the most important of which is the fact that when Netflix releases a new show, all episodes become available at once, allowing a viewer to watch as quickly (or slowly, but who does that?!) as they desire. Beyond that, the auto-play feature, absence of commercials, unlimited content, cheap subscriptions, download-ability, and universal access also seem to encourage bingeing. Even the [FAQs](#) on the Netflix site give the permission, “Go ahead, binge a little!”

Finally, and maybe most importantly, Netflix has recently been investing deeply into original content, producing shows and series that can only be viewed on their platform. With their attractive, youthful leading talent, surprising plot lines, melodrama, and cliffhanger endings, they have created some of the most-watched movies and series on the market. But without a subscription, a viewer is completely unable to partake.

The most popular, “binge-worthy” series at the time of writing include [Stranger Things](#), a Spielberg-esque mystery-thriller following a group of plucky small-town pre-teens and some unusual research experiments; [Orange Is the New Black](#), the story of an affluent woman who is relegated to prison time; [Fuller House](#), a continuation of the popular 80s sitcom, Full House; [House of Cards](#), a political drama featuring the manipulations of a ruthless former president; and [13 Reasons Why](#), an exploration of a teen’s suicide and the subsequent emotional journey of her loved ones. Even if you don’t have a Netflix subscription, you’ve probably heard of some—if not all—of these shows, demonstrating just how pervasive Netflix’s content has become in our culture.

——— **Is it okay to let my kids watch Netflix?**

Opinions vary. Because Netflix offers thousands of hours of movies, TV shows, documentaries, cartoons, stand-up comedies, and original content, it’s impossible to give a blanket statement answer to that question.

As mentioned earlier, though, Netflix’s exclusive content (as well as the content they license from other TV channels and movie studios) runs head-on into tough, gritty subjects like suicide, marijuana use, incarceration, drug consumption and sales, sex, mental illness, street violence, alternative lifestyles, wartime destruction, and the supernatural. It’s tougher to evaluate the suitability of these topics for today’s teens, especially when there are so many unfamiliar program choices. Plus, it seems like kids are losing their innocence earlier and earlier with each passing year, so protecting their virtue gets more and more difficult as a result. We even start wondering if we even should protect our kids’ innocence, since they’re exposed to so much we can’t control anyway. Our ultimate desire is, after all, to someday release our children as well-adjusted adults, prepared for anything the world throws at them.

Marybeth Hicks, in her well-praised book *Bringing Up Geeks: How to Protect Your Kid’s Childhood in a Grow-Up-Too-Fast World*, talks about teaching kids discernment in media consumption along with sheltering them from content designed to undermine their natural innocence. She lists the principles of media messaging (which apply not only to Netflix programs, but also to advertising, YouTube videos, cable TV offerings, mass-market movies, radio programming, Internet sites—pretty much any type of media):

- **All media is educational**, and the messages contained in media content are intended to be understood and to produce a response.
- **All media content stands for something**. Even the creators of preschool-level program-

ming embed values and points of view into their work.

- **Elements such as sound, lighting, tone of voice, costuming, color, etc. in media content subtly confirm the piece's message.** For example, “bad” characters tend to wear dark colors, “good” characters tend to look attractive and wear brighter clothing, and an attractive actor wearing bright colors and behaving badly sends the message, “Doing bad isn’t all that bad.”
- **Your personal experience affects the message you see and hear in the media you watch.** A child’s values, beliefs, and opinions impact their ability to assess the truth in what they observe. If they’re not sure what they value, believe, or think, they are more likely to perceive the messages presented to them as valid and truthful.
- **All media is politically and economically driven.** Someone always profits from the shaping of the audience’s values, beliefs, and opinions.

These principles indicate a need to train kids to maneuver through Netflix with an awareness of these messages and how to interpret them based on the truths we try to instill in them every day. But how can we do that when the messages (true or not) are so loud, colorful, engaging, culturally accepted, and repeated again and again from sources we can’t control?

The answer is more fundamental than Netflix and its competitors would have us accept. It’s about what’s inside our children, not what’s outside them trying to get in. Toward the end of this Guide, we offer some tried-and-true helps to focus your efforts on things that last ([1 Cor. 13:13](#); [2 Cor. 4:18](#)) and how to employ “the weakness of God” to be your family’s ultimate strength ([1 Cor. 1:25](#)).

— Is binge-watching harmful?

The Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine [recently published a study](#) warning against binge-watching video programs (and really, all screen-time) before bed because of its potential to produce poor quality of sleep. Even Netflix’s CEO, Reed Hastings, [commented in a 2017 earnings report](#) that his company’s “number-one competitor is sleep.” Another troubling study by the University of Michigan showed more than 70% of young Netflix viewers will admit they don’t typically binge-watch video content on purpose; they “[just get sucked into it](#)” (blaming Netflix’s “auto-play” function, in which successive content episodes begin automatically without the pesky need to push the “Play” button each time).

Despite Netflix’s apparent encouragement of it, watching video content continuously for long periods has bothered parents, pediatricians, and child behaviorists since TV started showing up in homes in the 1940s. The worry is that it interferes with important priorities (school, church, chores, jobs, etc.), time for rest and unstructured fun, strong relationships with others, and space for important life-lessons. There is also a feeling of powerlessness to limit our kids’ viewing time as technology allows such easy, inexpensive access to the content with *and* without our knowledge.

When we take a step back, however, it becomes clear how formidable the goals we set for our families are. Ask a teen why they binge-watch Netflix, and they’ll say it provides them an “escape” from reality, or it helps them “get away” from the pressures of the day-to-day. Some will even admit the shows, particularly the ones featuring young people struggling with harsh life circumstances, connect with something unexplainable inside them, as if the screen-stories give words to a common experience. *Stranger Things*, for example, speaks to teens’ deep desire for connection, their fear of being misunderstood, a hidden wish for security, and

a natural suspicion (and ultimate hope) that there's something more—something greater—going on in their lives than just gossip, hairstyles, and homework.

A bit of binge-watching probably won't do your teen any long-term damage, but there is wisdom in moderation. Plus there are some opportunities for us to connect with our kids around the shows they enjoy most. There might even be a chance for spiritual growth.

———— I've heard people mention “Netflix and chill.” What's that?

The phrase originated after Netflix's popularity started skyrocketing and is slang for “hooking up.” For example, someone will say, “Wanna Netflix and chill at my place tonight?” i.e., “Want to come over and hook up while Netflix is on in the background?” Netflix is basically the excuse one uses to get someone to come over. It's important to know that “hooking up” means different things to different people; some use it to refer to having sex, while others (especially high schoolers) may use it to mean varying levels of physical interaction, from “making out” to doing everything but sex. So simply being asked to Netflix and chill doesn't necessarily mean that that person wants to have sex.

There are two things we can learn from this. The first is to never, ever say this to our kids! Not only will eye-rolling at our lack of cultural awareness ensue, we will actually unintentionally ask them to do something very inappropriate, despite our best intentions. (And if you ever decide to ask your spouse if they'd like to “Netflix and chill” in front of your kids, be prepared for some gags and exclamations of “Gross!” from your teens...)

The second is that if you overhear someone saying this to your teen OR if you overhear your teen saying it to someone else (or see it in their texts), it's time to have a conversation with them about God's beautiful design for sex and why following it is the only way to flourish in our sexuality. It's also time to begin implementing stricter boundaries (no watching TV alone in the movie room, parents must be present if you go to someone else's house, etc.) until they have regained trust.

———— So how do I make Netflix work for my family?

- 1. If you haven't already, write down your family's core values.** The apostle Peter (who could never be accused of not speaking his mind) reminded Christ-followers in the Book of 1 Peter about God's constant watch over the righteous and His particular and Fatherly affection and provision for them. Even as Peter conceded that the world would cause us suffering despite our strong connection to God's power, he follows quickly with a promise that clearly knowing and standing strong in our beliefs in the face of difficulty or disagreement would only glorify God more and make us spiritually steadfast and worthy of honor, to our ultimate satisfaction. His advice, then? “Be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” ([1 Peter 3:13-15](#)).

FamilyLife offers parents [a comprehensive worksheet](#) to help determine what really matters to your family so it can govern how you live your lives. Developed by Dennis Rainey, noted

Christian expert on marriage and family relationships, the worksheet provides space for individual reflection, discussion topics for parents, and engagement techniques for kids and teens. It even provides ideas and suggested core values if you can't think of the right words. At the end of the exercise, each family member will have a specific list of what's important to him/her and to you all as a unit. Once your teen knows for certain what he/she believes and values, they can behave in support of it with godly confidence.

- 2. Watch Netflix with your teen.** As explained earlier, your teen likely has a reason for their choice of binge-worthy programming. Ask them what shows they enjoy, then ask if you could join them in watching. Look for opportunities to talk about the show's messaging and what your child gets from the experience of watching it. It's a really great way to connect with your kid, and you might find yourself enjoying it as much as they do.
- 3. Establish rules and limits in accordance with your family's values.** As difficult as this seems at first, even the attempt has value. The presence and enforcement of media limits (even if the success rate isn't perfect) shows your teen you care. They know you mean well and want them to make good choices, and it offers security they want (even if they won't admit it).

It's not helpful, however, to apply limits unilaterally; ask your teen if he/she feels awkward or left out because his/her friends have more Netflix freedom. Tell your teen the point is not to make him/her a social outcast but to enforce your family's value system so that each person can flourish, to control the influence of media messaging, and to help them learn to act on their personal values and beliefs. When parents take their teen's concerns into consideration when setting limits, teens are more likely to accept them—and the authority behind them.

- 4. Teach and model moderation.** U.S. families only really practice moderation moderately. Our quest for "more stuff now" is only matched by our desire for "more data now." It might help to ask [the questions Marybeth Hicks suggests](#) to establish the "moderation" reality in your household: *Does our family practice moderation in other areas (food, scheduling, competition)? Do I teach/model moderate behavior myself? How would we know if we were out of control, and how would we regroup if there's a problem?* Try to be honest in your inventory, and use the answers not to bring shame, but to bring growth.
- 5. Ask your teen to help you establish media-free times and zones.** Would your teen prefer to turn off Netflix during dinner, or would they rather wait to watch until their homework is finished? In any case, keep your Netflix-capable devices in a family area so everyone knows what everyone is watching. Secrecy in Netflix viewing can be a sign of too much exposure.
- 6. Utilize different profiles and parental controls.** Netflix offers the capability to place boundaries on its use. First, each account has the ability to create up to four different profiles, and each profile then has "soft controls" or maturity-level settings, which limit access to specific types of content. You can choose from "For little kids only," "For older kids and below," "For teens and below," and "All maturity levels." There are also "hard controls," which require passwords for any access at all. Read more about these options [here](#).

As you can see, there's a lot of ambiguity in these restrictions. Who decides what's appropriate for teens? At what age does someone stop being considered a "little kid" and move into being an "older kid"? Maybe certain maturity levels restrict vulgar language or

violence, but that doesn't keep bad ideas from seeping through. And what you decide is appropriate for one child at a certain age may not be appropriate for another child at that same age, not to mention that each parent and family is different.

Also, keep in mind that unilaterally-determined restraints placed on teens without their consent or consideration can do more harm than good. Although warranted in situations threatening health and safety, placing controls on a teen secretly, ignoring their privacy concerns, or disregarding what matters to them can do exactly the opposite of what a parent intends. Instead of keeping our kids safe, we can drive them to do dangerous things in frustration and anger. Instead of protecting our kids' innocence, we can destroy their confidence in what they've trusted to protect them all their lives.

Remember: We're not raising children; we're raising adults. We cannot "train up a child in the way they should go" ([Prov. 22:6](#)) and "exasperate" them ([Eph. 6:4](#)) simultaneously. Treating our kids—and really, everyone we encounter—with the respect we expect in return no matter what they do and who we think they are always does us (and them) much more good than locking them in a box of fear and tossing the key. Nine times out of ten, we will end up scrambling for that key before we're through.

- 7. Watch for signs of overexposure in your teen's behavior.** If your teen argues about Netflix viewing, watches in secret or during school hours, binge-watches shows continuously, or displays issues in homework or relationship quality, consider imposing a Netflix fast until things improve. Tell your teen specifically what you've observed and why it bothers you, then explain how and when their Netflix freedom will be restored.

Final thoughts

Netflix, like all media, may not be entirely neutral in its messaging, but it doesn't have to be an intruder in our homes. When watched in tandem with (and not in competition with) our established moral and behavioral ideals, Netflix programming can provide excellent opportunities for enjoyment, relaxation, communication, and connections between us and our teens. We are not condemned to allow the world's flexible, situational "truths" to overpower our teens. God often uses these to highlight the real, rather simple truth available in His Word and through the works-in-progress that are His people. The darkness of the night sky only emphasizes the light of the stars; God's purpose will not be put out by the efforts of those who do not know Him. When we make Him and His purposes the center of our families' lives—not just a part of it—Netflix is suddenly no longer an insidious enemy but something to cultivate and steward well in order to better disciple our children.

Nothing matters more than people. Nothing matters more to God, so nothing should matter more to us. Avoid the "scramble"; start out with respect whenever possible, be the first to offer dignity and grace, and watch doors open. Kids can surprise us when they know they matter to us.

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