

Knowledge is power: Tips to help children better understand our connected world



(BPT) - Technology has rapidly changed the way we live over the past 30 years. Where people once turned strictly to their televisions to watch their favorite shows or play video games, people can now access their favorite entertainment, anytime and anywhere — thanks to smart devices and a WiFi connection.

This new level of connectivity goes well beyond easier access to entertainment. For example, can you log onto a computer and get a real-time look at your energy use through your utility? If so, your home has a smart-meter — a powerful tool to help you better understand this newly connected world.

Smart meters are part of an emerging set of smart grid technologies that are transforming how electricity use is viewed and managed. Previously, an analog meter on your home measured your electricity use and, at the end of the month, a bill came in the mail. Now, smart meters communicate with the utility in real time. For you, this means easy, more immediate access to your energy-usage information, as well as the ability to take part in energy saving programs.

"Children today have the benefit of knowing that connectivity is just there whenever they want it," said Etienne Veber, president of Field Trip Factory, a firm that helps design, schedule and promote interactive learning experiences. "We can help our youth understand how this newly connected environment works for them, so that they learn to use it responsibly and have the foundational knowledge to one day lead and innovate future technology breakthroughs."

Parents can lay the foundation in their own homes, and smart meters and their connection to the smart grid make an excellent launching point for some fun science and technology lessons.

Make the connection: For decades, parents reminded children to turn off the lights and shut the front door to save energy. Children possibly ignored those reminders, perhaps because it was too difficult to prove these things made a difference. With a smart meter and a smart thermostat installed in your home, you have an unprecedented opportunity to show the cause and effect almost instantly. With a simple login, children can now see how much energy your house uses and discover what happens when the lights are turned off and the door is closed.

Take a spin with renewable energy: One neat benefit of the smart grid is how it makes it easier for utilities to use those renewable energy options, like solar and wind, and help them become increasingly available to customers. Help children understand how sun and wind can make renewable energy with backyard experiments that are safe, easy and practically free. For example, a cardboard box, aluminum foil and sunny day are all you need to create a solar oven that cooks a pizza right in your backyard.

Get a behind-the-scenes peek: Talk to your child's teacher or scout leader and volunteer to help organize a field trip to your local utility or have a utility representative speak in your child's classroom. Some utilities have developed engaging teaching tools that help children understand where their electricity comes from.

One prime example is ComEd's Smart Energy Hub Program in Northern Illinois. Thanks to a partnership with Field Trip Factory, the electricity provider has designed and developed an engaging, interactive program for students —

one that cannot be duplicated in the classroom — that explains how the new smart grid system works, and how it helps everyone save energy almost effortlessly. So far, the Smart Energy Hub program has reached 6,000 families and students.

Many of the youth return from the Smart Energy Hub feeling inspired and motivated to reduce energy use at home. Be sure and use that momentum and come up with a plan the whole family can use to save energy and keep more money on hand for the fun stuff!

To learn more about ComEd's Smart Energy Hub Program, and other engaging programs that might be in your area, explore FieldTripFactory.com.