

HELPING PARENTS NAVIGATE THE SCREEN-TIME DILEMMA

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Clinicians have recently added a new platitude to their repertoire of routine counseling: *Spend less time on devices*. Even clinicians who are not currently using DAX Copilot, Duo Mobile, and Haiku may sense the irony in this “do as I say, not as I do” advice. For those of us who care for youth, we may add an additional twist as we speak with parents: *Make your kid spend less time on devices*. We might as well be advising them to kick a hornet’s nest with bare feet.

Fortunately, there is a growing body of literature on the topic. Not only is there evidence of the adverse effects of screen time on developing minds, but research suggests effective methods for parents and clinicians to help manage our children’s electronics use.

It is worth noting that not all screen time is the same. Moderate use — typically up to one hour per day — of high-quality, age-appropriate educational content may benefit children between the ages of 2 and 5 years; this may be particularly true when it is co-viewed with parents. Conversely, lower quality, inappropriate, or “background” screen time, such as having the television on while playing, may negatively affect children’s learning, attention, and emotional regulation.¹

What qualifies as “high-quality content” may be different in each family, and defining this will also necessitate that parents actively moderate what their child is watching or playing. However, several organizations offer helpful online resources for both parents and clinicians (see table on page 54).

Parents may consider diverting time spent on devices toward other activities, particularly those involving both parent and child. The activity itself need not be particularly exciting or demanding — going for a walk, helping with dinner, or even just talking about their favorite characters. The key ingredient of a positive experience is affirming engagement and interaction between parent and child; this may benefit children’s healthy development more than almost anything else a clinician can offer.

As children get older, the challenges also evolve, and as teens gain independence, parents may find their family members at an impasse regarding device usage. A recent editorial in *World Psychiatry* provides some suggestions, intended as “directly actionable advice, rather than general principles on healthy usage patterns.”² While behavioral change is seldom easy, these suggestions are realistic, evidence based, and practical.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADOLESCENTS

- *Out of sight, out of mind*. Devices should be put away for an hour before bedtime. Ideally, this means outside of the bedroom. Having the charging station outside of the bedroom will make for a much more restful night of sleep. Mealtimes should similarly be tech-free.
- *Use device features to control usage*. By using “Do Not Disturb” mode and the “Notifications” setting, unnecessary and distracting alerts can be disabled some of or all the time. Access to specific apps can also be limited by total daily time or by time of day. This may be particularly helpful with video or social media apps.
- *Replace rather than restrict*. Spending less time on devices means having more time for other activities, such as family activities, exercise, or sleep. Furthermore, even with device in hand, less time on passive activities, such as “the infinite scroll,” can mean more time for active online engagement, socialization, and enrichment.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARENTS

- *Agree on a plan*. The family should come up with a written plan, made with input from all sides, which should be reviewed regularly and updated accordingly. As with all behavioral plans, positive reinforcement of desired behaviors is more effective than deterrence, although potential consequences for non-adherence with a plan

should be discussed and agreed upon from the beginning.

- *Become an example.* Having device-free times and places, such as family meals and family activities, will help parents just as much as they help kids. Children pay attention to what their parents say as well as to what they do. Attempting to change a child's behavior in a way that does not reflect the parents' behavior is unlikely to succeed. Thus, parents may appreciate being reminded to be good role models.
- *Communicate often and openly.* As noted above, any family plan for reducing screen time will only succeed with buy-in from everyone in the family, so it must be borne of open discussion. The internet can be a dangerous place for a young person, with bad actors shaming and isolating a youngster from their supports. For example, an adolescent entangled in a toxic or abusive community may anticipate punishment if they are "caught" by parents. Parents must strive to be supportive, remain calm, and strike a non-judgmental tone.

Parents and clinicians may feel that any free time young people spend on devices is time wasted. Young people may feel that adults in their lives come across as naïve and out of touch regarding electronics and the larger digital landscape. The truth, as so often is the case, is probably somewhere in between.

Those of us in positions of authority can take an active role in moderating the time spent with devices and the content consumed by the young people in our care. At the same time, we should be open to understanding each child's position and experience, which — as every next generation of parents soon realizes — is starkly different from any that preceded it.

At some point conflicts may manifest regarding a child's natural desire for independence and natural need to prioritize peer relationships. Thus, we must continue to balance each child's shifting priorities with our own responsibilities to see them through their healthy development.

REFERENCES

1. Council on Communications and Media. Media and young minds. *Pediatrics*. 2016;138(5):e20162591.
2. Firth J, Solmi M, Löchner J, et al. Promoting healthy digital device usage: recommendations for youth and parents. *World Psychiatry*. 2025; 24(1):1-2.

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Helpful Online Resources to Guide Parents

Common Sense Media: Age-Based Media Reviews for Families

A nonprofit organization "dedicated to improving the lives of kids and families by providing the trustworthy information, education, and independent voice they need to thrive."

commonsensemedia.org

Fairplay

A nonprofit organization "committed to helping children thrive in an increasingly commercialized, screen-obsessed culture ... dedicated to ending marketing to children."

fairplayforkids.org

American Academy of Pediatrics Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health

"A centralized, trusted source for evidence-based education and technical assistance to support the mental health of children and adolescents as they navigate social media."

aap.org/en/patient-care/media-and-children/center-of-excellence-on-social-media-and-youth-mental-health