



Screen & Device Struggles

Tips for Parents/Caregivers

Why do screens seem to take over kids' time?

- Screens provide easy brain stimulation (a “dopamine kick”), and games and apps are often designed to capture and hold onto kids’ attention.
- Achievements online (beating levels, gaining likes, status or equipment) is satisfying, especially for kids who struggle in real life with achieving or getting along with others.
- There is social pressure to engage with screens as more kids and teens connect through gaming and social media. This is especially true during COVID.
- Devices keep kids quiet and calm, which can be very helpful to parent/caregivers.

What can go wrong with screen time?

- Screen time replaces other important activities, like exercise, family time, socializing, schoolwork, sleep, hobbies, and reflection.
- Battles about access to screens can lead to bad habits (tantrums, rudeness, aggression, sneaking) to get more screens.
- The light from screens around bedtime affects sleep.
- When screen time is over, there is often a “dopamine crash” and tantrum.

What are signs of a screen use problem?

- Needs a screen to calm down
- Sneaks screens at night
- Gets aggressive when screens are taken away
- Interested in little else besides screens
- Chooses screens over interacting with others
- Can't play independently without screens
- Gets less sleep because of screens
- Expects to use a screen in the car

What are general tips?

- Childhood is the time to develop healthy screen use habits, and most kids need some outside structure.
- Set screen-free zones and times. Have a predictable, clear, and consistent schedule, and there will be less push-back from kids.
- Set rewards for following screen time rules and consequences for breaking them.
- Different kids need different plans. Some need little support. Others need active management and lots of supervision. Kids who show lots of behavior problems may benefit from a plan linking daily behavior goals to the length of screen time privileges.

Where do I start?

Use the worksheet on the next page to make a family media plan. Before you sit down with your kid/teen(s):

- **Decide your maximum limits.**
 - How much time do you think is healthy for a kid who is meeting all your expectations? On weekdays? On weekends?
 - Do you want to set a stricter time limit for now, and offer to increase when they are meeting certain expectations? (Like grades, sleep, behavior, exercise?)
- **Decide a device curfew.**
 - What time should devices be turned in, to allow for enough sleep? (Recommendations are 9-11 hours for pre-teens, 8-10 for teens.)
- **Set a “when-then” rule.**
 - “When homework and chores are done, then you can start your screen time” is a simple and effective approach for many families.
 - Decide what needs to happen first. Homework should be done for sure. Any chores? Taking a shower at least once in the past 2 days? Getting outside for 20 minutes? Exercising? (Step counters can be helpful for parents who require exercise.)

But how do I know if they finished their homework?

This is tricky. One approach is to create a protected no-screen “homework time” window on school days. This way there is no incentive to rush through or lie about homework to get to screens quicker. Consider a weekly check (or more often if your student is really struggling) on a school portal and penalize screen privileges if there is missing work or failing grades.

What if my kids’ schoolwork must be done on screens?

Consider ways to limit distracting devices (smart phones), apps and activities during homework time. Having kids do homework, or use screens, only in common areas of the home may help.

But how do I actually control their access to screens?

It can be hard for caregivers to control access to devices without a wrestling match. Apps like “Circle Go” can make it easy to set curfews, shut down devices, or limit certain apps. Xboxes have similar controls. Some cell carriers provide parental controls for restricting data, apps, specific websites, and even setting time restrictions. Some caregivers reset the household WIFI password daily and only give out the new password after expectations are met.

Families can require kids to turn in all devices when time limits or curfews are reached. Back-up consequences (such as taking away devices, stopping data/internet access, or other privilege loss for a period of time) can motivate kids to comply. Many families use a locked or supervised charging station to prevent nighttime sneakiness and sleep interference.

Use the worksheet on the next page to draft up a plan for your family. Consider ways to reward responsibility with more access and independence over time. Model healthy habits by including limits or goals for yourself too.

Creating a Family Media Plan

What are “screen-free” zones in your house?

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dining table/kitchen counter | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Kids’ bedrooms | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Car | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Kitchen | |

What are “screen-free” times of the day?

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Before school | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mealtimes | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Until homework and chores are done | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Between dinner and bedtime | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> If guests are present | |

Other Screen Limits

- Weekday screen time limit: _____ Weekend screen time limit: _____
- What time will children/teens turn in screens each night? _____
- What is the reward if child/teen follows all screen rules?
 - *Idea: Add 10 minutes of screen time the next day*_____
- What is the consequence if child will not follow screen rules?
 - *Ideas: Lose 15 minutes of screen time the next day, or that device is off limits the next day*_____
- Are there other behaviors that can increase or decrease screen limits?
 - *Ideas: Getting outside for 20 minutes, meeting daily exercise or step count goals, keeping GPA up*_____
- Are there ways kids/teens can earn looser limits over time?

How will adults monitor/model their own screen use?

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Put phone away from after school until kids’ bedtime | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Keep phone out of sight when not using | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> No phones during meals | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> App use tracking: keep certain apps to under _____ per day | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> _____ | |

Create your family’s personalized Family Media Plan at www.healthychildren.org