

- Make family meals a priority. Eating supper together has many benefits, as detailed in the next chapter.
- Limit family and personal screen time as detailed in the next section.
- Schedule regular “down time” for the family in order to rest, play, read, or just talk.
- Establish an evening routine. Eat, go for a walk, bathe, read, and then to bed.
- Limit extracurricular activities to one per child per season. Multiple child activities can be exhausting to the child and family.
- Limit your extracurricular activities. Parents need to commit to being at home with their children, especially in the evenings. This may mean postponing a hobby until your children are older.
- Be a good example. Limit your distractions in the presence of your children. Be available to your children and commit to catching up on computer work or your social media after the children go to sleep at night or during their naps.

Among the benefits of order in the home: Children in families with regular routines such as eating meals together are less likely to become obese and more likely to be mentally and emotionally healthy.

The Digital Influences on Your Child and Family

Electronic devices have made life today very different from that of our parents and especially their parents. While offering many advantages to our everyday life, these devices have ushered in risks for the family that our parents could never imagine. For children, as well as adults, electronic attractions and distractions abound: television viewing (often available in every room of the home), movie watching (on devices big and small, fixed and mobile), exploring the vast world of the Internet (by tablet, computer, or smartphone), app gaming, video gaming, computing (at home, at work, and during travel), and more. Digital devices are here to stay, so our obligation must be to set parameters for our children and for ourselves to allow for wise usage.

Negative Effects of Excessive Screen Time

Want to improve your child’s chances of being self-controlled, patient, and attentive in school? Of course you do. Then, avoid the early exposure to screened digital devices.

Screen time (television, tablet, computer, video game, and smartphone) can be harmful to your child. The early and frequent use of smartphones and tablets can interfere with healthy brain development. Video gaming can be powerfully addictive to the teenager, especially males. The frequent use of social media by teens can lead to anxiety, depression, and general discontentment. Addiction to pornography among adolescents and young adults is skyrocketing due to easy access on the Internet and mobile devices.

Here are some potentially negative effects of excessive or premature exposure to screen time.

- Decreases creativity. The allure of video entertainment replaces the challenge of original creativity. The child has less time for self-directed daydreaming and creative thinking.
- Interferes with conversation skills. The screen devices become the center of attention and reduce face-to-face interactions with family and friends.
- Discourages reading.³ Reading requires much more thinking than watching television. Reading improves a youngster's vocabulary. Early exposure to television or tablets reduces reading tendencies at later ages.
- Disrupts sleep. Television watching, tablet entertainment, and video gaming in the evenings tend to push bedtime later. A television in the bedroom is closely linked to poor quality sleep and actual insomnia of teenagers.^{4,5} Screens (large and small) in the bedroom are associated with less sleep and poorer quality sleep.
- Reduces school performance. Excessive screen time interferes with study, reading, and thinking time. If children do not get enough sleep, they will not be alert enough to learn well in school.
- Lowers ability to pay attention.^{6,7} In one study, the exposure to television at early ages was directly associated with reduced attention in class for seven-year-olds. The high-energy mental stimulation from video watching makes concentration in a seemingly dull classroom very difficult by comparison.
- Encourages a sedentary lifestyle and low achievement. Excessive entertainment from the screens encourages toddlers to be sedentary and to prefer effortless leisure activities, which fosters low achievement in school and homework.

- Displaces time for active forms of recreation. Screen time promotes a sedentary lifestyle and takes away time for participating in sports, music, art, or other activities.
- Increases likelihood of obesity.⁸ Excessive screen time leads to less exercise and less calorie burning, and is also associated with more snacking and junk food consumption. A sedentary lifestyle as a child follows many into adulthood.
- Interferes with learning self-control. Using screen time as a distraction or reward to get children to behave in situations where they should be learning self-control aids the parent in the moment, but harms the child in the long run. This can also lead children to seek distractions when confronted with mental, cognitive challenges, such as occurs in the classroom.
- Encourages a demand for material possessions. The frequent exposure to commercials provokes children to pressure their parents to buy the toys they've seen advertised.
- Increases fearfulness. Television exposes children to interpersonal violence and worrisome adult matters that are beyond their level of maturity to emotionally handle. Unlimited exposure to the Internet is unhealthy for the same reasons.
- Increase violence and antisocial behavior as an adult.^{9,10} Viewing excessive violence can numb the sympathy that a child normally feels toward victims. Young children can be more aggressive in their play after playing violent video games or seeing violent television programming.

Managing Screen Time

Take control of your family's devices before they take control of your family. Have a plan for their usage and review it with the family regularly.

Win your child's trust. Invest in your relationship. Make it clear that it is your child's heart and your relationship with him that is most important. Therefore, if the use of a digital device is harming either of these, it will be taken away. If your children know you have their best interest in mind, they are more likely to submit to your leadership.

Slow down and seek to keep life simple for the children, especially when they are young. This will be hard with all the digital temptations surrounding you. Keep the screens turned off most of the time. Encourage reading

and active play. Be available to your children and create opportunities for conversation.

Don't be intimidated. You may feel overwhelmed by the complexity of digital devices and the peer pressure your child is under to use them. But take action. If you don't monitor their use, no one will. Your child needs your oversight, especially during adolescence. The unlimited content on the Internet and the overpowering pressures of social media will overwhelm your child without your guidance.

Accept your responsibility of being the parent. This means you have authority over all digital devices used by your child, even when your intervention appears to invade his privacy. You also have the right and responsibility to occasionally review the content of your child's devices.

Use of a digital device is a privilege, not a right. This privilege must be earned by your child through responsible behavior, just as it can be lost through irresponsibility.

Don't underestimate the negative content these devices can bring into your child's life. Examples include: Uncensored texting with peers, lewd pictures (sexting), derogatory comments, foul language, gossip, pornography, predatory adult exposure, and access to deplorable content on the Internet.

Don't assume your child is immune. Temptation is a powerful force to cause your child to do things she would not have dreamed. Block the digital temptations. Your child needs your guidance and oversight from the cradle to college, and probably beyond.

Actions for the Family

Don't allow digital devices in bedrooms. The bedroom should be a screen-free sanctuary in order to promote the highest quality sleep. Screens (tablets, phones, and TV) in bedrooms are associated with insomnia and poor quality sleep. Only allow computer use in the living areas of the home where monitoring is possible.

Designate other screen-free zones in the home. In addition to the bedroom, consider making the dining area screen-free as well. Eating is a prime time for conversation.

Designate screen-free times. No device usage during mealtime, during family time, during homework, while in the cars (except on long trips), and one hour prior to bedtime. No video or app game playing on school day evenings and limit it to one to two hours on a weekend day.

Set device curfews. All mobile devices will be turned off at ____ and placed in the kitchen for charging overnight and possible review by parents.

Actions for Younger Children

Limit your child's exposure or use of screened devices. Avoid intentional exposure to screens before the age of two years, with the exception of occasional video chatting with a distant loved one. There is no firm evidence of any benefits of television viewing for children under two years. After two, allow limited time (one hour or less) of quality programming on the family TV or playing quality apps on a family tablet. Ideally, watch the TV or play the games with your child.

Suggested Time Limits on Total Recreational Screen Time

Child's Age	Limit on a Weekday*	Limit on a Weekend day	Device**
<i>Less than 2 years</i>	<i>Avoid all intentional viewing</i>	<i>Avoid all intentional viewing</i>	<i>All devices</i>
2–6 years	½–1 hour	½–1 hour	All devices
6–12 years	½ hour	1–2 hours	All devices
12 years or older	½–1 hour	1–3 hours	All devices

* These weekday limits assume school attendance for at least a half-day after age six.

** Devices include television, computer, tablet, smartphone, and video consoles.

Encourage outside play as an alternative to screen time. Screen-free, active play is healthier for the mind and the body. Consider linking screen time allowance to outside play and/or to the completion of chores.

Avoid (at least limit) using a phone or tablet as a distraction for your young child. While it is tempting to give a mobile device to a toddler when calmness is desired (restaurant, church service, waiting room), it does not teach or train self-control and often does the opposite. Outbursts commonly follow the turning off of the device, and next time your child will likely protest until you give the device again. Instead, prepare for outings by bringing coloring books, toy cars, dolls, or books for your young child. If your phone is never an option, it will not be requested.

Co-view TV programs and co-play tablet games with your children. This allows for monitoring and explanation of content.

Activate parental protection or filters on all Wi-Fi devices. Turn on filters and limits on all devices that access Wi-Fi, including video game consoles.

Be Internet cautious. The Internet can be a useful resource for the family, but it can also be a source of dark, degrading material for a child. Consider the following measures to protect your child.

1. Allow computer use only in the common areas of the home where monitoring is possible; not in a child's bedroom.
2. Program your family computer Internet browser to block pop-ups.
3. Turn on parental control settings on tablets and smartphones.
4. Install an Internet filter/monitor program. This is easy to install and inexpensive for multiple computers in the same household. These programs allow a parent to monitor and even limit a child's access to certain Internet content.

Actions for School-aged Children

Limit screen time on school day evenings. Limit TV and free screen time to 30–60 minutes on school nights to allow time for outside play, homework, and to be in bed on time. No video or tablet gaming on school day evenings.

Avoid screen time just before bedtime. Avoid screen time within one hour of bedtime. Both the light from the devices and the stimulation from watching the programs interfere with a child's ability to fall asleep.

Restrict video console or tablet gaming to weekends only, and then one to two hours a day. Delay video console gaming until eight years of age or later. It can be quite addictive, especially with boys. Avoid violent games; encourage educational or sports games. Review and even play every game you allow on the device. Prohibit online group play, or monitor it very closely.

Delay ownership of devices. Wait until the following ages (or later) to allow personal possession of the device: tablet—10 years; cell phone—13 years; smartphone—15 years. Delay giving your child a cell phone until there is genuine need, such as communication when away from home which is more likely in middle school.

Talk to your child about device use. Let him know that you are trusting him to use it responsibly. Here are some suggested rules.

- The device use is a privilege, not a right. If the privilege is abused, the device will be taken away.
- As your parents, we have the right to monitor the phone, and this will mean giving up the phone occasionally to us for review.
- You are not to load any apps on the phone without our permission.
- Limit game playing; it can be addictive and very wasteful of your time.
- Enjoy this device. You have earned it.

Manage the apps on the phone. Set up parental controls on your child's devices to restrict the downloading of apps. Periodically review the apps on your child's phone. Consult websites like CommonSenseMedia.org for reviews about age-appropriate apps, games, and programs to guide you.

Monitor the devices. Periodically (not every day) request to see your child's device to review its content and history. Ask that your child not delete history records on the device. Strongly consider installing tracking software and browser restrictions on the phone.

Manage any social media allowed. Delay your child's enrollment in social media as long as possible, but no earlier than 13 years of age. If your teen uses social networks, here are some guidelines:

- Open your own account and "follow" your child. View your child's page weekly.
- Know your child's user name and password to monitor his account. Warn your child about creating duplicate secret accounts.
- Review the privacy settings on the social site account and set it to the strictest settings for a young teen.

Teach your child to be wise and polite online. Be sure they are aware of the potential dangers and reinforce some safety measures, including:

- Don't share private or personal information (i.e., date of birth, social security number, address, and personal photos).
- Don't chat or text with anyone your parents don't know or have not approved.
- No chat rooms.
- Don't be rude or bully others. Respect the privacy of others. Don't participate in gossip.
- Once you send a post or picture, the whole world sees it and it cannot be reversed.

- Don't let it steal your time and energy.
- Be on guard for discontentment. Posts are not always as perfect as they appear.

Turn off phones and tablets at bedtime and have your child bring them to a central location in the home for charging overnight. This also provides you an opportunity to review the activity on these devices.

Avoid phone use or texting during homework.

Monitor your child's school-issued computer. If your child is issued a computer from the school and brings it home to use, talk with administration about the installed Internet filter and its limitations. Periodically review the computer history.

Be selective about the movies watched. Going to the movie theater is a popular form of recreation for youth. Movies, however, can subtly influence a child's mind and morals. Don't allow your child to go to a movie simply because it is popular. First, read about it on a dependable movie review website such as MovieGuide.org, PluggedIn.com, or CommonSenseMedia.org. If a movie has a lot of violence, sex, or bad language, talk with your child about why it is best not to see it. Be a trend-setter and hold high standards. Your child will eventually appreciate you for it.

Actions for Parents

Your children are watching. Be a good model. Use your devices responsibly.

Keep your phone in your pocket or purse during idle times with your child. Talk with your child instead.

When driving with children in the car, don't use your phone; talk to your children instead.

Have restrictions about any use of your phone by your children, especially toddlers.

Put your phone down. Make eye contact during conversations with your child. Show interest for what she has to say. Ask for the same respect from her as well.

Designate screen-free times for yourself. In order to give the family your undivided attention, commit to no screen usage on weekdays from 5 p.m. until the children go to bed.

Limit your own social media browsing to times when children are not present. Be on guard for its influences upon you, particularly creating discontentment.