The Children and Screens Guide *for* **Childhood Development *and* Media Use**

Middle Childhood
Ages 6-11

Children and Screens
Institute of Digital Media and Child Development

Children ages 6-11 (also known as "middle childhood") are continuing the rapid developmental trajectory started in the first five years of life but with increasing sophistication in cognitive and social/emotional development. It is also a time where many children increase their media use and build skills for self-regulation and critical thinking. Children and Screens has summarized insights from current research and experts in the field to help parents and caregivers of children in middle childhood continue to build a foundation of healthy brain, neural, and social development — as well as help determine how to intentionally and most beneficially incorporate media use into their child's life.

SECTIONS

BIG DO'S and DON'TS

- **Set rules — any rules — around media use and establish consistent family routines.**
  - » *Discuss the "why" of family rules.*
  - » *Do not rely solely on software parental controls for media use/restriction.*
- **Help build skills for independent self-regulation and self-calming without screens.**
  - » *Balance "high-dopamine" media use with plenty of "low-dopamine" activities — create a balanced "diet" of other activities like social time, down time, physical activity, and other family priorities.*
- **Gradually increase media privileges as your child successfully demonstrates self-regulation and responsibility around media time and in other areas of life.**
  - » *Delay full smartphone access as long as possible — use developmental cues to determine when a child is ready for ownership of their own personal device.*
- **Support sleep quality for health (cognitive, behavioral, social, physical, mental) — keep screens out of bedrooms and pre-bedtime routines.**
- **Model awareness and healthy use of media — reduce your own digital distractions and prioritize undivided attention.**
- **Watch for signs of problematic media use and scale back if they appear.**
- **Discuss family values and model values-based behavior offline and online.**

- **Discourage offloading cognitive and learning tasks to generative AI tools.**
- **Build attention and focus skills.**
  - » *Keep background media/TV to a minimum (or eliminate).*
  - » *Engage in interactive print-based reading with your child.*
  - » *Encourage reading print vs. digital in increasingly longer forms.*
  - » *Discourage multitasking.*
- **Support social development with plenty of in-person interaction, with yourself and others.**
- **Stay aware of the content your child is consuming and the peer experiences they are having online.**
  - » *Match allowed content/platforms with your child's developmental readiness — avoid exposure to violent media and online spaces where strangers may have access to your child.*
  - » *Be curious and casual rather than judgmental in conversations to get kids to talk about their online experiences with you.*
  - » *Evaluate video game play for possible effects on mental health.*
- **Help your child develop critical thinking skills — build habits of reflection and awareness into daily interactions and joint media use.**

BIG DO'S and DON'TS

Tips for Cognitive Development and Learning

Middle childhood is a stage when the neurons responsible for cognition, language and social skills are being consolidated in a child's brain. Feedback loops between brain regions transform and enable flexible regulation of thoughts and actions in response to different stimuli in a child's environment. Supporting cognitive development in this time frame means supporting the foundations of attention, learning, and brain health.

Understand the Executive Function Tasks of Middle Childhood

Building and strengthening executive functioning skills is an important part of cognitive development in middle childhood. Executive function is a set of processes that coordinate and organize thinking and emotional functions to complete a task and meet goals, says Taína Coleman, MA, MEd, Educational Specialist, Learning and Development Center, Child Mind Institute. For tweens, this means developing skill sets like working memory, organization, time management and planning, behavioral and emotional inhibition, cognitive flexibility, and communication. Many of today's tweens, especially those with ADHD, are struggling with balancing all these cognitive skills, she notes.

Support Quality Sleep for Cognitive Health

Sleep health is foundational for almost every other measure of health in children (and adults). "A lack of consistent and good sleep is associated with slower and different developmental trajectories in brain development, academic performance, academic failures, and many other aspects of child development," says Eva Telzer, PhD, Co-Director, Winston Center on Technology and Brain Development and Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at UNC Chapel Hill.

While there are many factors that may affect sleep quality, there is growing evidence showing that late night technology use impairs children and adolescents' sleep, says Telzer. Support quality sleep by making sure any media or tech use is cut off well before bedtime, and keep devices that might provide both temptation for use and notifications overnight out of the bedroom. "No screens one hour before bed," cautions Kim West, LCSW-C, a child and family therapist, Sleep Coach Trainer and author. Screens include background TV, phones, and tablets.

In 2024, a consensus panel of sleep experts agreed that screen use in general and the content of pre-sleep screen use can harm sleep health for both children and adolescents ages 5 to 18 years. Behavioral strategies and interventions to reduce screen use (both generally and in the evening) and reduce interactive screen activities at night were found to reduce negative impacts on sleep health.

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Eva Telzer, PhD
WINSTON CENTER ON TECHNOLOGY AND BRAIN DEVELOPMENT
UNC CHAPEL HILL

Build Skills for Focus and Concentration

Human beings are naturally distractible and have to learn how to pay attention, says author and journalist Nicholas Carr. Children develop this skill by doing activities that require attentional focus and practicing them over and over again. “The reason it’s so important is that when we talk about paying attention, what we’re really talking about is the skill of controlling our minds,” says Carr. “When you pay attention, you are choosing what you think about, what you look at, what your mind focuses on. All [adult] professions and vocations require the ability to control our own mind and not let the environment or our phones or the digital distractions determine what we think about.” While some screen activities do require attentional focus, the fast-paced nature of many screen-based activities and the presence of digital distractions trains young brains towards fragmented focus instead of the more sustained focus brought about by activities that are multisensory and nondigital.

A TV on in the background…disrupts our attention in ways that can accumulate over time.”

Heather Kirkorian, PhD
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Reduce/Eliminate Background TV at Home to Support Attention Development

According to some reports, a third of households in the US with children 0-8 years old have a TV on all day in the background, says Heather Kirkorian, PhD, Laura M. Secord Chair in Early Childhood Development School of Human Ecology, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Kirkorian’s research indicates that having a TV on in the background predicts less focused attention during toy play and lower quality parent-child interactions because both children and parents can be distracted by the TV. “If you’re just watching a family interact with a TV on in the background, it might look like they’re ignoring it, but it has these subtle effects that disrupt our attention in ways that can accumulate over time,” she says.

How and What Kids Read Matters

Focus on Print-Based Interactive Reading

Interactive reading with your child using print-based materials engages brain attention networks differently, and better, than passive screen viewing of narrative content, says Tzipi Horowitz-Kraus, PhD, Associate Professor, Educational Neuroimaging Group, Faculty of Education in Science and Technology, Faculty of Biomedical Engineering, Technion — Israel Institute of Technology. "Encourage print-based reading in young ages. Reading from the screen and from the paper is not the same thing, especially for young children."

Research shows that children as young as seven and eight years old commonly believe they comprehend more information when reading digitally, says linguistics expert Naomi Baron, PhD, Professor Emerita of Linguistics at American University. "They will tell you, 'I'm going to do better reading digitally' — and most of the time they don't."

It's Okay to Utilize Tech for Reading if Needed for Reluctant Readers

Not all grade-level children enjoy reading. Though print has proven overall better for comprehension, some children benefit from using e-books to help jumpstart an interest in reading. Studies have shown that for children who resist reading print, e-books (sometimes done in book club settings) can spark this interest, says Baron. From there, many of these children naturally expand their reading platform choices to include print.

Audiobooks can also provide a pathway to eventual print reading, Baron notes. "Audiobooks are not necessarily a turn-off from reading print. Sometimes they're an alternative avenue to get kids to want to read print. So what becomes important is understanding this variation in where children are in terms of what's intriguing to them, or what's not. The goal is to get them interested, to get them hooked in the best sense of the term. Sometimes finding an alternative avenue of doing that using technology can turn out to be quite helpful."

Encourage Reading Increasingly Longer Material

Research indicates that school-based reading comprehension scores in 7-16 year-olds are higher for children who frequently read book-length works for pleasure, notes Baron. Despite this, she says "an awful lot" of school-assigned reading is much shorter in length. Parents can help by encouraging and providing opportunities for extensive reading at home, including modeling longer reading themselves. Besides nurturing comprehension skills, longer texts invite readers to become absorbed in books, identifying with characters and developing an appreciation for plot development.

Encourage print-based reading in young ages. Reading from the screen and paper is not the same thing."

Tzipi Horiwitz-Kraus, PhD
ISRAEL INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

Avoid High Amounts of Screen Use to Support Language Development and Reading Skills

A research study involving 8-12 year-olds found a correlation between high screen use and low amounts of book reading, says Baron. The children with high screen use in the study were also more likely to have lower connectivity in the brain areas that help form language and support reading skills. These findings indicate that "there are some real relationships between how much we use screens and what happens to the reading brain as kids are developing," she says.

Children's brains are more vulnerable than adult brains, and are much more susceptible when they are engaging with screens and digital tech, says Emily Cherkin, MEd, author of *The Screentime Solution.*

"What is happening is their neural pathways are being stimulated in a very, very convincing, compelling way. What I always say to parents is that it is not 'you versus your child.' [With screen time battles], it is 'you versus a hijacked neural pathway.'" Finding ways to avoid the negative effects of high amounts of screen time is the modern-day challenge for parents, she notes.

Minimize Digital Distraction

Most schools now distribute digital devices for learning, even in the earliest grades. Though these educational devices carry the possibility of increasing learning and preparing students for the adult digital environment, there is a potential for distraction and using the internet in ways not intended by educators. "Spending learning time searching for online content is not only distracting but is also likely detrimental to development," says Marc Potenza, MD, PhD, Director, Division on Addictions Research at Yale, Professor of Psychiatry, Neuroscience and Child Study, Yale University School of Medicine.

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Marc Potenza, MD, PhD
YALE UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

Beware Offloading Cognitive Tasks Onto AI

Research into rapid deployment and use of generative AI tools like ChatGPT and its effects on child development are just beginning, but experts caution against using these tools for learning tasks while a child is still developing their foundational cognitive skills.

What happens when students turn to AI tools like ChatGPT for assistance with homework? "Are they engaging in the learning process or are they sidestepping it?" asks Ying Xu, PhD, Assistant Professor of Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Xu notes that the impacts depend on the timing of the learning objectives. "For younger learners, particularly those in elementary and middle school, the priority is to develop foundational skills. Relying on AI too early for tasks meant to develop these foundational skills could potentially hinder their development." Older children and young people preparing for the workforce, who have already developed strong foundational skills, may benefit more from the integration of AI tools into their education.

"For AI to be a valuable tool, it shouldn't just provide easy answers, but rather it should guide children in their journey of sense-making, inquiry, and discovery," says Xu. There is evidence that when AI is specifically designed to guide children through the learning process, it can be quite effective, she says. However, the most widely available GenAI systems are not designed for child use or educational use, and Xu notes that as of late 2023, OpenAI (the maker of Chat GPT) requires users to be at least 13 years old, with parental consent needed for those between 13 and 18.

Baron adds that the spectrum of writing functions that today's AI can serve should not be underestimated. Besides producing new text, writing summaries, or constructing point-by-point arguments, AI is also increasingly taking over basic editing: everything from capitalization, punctuation, and spelling, to grammar and style. "Parents, educators, and students need to think carefully about which of these skills it's important to be able to handle on your own and when it's OK to cede control to a computer program," she says.

"Children should establish a skill base, something they can come back to," says Baron. "Even if at some point they are using a lot of AI, when they need to use their own brain, they will be able to."

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For AI to be a valuable tool, it shouldn't just provide easy answers, but... guide children in their journey of sense-making, inquiry, and discovery."

Ying Xu, PhD
HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Narrate Your Own Behavior and Motivations for Screen Use

Parents, caregivers, and older family members can help children develop self-awareness and executive function skills by using a technique called "Living Your Life Out Loud," says Cherkin. This technique involves narrating what you do, as you do it, any time you are using digital technology. For example: "I'm reaching for my phone to check the weather." "I want to see what time soccer practice starts." "I'm going to quickly look and see if there's bad traffic." "I just got a text from your friend's mom about your playdate." Cherkin notes that while kids may initially receive this with eye rolls, consistent practice and modeling by parents will eventually make it normal for the child to intentionally think about and verbalize their use of tech as a helpful tool rather than just entertainment.

Discourage Multitasking to Build Cognitive Power

Cognitive studies in adults and in children show that when you engage in a cognitively effortful task, such as reading or listening, and you really pay attention, you cannot multitask, says Martin Paulus, MD, Scientific Director and President, Laureate Institute for Brain Research, Adjunct Professor, Department of Psychiatry, University of California, San Diego. While many people have the impression that they are able to multitask, what the brain is doing in these situations is switching attention from one thing to another and back again, costing the brain processing power, he says. "Building attention — being focused on one thing for an extended period of time and building deep experiences — cannot occur in a multitasking environment, it just cannot," says Paulus. "It's not true in adults, and it's not true for children. I would really strongly urge parents to provide kids with the opportunity to not multitask, to give children time to just be with one thing. Paying attention to one thing builds depth of experience."

Building attention - being focused on one thing for an extended period of time and building deep experiences - cannot occur in a multitasking environment."

Martin Paulus, MD
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Balancing 'high-dopamine' activities with 'low-dopamine' activities could help avoid problematic or addictive use of media in children."

Clifford Sussman, MD
GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Keep a Healthy Balance of Dopamine in Child Brains

Engaging in pleasurable activities releases the neurotransmitter dopamine in the brain. Dopamine reinforces behaviors a person finds rewarding and motivates them to do more of it. Balancing "high-dopamine" activities with "low-dopamine" activities could help avoid problematic or addictive use of media in children, says child and adolescent psychiatrist and internet addiction specialist Clifford Sussman, MD, Volunteer Clinical Faculty at George Washington University.

What is a "high-dopamine activity"? Something that is instantly and continuously stimulating, such as playing a video game or scrolling on TikTok, says Sussman. "Low-dopamine" activities are those that require patience and effort to get what you want, or delayed gratification, such as homework (for grades awarded later), exercising, or playing a musical instrument. When children continuously engage in "high-dopamine" activities, the brain increases its desire and neurochemical craving to continue the activity, creating a feedback loop that makes it harder to return to a "low-dopamine" state.

Watch for Screen Displacement of Activities Better for Cognitive Development

Screen time in and of itself isn't necessarily damaging to the brain and cognition — however, the time spent on screens may be displacing time spent on other activities and interactions that are very important for building a healthy brain, says Moriah Thomason, PhD, Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at NYU, Langone. "What we see is it's the other ancillary activities and how those activities are affected. As a parent, you don't have to think about the screen as your enemy. You can think of it instead as potentially getting in the way of the kinds of positive things that you want to be introducing in your children's lives that themselves can have a significant effect on brain development."

Examples of activities that are great for cognitive development in middle childhood are games that encourage problem-solving and strategic thinking (i.e., board games, card games, logic problems, and puzzles), creative expression (i.e., storytelling, writing, art, and music), imaginative play, and active, hands-on activities (i.e., cooking, building), says Kate Blocker, PhD, Director of Research and Programs at Children and Screens.

Protect Long-Term Brain and Mental Health — Avoid Problematic Media Use

Avoiding problematic media use is important for many reasons, including increasing evidence that problematic media use is associated with structural brain changes that mimic adult addictions. In a study of over 11,000 youth, high-frequency screen media activity in 9-10 year-old children was associated with a brain structural co-variation pattern almost identical to those found in adults with alcohol addiction who started drinking early in life, says Potenza. This brain structural pattern associated with high screen media use was also associated with problems with conduct or oppositional behaviors, he notes.

"We know that there are many ways that we might see depression being associated with digital media use, including the ways in which mood might affect what teens choose to do online, what time they go online, what platforms they might engage in," says Mitch Prinstein, PhD, ABPP, Chief Science Officer of the American Psychological Association. "Someone that's experiencing social or psychological vulnerabilities and engages with the most harmful or addictive or concerning stimuli on digital media might have a much worse outcome," explains Prinstein.

Research suggests problematic overuse of screens might be linked bidirectionally with an increased risk of mental health issues and attention difficulties. "Children or teens who overuse screens might be displacing other important developmental tasks and learning opportunities," says Coleman. While screens are not the cause of ADHD, "screens could play a role in amplifying ADHD symptoms depending on the limits set — we tend to see the symptoms of ADHD are exacerbated due to screen usage."

How can you tell if media use is problematic? While many experts recommend limiting recreational screen use in school-aged children to a minimal amount, optimally mediated by an adult, individual families and children have different views on what a "minimal amount" means. A rule of thumb for problematic use: "If you feel that the usage interrupts the child's life and everyday activities, that is too much. We know it when we see it," says Horowitz-Kraus.

In general, addiction involves the "4 C's" says Dimitri Christakis, MD, MPH, Chief Science Officer of Children and Screens, and George Adkins Professor of Pediatrics, Adjunct Professor of Psychiatry, and Adjunct Professor of Health Services, University of Washington School of Medicine.

These are:

- **Craving** — *craving the use*
- **Compulsion** — *feeling compelled to use*
- **Control** — *losing control over usage*
- **Consequence** — *continuing to use in spite of adverse consequences (school, sleep, friends, etc.)*

Encourage Multisensory and Creative Play for Healthy Brain Development

Development of all the senses supports healthy brain development. Encourage this sensory development with activities or play stations that nourish and stimulate different senses. One idea: create a touch, feel, and smell garden outside, if possible, says Natalie Spencer Gwyn, PhD, Core Faculty, School of Counseling, Walden University. "You're using all of the different senses and it can encourage your youth to take on leadership activities, because they're watering the garden and then they're also participating in it. You can keep a journal about the growth of the plants and what you're noticing and what you're smelling and what you're feeling."

Indoor sensory stations are also beneficial, and may be more feasible in some environments, says Blocker. Provide a designated space with a variety of objects that kids can freely explore, with a mix of both calming and stimulating tools that engage different senses (e.g., smooth textures and rough textures for touch). Other ideas for multisensory play include cooking, building or creating with multiple types of materials, puppet shows and other forms of interactive storytelling, obstacle courses, and music or rhythm games.

Passive enjoyment of screens for entertainment is not generally strengthening the brain compared to activities that utilize creativity, says Thomason. "There are things that the brain is doing to build a better, stronger brain that you're not always able to understand or think about — building and the kinds of play that we can do that are enhancing those kinds of creative activities would be helping some of the systems that are not going to be as active when the programming is coming toward us."

Use Hard Copy of Homework to Support Learning Skills

Everyone learns better reading print books rather than digital, says neuroscientist and author Jared Cooney Horvath, PhD, MEd, Director, LME Global. "If you've got a printer, print it out. Are you doing homework? Print it out. The more people print it out, it's easier to control where children's attention is focused and where their learning is going," he says. Children using devices at home for homework are tempted by any number of digital distractions that can make it difficult to develop skills for focusing and learning.

If a child must use a computer at home for homework, investigate if there is any way to lock the computer so that it only allows access to the program needed for the homework and doesn't have access to the internet, suggests Horvath. "The more you can unplug them, the better."

Provide a designated space with a variety of objects that kids can freely explore, with a mix of both calming and stimulating tools that engage different senses."

Kate Blocker, PhD
CHILDREN AND SCREENS

Educational Apps Are Beneficial– If Co-Used With an Educator Or Caregiver

While there are a handful of educational programs and apps that have been shown to positively affect learning in grade-school children, particularly math apps, the use of these apps should not be "set it and forget it," says Christakis. "Bedtime math, which has been shown to improve math performance in 1st grade students, is not an app that a parent gives to a child and walks away. It's an app that a parent uses with their child that essentially queues up what Vygotsky called a 'scaffolding opportunity,'" he says. The math learning through the app is cemented by the parent having a meaningful interaction with the child around the app content. Christakis notes that this type of meaningful interaction for learning doesn't actually require an app at all but that apps can readily provide.

Viewing Content Repetitively Helps Learning

Reserve media for learning when it's the best and only tool, suggests Kirkorian. In these instances, research indicates that children learn better from seeing the same media content repeatedly. While it may seem tedious to parents when children watch the same content over and over again, children learn better from this repetition. Rebecca Dore, PhD, Director of Research at the Crane Center for Early Childhood Research and Policy, The Ohio State University, cites a study that children's comprehension and learning from a Blue's Clues episode kept improving when they watched the same episode every day for a week. "Allowing children to engage with the same content multiple times can actually enhance their understanding and learning," she says.

Educational videos lend themselves well to the repetition that can enhance learning in young children, says Kirkorian. "You can watch it over and over again as opposed to a real-life demonstration. If the goal is to help kids learn something from a video that you couldn't teach them with something real, show them something they would never experience in their real lives, such as animals that don't live in their environment, for example."

Allowing children to engage with the same content multiple times can actually enhance their understanding and learning."

Rebecca Dore, PhD
THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

Lay a Foundation of Critical Thinking

Middle childhood is a time ripe for developing critical thinking skills that will help children evaluate and process information for the rest of their lives. Developing critical thinking, particularly with the media content they consume, lays a foundation for independent thinking and problem-solving.

One place to start with children is helping them understand the difference between a fact and an opinion, or a fact and values, says Andrew Shtulman, PhD, Professor of Psychology at Occidental College. Even younger children can often understand these differences.

Critical thinking doesn't need to be taught with a curriculum, and can be integrated into daily life whenever encountering content or media. "The five key questions in media literacy are really around authorship," says Sherri Hope Culver, Director, Center for Media and Information Literacy, Professor, Temple University. "Who created the message? What are those creative techniques? What's the purpose? Who's the audience? These are questions that you can have in a subtle conversation with your children. You can have a more informal conversation. We don't have to say, 'Let's talk about the five key questions about media literacy.' But really even thinking about, hey, we're on this website, who do we think made this website? Just more casually doing that."

Increased use of AI is making critical thinking skills even more important. "Because AI is sometimes providing misinformation and disinformation, that requires children to constantly leverage their critical thinking, to evaluate and interrogate the quality of the questions," says Xu. "This is a training opportunity for children to develop this kind of awareness and strategies when they encounter information either from AI or from human informants in the future. This skill would actually benefit them not just in their interactions with AI, but also in their acquiring and evaluating information in the long run."

One place to start with children is helping them understand the difference between a fact and an opinion, or a fact and values."

Andrew Shtulman, PhD
OCCIDENTAL COLLEGE

Children may not have the language to describe the concepts they are thinking about, but children actually have the capacity to be consulted on just about everything to do with their online world, says Sonia Livingstone, OBE, FBA, Professor of Social Psychology, London School of Economics and Political Science and Director of Digital Futures for Children Centre. Livingstone shows an example of how children are able to think about data privacy: "We drew lots of bits of data on cards and said 'Okay, your favorite films? What you bought last week? Who are your friends?' And then we said, 'Okay, who can know these different things? Can your friends know? Can your parents know? Can your school know? Can Amazon know? Can the government know?' And when we made it really concrete and broke it down, they had lots of opinions and they were ready to deliberate. 'Why should Amazon know my address? Oh yeah, they want to deliver the parcel. Okay, they need to know my address. Can they tell anyone else? No, they shouldn't tell anyone else. It's only to deliver.'"

Tips for Social-Emotional Health and Development

The brain connections of children that are important for social development are "pruned" during middle childhood in ways that affect later childhood and adult social health and are highly affected by children's environments. Important "tasks" of social development during this time period include developing self-regulation of emotions and behavior, exploring peer relationships, beginning to establish some independence from parents and family, refining a sense of self, and developing awareness of concepts of justice, fairness, empathy, altruism, task persistence, social boundaries, and social self-esteem.

Prioritize and Encourage In-Person Relationship Time

Recent years have shown a decline in time spent socializing in-person for both adults and children. While it's possible to have social relationships and interactions online, key social skills and social coping skills cannot be learned through a screen, says Elizabeth Englander, PhD, Professor of Psychology and Executive Director and Founder of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center at Bridgewater State University. "We need kids to remember how to connect with each other, we need them to remember how to look people in the eye and have conversations. All of that is going to need to come from time with their family."

Not all children know that they crave social interactions, says Moriah Thomason, PhD, Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at NYU, Langone. Parents likely need to create opportunities for social time without being asked by the child.

Lacking family time together is one of the top reasons cited by adults for loneliness in America, notes Milena Batanova, MA, PhD, Director of Research and Evaluation at Making Caring Common, a project of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. "It's so important to carve out that time." The number one cited reason for adult loneliness? Technology use, says Batanova.

Give Kids the Tools to Self-Regulate Without Screens

Self-regulation of behavior and emotions is an important skill developed in early and middle childhood. Use of devices for calming or emotional regulation prevents children from developing these skills independently. Help kids develop non-screen-based strategies for self-calming and winding down to help support emotional regulation and sleep health, suggests Sarah M. Coyne, PhD, Professor, Human Development, School of Family Life, Brigham Young University. Collaborate with your child to give them a "toolbox" of ideas on how to self-regulate and self-calm.

Each child is different and may require different strategies. Plan ahead based on what you know about your individual child to determine what your calming routine is going to be, says Englander, and teach your child to recognize in themselves when these feelings are rising and when they're going to need to do something to help themselves calm down.

Collaborate with your child to give them a "toolbox" of ideas on how to self-regulate and self-calm.

Model Personal Social Connection– Reduce Your Own "Technoference"

When parents pick up their own phone or tablet in front of their child, the attentional link is cut, and indicates to the child that the most important thing in the room is our tablet, phone, or computer, says Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, PhD, Lefkowitz Faculty Fellow in Psychology at Temple University and Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution. "That's what we're teaching our children."

This "technoference," or device use by parents while spending time with their child, is a very common experience, says Brandon T. McDaniel, PhD, Senior Research Scientist at the Parkview Mirro Center for Research and Innovation. "We all want to be a good parent. We want our children to know that we love them. It's really important to understand that the more our devices come into our space and time around our children, there's the potential for a growing divide to happen, even unintentionally, where you begin to drift apart or to not have as strong of a connection because the device use presents a barrier. If you're getting on your device during the time that you're around your child, and it's happening quite often, then those are times when eye contact is getting broken, the synchrony of the interactions, the conversations back and forth often will be impacted."

If the parent is constantly using devices around their child instead of prioritizing personal interaction time, the child may react with behavior problems over time, says McDaniel. As they age into adolescence, this may also display as disengagement into their own devices and problematic screen use behaviors.

As children age, if using your device during personal time is necessary, it can help to communicate what you are doing and why, and help the child understand that they are still the most important thing to you, says McDaniel.

Support Self-Esteem Development– Talk About Child Internal vs. External Qualities

Support the development of healthy self-esteem by focusing discussions about worth and value around your child's inner qualities ("content") rather than external ("container"), suggests psychologist and author Lisa Damour, PhD. "We have to be very mindful as the adults in kids' environments, how we talk about their containers versus how we talk about their contents. Social media is a container world. It is all about the container. Remember this is a zero sum game. Every moment that we are talking about what a kid looks like, we are not talking about who she is inside. I'm not saying you can't tell your daughters they're cute. I love telling my daughters they're cute. We also have to spend a lot of time talking about how smart, interesting, funny, and sardonic that they are."

Foster a Sense of Social Belonging

A sense of social belonging can bolster children's social and mental health and development. Creating this feeling of belonging is an important support parents and educators can provide in children's lives, says Phyllis Fagell, Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor, Certified Professional School Counselor. This can take the form of helping children see themselves as part of a community, but also helping them assume positive intent in others. For example, if a child complains of another child ignoring them at school, parents can help talk through possible alternative explanations where this isn't a negative intent scenario and help the child develop cognitive flexibility in interpreting social situations. This skill can later be applied to online interactions as well.

Teach Self-Awareness and Self-Regulation with Screen Time

Helping teach your children to self-regulate means teaching them to recognize when something affects their mood or emotions such that it affects their focus, behavior, or schoolwork, or leads to outbursts like tantrums, says Elizabeth Milovidov, PhD, JD, Founder, DigitalParentingCoach.com.

Children often need guidance in developing self-awareness and self-regulation with screen time. One way to guide them towards this self-understanding is to get them to notice their own behavior before and after screen time, suggests Catherine Steiner-Adair, PhD, clinical psychologist and author of ***The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age***. Steiner-Adair recommends an experiment with your child — ask them to notice how calmly they are treating and talking to their siblings before getting on a video game, then compare that to afterwards. If there are differences, you can then use that as a motivation to work together to find ways to be able to be calm and more easily transition out of screen mode.

Teach the Language of Emotion — Lead with Empathy

Teaching your child the language of emotion can help them recognize emotions in themselves and provide a foundation for emotional problem-solving, says Dan Shapiro, MD, Developmental-Behavioral Pediatrician, Creator, Parent Child Journey. Doing this "all starts with empathy," he says. Part of leading with empathy with children means staying out of power struggles and making sincere and genuine efforts to understand your child, making them feel understood, and validating the feelings they have.

> *Get [children] to notice their own behavior before and after screen time."*
>
> Catherine Steiner-Adair, PhD

Resist Peer Pressure and Wait on Social Media and Messaging Platforms

Most social media platforms have age restrictions, such as 13 years old for an Instagram account. Younger children are easily circumventing these rules, sometimes with explicit or tacit parental consent, and creating accounts with a fake birthday. Research shows the use of social media, especially image-based social media, is linked to body image disorders, self-harm and more.

"With respect to when to give your child a smartphone, recommendations typically range from ages 13-16, if possible," says Trisha Prabhu, Founder and President of ReThink Citizens, inventor of ReThink, and JD candidate at Yale Law School. "Children may say, 'But my friends have a phone!' 'My friends have Instagram.' But later on, kids may look back and appreciate that they got a little more time to grow and develop while unplugged from the digital world."

"Our research shows that over 92% of fifth-graders have been exposed to hate speech on social media in the last month," notes Marc Berkman, JD, CEO of the Organization for Social Media Safety. "This amount of exposure is likely normalizing hate speech amongst our teen and young adult population, contributing to more hate speech being posted and shared over time."

"There's a big difference between screen activities that are socially connecting versus ones that are socially isolating."

Dan Shapiro, MD
PARENT CHILD JOURNEY

Make Media Time High Quality and Prosocial

Screen time in and of itself is neither all good nor all bad for children of school age. Making sure that the digital use your child is engaging in is providing positive and interactive experiences is important, say many experts. "There's a big difference between computer activities or screen activities that are socially connecting versus ones that are socially isolating," says Shapiro.

While parents often focus on safety with children and screen use, healthy content and use is also extremely important, says Englander. "There's a big difference between activities that last hour after hour after hour after hour and screen activities that last for a [set] period of time. There's a beginning, middle, and an end, and then you do something else and then you return to it," notes Shapiro.

Share Evidence with Older Children on Dysregulation and Technology

With older children who may be having a very difficult time with dysregulation when it's time to transition off of screen time, one helpful strategy can be showing them the research on the impacts of technology on attention, mood, and behavior, suggests Steiner-Adair. This allows for a safe space where it's not a position of parent judgement but just talking honestly about why it's hard to get off, and how technology is designed to keep them engaged and dysregulate, she says.

Avoid Violent Media Exposure

There are several known effects to children from exposure to violent media, says Brad J. Bushman, PhD, Professor of Communication, The Ohio State University. For some children, playing violent video games or simply watching media containing violence results in subsequent increases in behavioral aggression, stress, mental health concerns, and social isolation, he says. The violence in the media doesn't need to be realistic imagery in order to have this effect, notes Craig Anderson, PhD, Distinguished Professor of Psychology at Iowa State University. Anderson cites a study that playing cartoonish "kid" games with violence increased subsequent aggressive behavior by 47% — just as much as a more "realistic" imagery with violence.

The "bystander effect" of exposure to violent media has been shown to make children and adults who consume violent media less physiologically aroused or concerned by real-world violence, says Bushman. This plays out in real life by showing less empathy to victims of violence and less inclination to help a victim out in a real-life scenario. "One study found that children are less willing to intervene when they saw two younger children fighting if they had previously watched a violent film compared to a nonviolent film. Violent video games are especially problematic because feeling empathy requires you to take the perspective of the victim, whereas violent video games encourage players to take the perspective of the perpetrator."

Other known effects from violent media exposure include:

- **Aggressor effect** — *increased exposure linked to more aggressive behavior*
- **Victim effect** — *increased exposure linked to more fear*
- **Appetite effect** — *increased exposure linked to increased desire for more similar content*

Violent video games are especially problematic because...they encourage players to take the perspective of the perpetrator."

Brad J. Bushman, PhD
THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

Understand Influence of Parasocial Relationships

Children can and do form meaningful attachments to media characters, referred to as "parasocial relationships." Parents would be wise to understand these attachments are real and can provide benefits to children, says Rebecca Tukachinsky Forster, PhD, Associate Professor of Communication, Chapman University. "They can fulfill emotional needs, give a sense of belongingness, connectedness, affiliation, affirmation and attachment. They can help regulate moods and emotions, and they play a role in children developing their own identity."

The flip side of parasocial relationships with media characters is that they can be very influential on children's values and behaviors — parents should take care to be mindful of parasocial attachments to people or characters that display values and behaviors that do not fit within your family's values, she notes.

Help Kids Reflect on Values and Behavior

Discussions with children about healthy media use can fit into broader conversations with them about what kind of person they want to be — though it's important not to have these conversations when a child is already dysregulated or at a difficult transition moment with screen time, says McDaniel.

Talk to your child over time about:

- **Who they want to be**
- **What kind of behaviors they want to exhibit**
- **How they want people to see them**
- **What screen use can do to their behavior over time**

You can then use these answers to help them think about ways they might want to conduct themselves and spend their time that will help them become this version of themselves they want to be, suggests McDaniel. "Check in with them at different times about how they're feeling about those things, as opposed to only coming in during a punitive or limit-setting moment."

Habit formation and culture-building both require accountability."

Thomas Lickona, PhD
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT CORTLAND

Build Character-Forming Habits and Family Culture

Parents have two fundamental tasks when raising children to become kind and respectful, says Thomas Lickona, PhD, Professor Emeritus of Education and Director of the Center for the Fourth and Fifth Rs (Respect and Responsibility) at State University of New York at Cortland. One is to help them build strong personal character through habit formation. The second is to build a strong family culture that brings out the best in all family members. A positive family culture can be developed through regular rituals that foster prosocial norms, such as having a topic at mealtime like, "What's something you're grateful for today?" or "What's something kind you did today?"

Habit formation and culture-building both require accountability, notes Lickona. Creating a family mission statement together ("We use respectful words to solve problems," "We say we're sorry when we've done something wrong," etc.) asks all family members to commit to trying to be their best selves. A "family huddle" gives both parents and kids a voice in follow-up discussions ("How did we do this week with our mission statement?") and in deciding how best to solve a particular problem going forward. When a consequence for wrong behavior is warranted, it's another opportunity to give children voice and responsibility: "What do you think is a fair consequence?" or "What is something positive you can do to make up for it?"

Encourage Helping Behaviors at Home For Behavior in Other Contexts

Research shows that children who help their family more at home in various ways are more likely to also help and have positive behaviors with peers, friends, and in school contexts the next day, says Eva Telzer, PhD, Co-Director, Winston Center on Technology and Brain Development and Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at UNC Chapel Hill. Behaviors that are socialized in the home context can really impact children's daily lives in other contexts, including online behavior as well, she notes.

Fostering helping behaviors and kindness at home does not necessarily mean forced helping or chores, notes Telzer. "Requiring your child to do chores is not the same thing as a child developing the competence and the meaning around why helping around the house is an important behavior. It's really developing this character as opposed to forcing or requiring a behavior at home to occur."

Start teaching children from young ages about boundaries and healthy friendships."

Megan Maas, PhD
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Talk Early About Boundaries and Healthy Friendship

Start teaching children from young ages about boundaries and healthy friendships, says Megan Maas, PhD, Assistant Professor of Human Development and Family Studies, Michigan State University. Developing those principles starting as early as kindergarten will help children apply those principles to healthy relationships later in life. "Kids are constantly discovering what it is they need to do to be a good friend, to find a good friend," says Fagell. Parents can help kids develop resilience to friendship drama by helping them understand that no one child may meet all their friendship needs. Fagell suggests asking your child questions like:

- **Who is a friend with whom you have fun?**
- **Who is a friend you know you can trust to keep a secret?**
- **Who is a friend who always says yes when you want to hang out?**

Answering these questions will help children embrace the idea that perhaps different friends can support different friendship needs, and be resilient to rejection or transitions from one specific friend.

In the digital age, it's important to help young people realize that they do not need to be available 24 hours a day via electronic devices in order to be a good friend, says Lizzy Winstone, PhD, Senior Research Associate in Population Health Sciences at the University of Bristol. "That can be a real source of stress for young people — the expectation that they're available to respond to a message immediately. Have those conversations with young people that this constant availability is not an essential part of a friendship. At least that's not what should be considered most meaningful in a friendship. You could model this with your own behavior too."

Discuss Displaying Good Behavior and Character Online

Children who behave respectfully and kindly in real life, like adults, can be guilty of behaving contrary to their values when online and not having to face the in-person cues or in-the-moment consequences of their actions. "The thing to remind kids is that there's another human being on the other end of all of these digital interactions," says Devorah Heitner, PhD, author of ***Growing Up in Public: Coming of Age in a Digital World.*** "Sometimes we can see online disinhibition where kids forget that they're typing to others. We just need to remind kids that they're always communicating with other human beings and they're accountable and responsible for not causing harm intentionally."

"We have to be direct in teaching children how to take basic social skills and bring them online," urges Anne Maheux, PhD, Assistant Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Winston Family Distinguished Fellow, Winston National Center on Technology Use, Brain, and Psychological Development. "We kind of pretend like the digital context is entirely different. And although digital media does transform the way that teens and children are engaging with their peers, basic empathy and pro-social skills can be applied to digital contexts." Steiner-Adair recommends having a family responsible use agreement that says "Here's how we talk to other people and here's how we don't. And here's the consequences."

Talk About Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is not just a problem for adolescents. "Our research has shown that kids who own cell phones in elementary school are significantly more likely to get involved in cyberbullying both as bullies and as victims. We need to start talking to kids about it when they're young," says Englander. These discussions can be part of the conversations about character, values-based online behavior, as well as healthy friendships.

"Cyberbullying carries many challenges because today's youth have such easy access to digital media and cyberbullies can sometimes remain anonymous and without consequences. To help prevent cyberbullying, I recommend parents set clear rules with their children about what's allowed, what's expected, and what's not, and to develop a relationship of trust," says Melissa Faith, PhD, Clinical Pediatric Psychologist, Johns Hopkins All Children's Hospital. "Be honest with your child about your concerns and talk about your family values and support structures. I also recommend telling your child if you plan to check their accounts to monitor their and peers' online behaviors. These honest conversations can help your child develop an accurate expectation of privacy, build trust, and contribute to an overall parenting style of setting clear boundaries and expectations in the context of an overall warm, loving parent-child relationship."

Parents should also consider the child's age and maturity — for younger children, Dr. Faith recommends bookmarking websites that children are allowed to use and perhaps initiating some parental controls or monitoring. For older children, especially pre-teens and younger teenagers, Dr. Faith recommends creating the child's online passwords together. As these young adolescents are becoming involved in social media and other online platforms, like online gaming platforms, parents should set expectations that they may review online content together with their child, at times, to foster opportunities to mentor their child through the child's growing engagement in virtual settings.

Tips for Physical Health

High amounts of screen time are linked to impacts on child physical health factors, including BMI, nutrition, physical activity, and ocular health. Elementary-aged children need at least 60 minutes of physical activity daily, whether at home, school, or extracurriculars. Good physical health at this age is important also for cognitive and mental health, and builds a foundation for wellness across the lifespan.

- More Screen Time is Associated with Higher BMI and Binge Eating in Children
- Avoid Distracted Eating During Screen Time
- Limit Exposure to Food Advertisements
- Understand Link Between Screen Use and Weight-Related Behaviors in Children
- Make Screen Time Active Time Together
- Establish Regular Consistent Routines — Bedtimes and Mealtimes
- Maintain Eye Health with Proper Media Use

More Screen Time is Associated with Higher BMI and Binge Eating in Children

Preteens in a large national study of almost 12,000 youth reported an average of four hours of recreational screen time per day, reports Jason Nagata, MD, Associate Professor, Department of Pediatrics, University of California, San Francisco, School of Medicine. Each additional hour of screen time per day was associated with a higher BMI (Body Mass Index) percentile one year later. In particular, increases in time spent texting, video chatting, and video gaming were the most strongly associated with BMI gains.

The link between screen time and higher BMI has multiple likely causes. More screen time generally means more sedentary time and less physical activity, says Nagata. Another study from Nagata and others examined links between screen time and binge eating disorder. Binge eating disorder is characterized by eating large quantities of food in a short period of time, a feeling of loss of control during the binge, and then experiencing shame or guilt afterwards. "We found that each additional hour of screen time per day was associated with 62% higher odds of development of binge eating disorder, one year later," says Nagata.

Each additional hour of screen time per day was associated with a higher BMI percentile one year later."

Jason Nagata, MD
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
SAN FRANCISCO SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

Avoid Distracted Eating During Screen Time

One pathway for increased body weight with increased screen time is through mindless or distracted eating in front of screens, says Erica Kenney, PhD, Assistant Professor, Department of Nutrition, T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Harvard University. "If you are watching a movie or a show and you have a bowl of snacks, you're not necessarily as able to pay attention to whether you're actually still hungry or not, whether you actually even still like the taste of what you're eating. It's harder to pay attention to those cues from your own body for how much you're consuming and that can lead to overconsumption of foods." In addition, the snack foods most often consumed in front of the TV or screen are often high-sugar, high-grain, processed foods that are difficult for the body to be aware of.

Limit Exposure to Food Advertisements

Food advertisements on TV and online are "enormously effective" at changing the foods that children eat, says Kenney. Repeated exposure to the same ad often entices children to beg parents for foods that are often unhealthy.

Modern digital advertising employs many techniques beyond traditional ad spots. Some engage with kids as if they are their friends, making it harder for kids to separate out their experience with friends versus advertising, says Kenny. Product placement in shows or on popular influencer channels can also affect child food preferences.

Understand Link Between Screen Use and Weight-Related Behaviors in Children

Screen time, particularly on social media, is linked to body dissatisfaction and weight-related behaviors in both girls and boys. While it's commonly thought that weight-related behaviors are not displayed until adolescence, it is becoming more common in younger children. Greater media exposure and appearance conversations were the strongest predictors of weight-related dietary restriction in 5-year-old girls according to a 2015 study.

"Exposure to social media may lead to unattainable body ideals and images that children are exposed to, and particularly social comparisons between photos and videos of other teens or young people," says Nagata. For girls, that means behaviors aimed at becoming thinner and losing weight, such as restrictive eating, whereas boys are more likely to engage in behaviors to become more muscular, like anabolic steroid use, excessive exercise, protein overconsumption while restricting carbohydrates and fats, or other muscle-building or performance-enhancing behaviors."

Make Screen Time Active Time Together

Parents can enjoy bonding time as well as active time by playing physically active video games or following exercise videos together with their children, says Amy Lu, PhD, Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Studies, College of Arts, Media and Design, and the Department of Public Health and Health Sciences, Bouvé College of Health Sciences, Northeastern University. In addition to relationship bonding, this physical activity can provide exercise for children, making them less likely to engage in nonproductive sedentary screen time, introducing them to sports, and increasing the chances that they will sleep better.

It's not just about providing food... but the structure and planning around it that helps children who thrive in predictability."

Laura Bellows, PhD
CORNELL UNIVERSITY

Establish Regular Consistent Routines — Bedtimes and Mealtimes

Routines provide structure and security and stability that are associated with positive developmental outcomes, says Laura Bellows, PhD, Associate Professor, Division of Nutritional Sciences, College of Human Ecology, Cornell University. Routines that augment physical health include those related to meals, sleeping and bedtime, bathing, and physical activity.

For mealtimes, it's not just about providing food and nutrients, but the structure and planning around it that helps children who thrive in predictability, says Bellows. Mealtimes are also an opportunity for emotional connectedness and a way to establish positive parent-child interactions and effective communication.

Research shows that for families that eat three or more meals a week together, there is a reduction in obesity, disordered eating, and unhealthy food consumption, and an increase in healthful food consumption. Kids who eat regular family meals are also likely to do better in school, have better weight status, and be less likely to partake in risky behaviors, says Bellows. Family meals are also an important avenue for strengthening the parent-child relationship and are cited by many experts as an important time to make screen-free in order to strengthen these relationships.

Maintain Eye Health with Proper Media Use

High amounts of screen time are linked to child eye health issues such as myopia (nearsightedness) development and progression. The four rules of visual hygiene around screens are proper distance, good lighting, rest breaks, and time outside, says Kenneth Sorkin, OD, FAAO, at Long Island Pediatric Ophthalmology.

- **Proper screen distance** — *Keep screens a good distance away — for larger screens this could be at least an arm's length away; for smaller screens, arms should be in an "L" position rather than a "V" which brings the screen too close.*
- **Good lighting** — *Lower screen intensity in balance with ambient room lighting. Avoid pitch black rooms.*
- **Rest breaks** — *25 minutes of "near work" (i.e., reading on a tablet) should be paired with approximately a minute of rest. Have the child close their eyes for 30 seconds and then look far away for another 30 seconds.*
- **Get outside** — *Outdoor exposure is protective against the development of myopia.*

Look for signs that their ocular health is being adversely affected by screen use. These signs can include blinking too much, rubbing eyes, or getting headaches, says Sorkin.

What to Allow — Considerations for Children's Media Content

The relative impacts to child health of "screen time" are not solely based on minutes spent on a device — many impacts are tied to the content children see during their time online and the individual child's developmental readiness for that exposure. Limiting inappropriate content and preparing children for critical consumption are important parental tools to help ensure healthy child media use.

- Limit Access to Platforms and Content Meant for Older Adolescents and Adults
- Match Media with Individual Child's Development and Environments
- Select Media with Purpose in Mind and that Reflects Your Values
- Balance "High-dopamine" Screen Activities with "Low-dopamine" Activities
- Teach Kids what Hateful Content Looks Like and How to Handle it
- Restrict Access to Violent Media
- Know that Most Kids are Seeing Sexual Content — Intentionally or Not
- Popular Kid Platforms Aim for Eyeballs Not Health
- Evaluate Quality of Video Game Play vs. Quantity for Mental Health
- Reduce Exposure to Advertising
- Teach Kids How Ad Content Influences Their Desires
- Be Aware of Manipulative Techniques to Get Kids to Overengage or Spend Money
- Find and Encourage Engagement with Positive Content
- Educate Yourself About Your Child's Media Diet
- Find Out what Personal Information is Being Collected
- Define and Discourage Doomscrolling
- Develop Algorithm Know-How
- Train Critical Use of GenAI Products
- Digital Therapeutics are Not Proven for Efficacy/Benefit

Limit Access to Platforms and Content Meant for Older Adolescents and Adults

Children ages 6-11 have "one foot in preschool, one foot in adolescence," says David Kleeman, SVP Global Trends, Dubit. For many children, technology meaningfully enters their lives at this age, and they are very eager to be in control of their own media, he says. The top apps for children this age are advanced messaging and social media, despite the fact that social platforms are supposed to restrict use to 13 years of age or older. Enforcing this age limit with your child instead of tacitly approving side-stepping of age restrictions since "everyone else is doing it" is a wise choice, say many experts, as younger exposure to social media may increase its associated harms.

Match Media with Individual Child's Development and Environments

First and foremost, find content that is responsive to youth and where they are developmentally. Use Common Sense Media or similar sites to help you evaluate whether any given piece of media is appropriate for your child's age and maturity.

While it's known that media has effects on children, how each individual piece of media might affect a specific child cannot be known by researchers and depends on parent or caregiver knowledge of the individual child, say many experts. "Effects are so defined by the contours of who the child is. They're so defined by the contours of the context of what's happening in that environment and that content that they're engaging in," says Jessica Piotrowski, PhD, Associate Professor, School of Communication Research Director, Center for Research on Children, Adolescents, and the Media (CCaM), University of Amsterdam.

How each piece of media might affect a specific child depends on parent or caregiver knowledge of the individual child.

For media that contains aggression, for example, "kids process that kind of aggression really differently, so the key thing is to know your child and to understand where their vulnerabilities are," says Elizabeth Englander, PhD, Professor of Psychology and Executive Director and Founder of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center at Bridgewater State University.

Parents and caregivers are best at identifying the content that meets their own value systems and that feels good to them, says Piotrowski. As a parent, you often have a sense of how your children are responding to media, and you quickly know which ones are the ones that don't bother you, that fit in your values, or ones that create a reaction that is not acceptable in your own household, she says.

Select Media with Purpose in Mind and that Reflects Your Values

Different media content affects children in predictable ways — know that you have the power to choose the content that you want your children to experience and be aware of potential effects, because children learn from everything they see. "Content matters greatly. If children play Reader Rabbit, their reading skills improve. If they play Math Blaster, math skills improve. If they play prosocial games where you have to take care of other characters and care about them and show empathy for them, in fact, empathy does tend to go up and helpful and cooperative behaviors in the real world go up. And if they're playing violent games, well, kids become desensitized and they learn to be more willing to behave aggressively when provoked," says Douglas Gentile, PhD, Distinguished Professor of Developmental Psychology, Iowa State University, Editor, "Media Violence and Children."

When unfamiliar with content that a child wants to watch or play with, age ratings on content are better than nothing, but only go so far, depending on your family's values. It's now easy to find clips and reviews online of games or shows so you can make an informed decision for your child and your family, says Gentile. "One of the reasons parents don't agree what the minimum age is for media products is because parents have different values. Some parents care a lot that their kids do not see violence but don't mind if they see sexual things and other parents are exactly the opposite," says Gentile. By previewing content yourself, you have the power to choose based on what your family's values are.

Balance "High-dopamine" Screen Activities with "Low-dopamine" Activities

Screen activities that release high amounts of dopamine in the brain can lead to addictive screen use behaviors if not balanced with other activities that release lower amounts of dopamine, says child and adolescent psychiatrist and internet addiction specialist Clifford Sussman, MD, Volunteer Clinical Faculty at George Washington University. Examples of screen activities that release high levels of dopamine include video gaming, short-form video scrolling (e.g., TikTok), and watching content that utilizes fast-paced editing.

Note that not all screen activities are considered high-dopamine. Lower dopamine screen activities can include learning to code, making a school presentation in powerpoint, or listening to a podcast. However, even when doing low-dopamine activities on screen, children are often tempted by easy access to the internet and various notifications that can draw them into high-dopamine activities on a device.

Sussman notes that brains start releasing dopamine even before an activity starts once it's been conditioned to expect to receive what it wants, increasing the lure and power of more addictive and less healthy screen behaviors. Work to reduce the cues your child is exposed to for high-dopamine screen use. "A lot of the work I do with kids and families is about adjusting the cues in the house and trying to separate high-dopamine cues from low-dopamine cues," says Sussman. Always follow high-dopamine activities with a block of low-dopamine activities to allow young brains to reset.

Teach Kids what Hateful Content Looks Like and How to Handle it

It's "on us" to talk with kids and teach them what hateful or bullying content looks like online, says Stephanie Fredrick, PhD, NCSP, Associate Director, Alberti Center for Bullying Abuse Prevention, University at Buffalo, SUNY. Parents cannot rely on platforms to restrict hateful content — preparing children to recognize hateful or harassing content or behavior is part of parenting today. Talk with children about what they can and should do if they see a situation develop, and help them build a toolbox of appropriate actions and options, says Fredrick.

Restrict Access to Violent Media

Effects of violent media on children depend on children's exposure — to reduce exposure, restrict access as much as possible, suggests Brad J. Bushman, PhD, Professor of Communication, The Ohio State University. This restriction can include using filtering devices to restrict violent content on TV sets and computers, and keeping all screens in public areas of the home (and out of children's bedrooms) so that parents can monitor content. Research indicates several effects on children from exposure to violent media, says Bushman, such as:

- **Aggressor effect** — *increased exposure linked to more aggressive behavior*
- **Victim effect** — *increased exposure linked to more fear*
- **Appetite effect** — *increased exposure linked to increased desire for more similar content*
- **Bystander effect** — *increased exposure linked to less empathy towards others in violent situations*

Know that Most Kids are Seeing Sexual Content — Intentionally or Not

Children and adolescents who are not necessarily looking for sexual information are still seeing this content regularly, noted several experts. "Depictions of sexual talk and behaviors are quite frequent in entertainment media for youth," says Jennifer Stevens Aubrey, PhD, Professor of Communication at University of Arizona.

"We did a national study where we actually looked at what teens were consuming and what they were being exposed to on online content. We found they were being exposed to sexual content, and they were also being exposed to pornography. Children were pretty disturbed about what they were seeing," says Carolyn West, PhD, Professor of Clinical Psychology at University of Washington.

Children were pretty disturbed about what they were seeing."

Carolyn West, PhD
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

Popular Kid Platforms Aim for Eyeballs Not Health

Today's platforms use algorithms to autoplay content that can be undesirable or even harmful to children — even the kids' versions, caution experts. "A lot of parents let their kids use the Kids YouTube app freely thinking that it's safe. But there have even been controversies and problems with that Kids app as well," says Soraya Giaccardi, Senior Researcher, Norman Lear Center, University of Southern California.

YouTube is the most popular platform with children worldwide — parents should "have their guard up"when their children engage with this site, says Jenny Radesky, MD, Assistant Professor, Developmental Behavioral Pediatrics, University of Michigan Medical School. "The industry incentives favor engagement — that's how the industry measures success of a product." The platforms and their algorithms are not incentivized to prioritize child health but to maximize the time a child spends on the platform. "If your kids love YouTube you can look at YouTube Kids. There's more ad limits and filters on there, but there is still a lot of commercial content and influencers," she says.

Independent research has shown that 85% of videos on YouTube have advertising, yet this percentage is even higher for early childhood videos, says Radesky. Content ranging from nursery rhyme compilations, videos helping learning numbers and colors, and popular animated character compilations have significantly more "ad-load," meaning while watching one piece of content children will see a banner ad, and a pop-up ad, and a sidebar ad. "Sometimes the educational content was actually blocked by an ad, and sometimes the ads weren't even relevant to what a child would want to be searching," says Radesky.

85% of videos on YouTube have advertising... this percentage is even higher for early childhood videos."

Jenny Radesky, MD
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN MEDICAL SCHOOL

Evaluate Quality of Video Game Play vs. Quantity for Mental Health

"There are lots of ways that games can affect mental health for better and for worse," says Nick Ballou, PhD, Postdoctoral Researcher at Oxford Internet Institute. "Research shows that play time is less important than the quality of that play," he notes. "There are people like speedrunners or streamers that have really healthy, positive relationships with games and gaming communities despite really high play time."

When evaluating youth game play to determine whether it falls into "healthy" use or "problematic" use, Ballou suggests looking at factors such as:

- **Business model/monetization features** — *Are there gambling or loot box features that encourage problematic play or behaviors?*
- **Genre of game** — *What type of game is it? For example, a story-focused role-playing game, a fast-paced strategy game, a creative simulation or building game, or something else?*
- **Mode of game** — *Is the game being played as a team or in solitary mode? Are there randomized elements?*
- **Content of game** — *What themes does the game include? For example, sexualized characters, drug use or gambling, fantasy violence, and so forth.*
- **Play style** — *What is the child doing in the game? What kind of roles are they adopting in the game? Are they taking more of a leadership role or a follower role, or are they playing a support role?*
- **When the game is being played** — *Is the game being played after school or on weekends or before school? (Some research indicates that before-school gaming is associated with lower school performance.)*
- **What the play is displacing** — *Is the child gaming to the exclusion of homework, reading a book, or other activities available to them?*
- **Physical position of play** — *What is the body doing while playing?*
- **Social context of play** — *What communities or relationships is the gamer engaging with through video game play?*
- **Purpose of play** — *What is the gamer trying to get out of playing the game?*
- **Individual factors** — *What are the identities or personality traits of the gamer that affects how they experience game play***?**
- **Emotional factors** — *How does the game make the player feel during and after play?*

> *Research has shown that children have difficulties resisting advertising messages… cognitively, many haven't developed the developmental competency to stop, take a break, and think carefully."*

Matthew Lapierre, PhD
UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

Reduce Exposure to Advertising

Children's immature cognitive and affective skills put them at a disadvantage in processing and viewing advertising content, says Matthew Lapierre, PhD, Associate Professor, Communication, University of Arizona. "With an advertisement you have to decipher what is the person's intent, what's the communicator's intent. We don't do this naturally, it takes time to develop these skills." Research has shown that children have difficulties resisting advertising messages, says Lapierre. Cognitively, many haven't developed the developmental competency to stop, take a break, and think carefully about the messages advertising is delivering to them," he says.

On top of that, in today's sophisticated media environment, advertising content is designed for maximal reaction and effectiveness, and is often delivered in stealthy ways that make it more challenging to identify. Children need guidance in understanding when they are being marketed to and how they might resist it.

Today's advertising is targeted to the individual — based on a young person's demographic profile, their location, or even their previous actions online, says Vicky Rideout, President, VJR Consulting. It's often interactive, meaning the child can actually engage with the advertising content and give the advertiser information directly.

Advertising is now often viral — children may receive it from a friend and send it to their friends, says Rideout. On top of that, it's often seamlessly integrated into whatever the content the kid is using, whether it's video, social media posts, or games, she notes. Sometimes children may not even be able to play a desired game without watching it.

Influencer content is increasingly prevalent online, including child influencers. Often, child influencers are "basically a thirty minute commercial for a product," says Lapierre. Because advertising is baked into watching the content itself, and being viewed on smaller screens instead of TVs, the influence is more subtle and harder for parents to monitor.

Start with curious conversation."

Omni Cassidy, PhD
NYU GROSSMAN
SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

Teach Kids How Ad Content Influences Their Desires

Children's desires and preferences can be heavily affected by advertising and other content they view online, particularly with food products. As children get to grade school age, parents can help them understand how these desires are affected by advertising and develop the skills to set their own intentions about what food or other products they desire. Start with curious conversation, says Omni Cassidy, PhD, Assistant Professor of Population Health, NYU Grossman School of Medicine. When a child shows desire for something on the screen, ask why?, she suggests. "'Why do you want to eat that? What about that makes it seem like it's delicious? Have you ever tasted it before?'" The more parents have these conversations with children, the greater the impact in the child to help them shift the needle in understanding of their own motivations for wanting something.

Be Aware of Manipulative Techniques to Get Kids to Overengage or Spend Money

While there are many dimensions to what may make the content of a game more harmful than beneficial, there are certain features using monetization or gambling strategies that are commonly understood to have negative effects on gamers, says Ballou. "For example, you buy a subscription for a game for a month or three months, and then the game gives you rewards on a schedule. The more you play, the more rewards you earn. If you don't play a sufficient amount of time or log in every day for that period for which you have the subscription, you will lose out on those rewards," he explains.

With these sorts of features, you'll find many players saying things like "I actually don't really want to play this game right now, but I feel like I have to," says Ballou. Any design feature that makes a player feel that they have to do something they don't want to do because of investment or gamification should be reined in where possible, he suggests.

Adam Gazzaley, MD, PhD, Founder and Executive Director of Neuroscape and David Dolby Distinguished Professor of Neurology, Physiology and Psychiatry at University of California, San Francisco, agrees. "There are some game mechanics that are very close to what we would call gambling mechanics, some reinforcement strategies that are just considered unhealthy, and that's something that we should definitely monitor. But, at the end of the day, it's the delivery of these that really has to be monitored," he says.

Find and Encourage Engagement with Positive Content

Parents can play an important role in researching channels for child content and ensuring what children consume online contains positive messages, says Radesky. "Encourage your kids to subscribe to positive channels so you know they are not being fed something you are unsure about."

Educate Yourself About Your Child's Media Diet

It's important for parents to fully educate themselves about the possible uses of the platforms preferred by their child so that appropriate and informed limits can be set. Understanding how, where, and why kids are playing games is vital for effectively guiding them towards age appropriate and positive digital play, says Sara Grimes, PhD, Wolfe Chair in Scientific and Technological Literacy and Full Professor, Communication Studies, McGill University. Gaming platforms are not just for gaming anymore — kids can use them for all kinds of other activities, says Englander.

"Educate yourself about everything that your child is interested in, then think about rules or ways that you might want to set limits on how they are going to use it. Make sure that things are done within the limits of what you're comfortable with and that privileges for having it are directly linked to responsible use," says Englander.

Being informed about the actual ways children are using platforms today also creates an environment where you can be the "go-to" parent for helping your child through any situation in which they may find themselves, and develop resilience, notes Catherine Steiner-Adair, PhD, clinical psychologist and author of ***The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age***.

Find Out what Personal Information is Being Collected

Beyond the viewing of specific content, it's also important to evaluate access to specific apps and platforms used by children by investigating what sort of data the software is collecting on children.

This is not always easy to find out, though there are some sites online providing services, says Radesky. One such website for Android apps is called "search.appscensus.io" for example.

You may find out some surprising information when you dig, says Radesky. "I was looking up some of the popular meditation apps and they collect identifiers and send data to databases like Facebook. You probably don't want databases knowing that you're feeling anxious or you need help coping, and yet that sort of data is sort of regularly shared without us really knowing about it."

Define and Discourage Doomscrolling

Parents need to know about doomscrolling and help a child understand why it's not healthy, says Erin Berman, PhD, Clinical Psychologist, National Institute of Mental Health. Doomscrolling, a term coined for scrolling constantly through negative social media posts or news headlines, can not only contribute to anxiety and depression, but is also a passive way to use social media and the internet related to boredom and boredom-proneness, says James Danckert, PhD, Professor of Cognitive Neuroscience, Cognitive Neuroscience Research Area Head at University of Waterloo. Knowing the difference between normal scrolling and the type of scrolling that isn't healthy, particularly when one is feeling depressed or anxious, is important for children and their parents to understand and it's better than just telling kids "Don't scroll!" says Berman.

Develop Algorithm Know-How

Helping children develop an understanding and competency in grasping how AI and algorithms work to shape their online lives, as well as store their personal data, is a key task for parents in the years when children first start spending more time online.

"These technical competencies are important because they shape the visibility and invisibility of your kids online on social media platforms. It is one of several factors that shapes the journey of your data, says Ranjana Das, PhD, Professor in Media and Communication, University of Surrey. Some important things to convey for "algorithm literacy" according to Das:

- **That algorithms are present for almost every online experience — content consumptions, shopping, gaming**
- **Personalized search results are trained by an algorithm collecting data on your preferences and mean you are seeing different search results than other people**
- **News headlines you see may not be the same headlines that others see**
- **Notice what is being recommended to you often**

Some parents have helped their children "throw off" algorithms by discouraging "liking" things on social media, not scrolling slowly on content, and doing deliberate searches on platforms like Amazon for things they aren't interested in to avoid hypertargeting by algorithms, says Das.

Train Critical Use of GenAI Products

Use of ChatGPT and other generative AI products are increasingly popular with children and adults alike. However, children need training in order to be able to critically evaluate the output generated by today's AI tools, say many experts.

Tracy Pizzo Frey, MBA, Senior Advisor at Common Sense Media, cautions adults and children alike to remember what AI is in essence – "It's math that trains computers to do tasks that have been programmed with super-specific rules. While this technology is exciting and it's powerful, it's not perfect," she says.

Children use similar comparable strategies when judging the reliability of AI as they do with humans, says Ying Xu, PhD, Assistant Professor of Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, basing their judgment on whether the informant has provided accurate information in the past as well as on the level of expertise they perceive their source to have. "However, it appears that some children may be better at utilizing the strategies to calibrate the trust than others," she says. Youth with better background knowledge of the subject area of the conversation or more sophisticated understanding of the AI mechanisms will be better at making these judgments. Conversely, children with lower AI literacy may be prone to trust information received from AI without critically evaluating its quality.

Digital Therapeutics are Not Proven for Efficacy/Benefit

Grade-school age children may like mental health apps, but there are few studies on their efficacy and research is still emerging on whether these apps provide real benefit to children's mental health, says Stephen Schueller, PhD, Professor of Psychology and Informatics, University of California, Irvine. While an absence of evidence doesn't mean they don't work, it does mean that parents and caregivers should use caution in allowing children to use them and should make sure they are developmentally appropriate for their child's age and maturity.

Training Wheels – Parenting Tips for Supporting Healthy Media Use

- Promote Sleep — Remove Screens from All Bedrooms — Even Yours
- Emphasize Loving Connection at Bedtime
- Model Matching Values with Screen Behavior
- Ditch Unproductive Guilt for a Positive Mindset Around Media
- Delay Full Access to Internet/Online Media
- Protect Against Online Predators — Get Your Kids' Login Information
- Don't Put All Your Trust in Parental Controls
- Set Rules for Media Use — Any Rules
- Co-create Rules and Schedules with Your Children
- Gradually Increase Tech Access and Independence as Children Display Readiness
- Link Calm Transitions and Responsible Behavior to Increased Privileges
- Help Kids Balance "Junk Food" Tech Time with Healthy Screen Uses
- Support Development of Self-Regulation Skills
- Build Structure and Habits for Stopping Media Use
- Allow Reasonable Stop Points vs. Strict Limit Enforcement
- Normalize Conversation Over Restriction to Grow Children's Media Awareness
- Plan for Boredom
- Ask Don't Assume About Children's Online Lives and Content
- Interact During Media Time
- Watch for Signs of Problematic or Addictive Media Use
- Monitor for Other Conditions Coexisting with Problematic Screen Use
- Consider Community Agreements
- Monitor Content and Media Use
- Preserve Privacy and Self-Ownership — Minimize "Sharenting"
- Strategies for Co-Parenting Situations

Promote Sleep — Remove Screens from All Bedrooms — Even Yours

Instead of being "anti-screens", families should think about what they are "for," notes psychologist and author Lisa Damour, PhD. The first thing parents should be "for" is quality sleep, and in order to achieve this, technology should not be in any bedrooms, ever, she says. Healthy sleep is foundational for all other aspects of health, including cognitive development and mental health. Young humans need more and earlier sleep than older children and adults, says sleep health expert Lauren Hale, PhD, Professor of Family, Population, and Preventive Medicine, Stony Brook University.

Experts agree that elementary school-aged children should be getting between 9 and 11 hours of sleep a night. Screens in bedrooms can contribute to later sleep timing, shorter sleep duration, and worse sleep quality, says Hale, which has consequences for later life outcomes as well as current well-being. Research indicates inadequate sleep routines at ages five and nine predict higher obesity at age fifteen, she notes. Very few children at elementary school age have the self-regulation to put away a device at night independently on a reliable basis, notes Devorah Heitner, PhD, author of ***Growing Up in Public: Coming of Age in a Digital World.***

There may be situations where screens must be in bedrooms in order to complete homework in a quiet area — in these instances, just make sure to remove the screens before bedtime and not keep them in the room overnight, says Damour. Model removing screens from bedrooms by doing so for yourself, says Kim West, LCSW-C, a child and family therapist, Sleep Coach Trainer and author. After doing so, you can share with your child that you want them to learn how to put themselves to sleep without TV or tablets and that you're going to learn along with them, she suggests.

Emphasize Loving Connection at Bedtime

Research has indicated that parents' emotional availability at bedtime promotes feelings of safety, and security, and as a result, better-regulated child sleep, notes West. What does it mean to be more "emotionally available" at bedtime?

Suggestions include:

- **Not bringing your own screen or tablet into the bedroom**
- **Giving your child focused personal attention for 2 minutes — read a book, play a puzzle, or do another quiet activity**
- **Connecting book reading and story plots with real life through conversation**
- **Going for an evening walk or another calming activity**
- **Having tea together**
- **Engaging in physical affection with your child as much as possible**

(Hale, West)

Parents' emotional availability at bedtime promotes feelings of safety, security… and better-regulated child sleep."

Kim West, LCSW-C

Your behavior is the greatest predictor about how your kids will interact with media."

Sherri Hope Culver
CENTER FOR MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY
TEMPLE UNIVERSITY

Model Matching Values with Screen Behavior

Research continues to find strong links between parent screen behaviors and those of their children. "Be aware of the fact that your behavior is the greatest predictor about how your kids will interact with media," says Sherri Hope Culver, Director, Center for Media and Information Literacy, Professor, Temple University.

"Don't talk about it, be about it," urges Damour. "You should be really thinking very carefully about the relationship with technology you're modeling and the relationship with yourself and your self-esteem that you are modeling." Stick to a policy of showing kids that you do what they do, says Elizabeth Englander, PhD, Director, Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center and Professor of Psychology at Bridgewater State University. This includes paying attention to other people and not looking at devices during dinner time, for example, and putting your device away if your child is attempting to talk to you.

If you're on your mobile phone at the table or when you're talking to your child, you can't be surprised if they're going to prioritize that behavior as well, says Naomi Fineberg, MBBS, MA, MRCPsych, Professor of Psychiatry at University of Hertfordshire and Consultant Psychiatrist in Highly Specialized Service for Obsessive Compulsive and Related Disorders at Hertfordshire Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust.

It's important to demonstrate consciousness of your screen behavior and remind yourself to get off, says Culver. "Model the behavior you want to see and give a running commentary about it. So if I'm on my phone and my daughter walks in the room and I think to myself, 'I've been on my phone a long time, I really should put it down.' I actually say, 'Gosh, I've been on my phone for a long time, I'm just going to put it away.' Explain what you're doing and why you're doing it, as you're doing it."

All families are different and not everyone needs to use media the same way, says Sonia Livingstone, OBE, FBA, Professor of Social Psychology, London School of Economics and Political Science and Director of Digital Futures for Children Centre. One family may use media primarily for creative purposes, where another one may enjoy gaming together. Neither is necessarily better or worse than the other, and parents shouldn't feel they have to do exactly what anyone else is doing, as long as you stick to what your values are and what is important for your family, she urges.

Ditch Unproductive Guilt for a Positive Mindset Around Media

The majority of parents don't think they are doing "good enough" with regulating their children's and their own screen use, says Sarah M. Coyne, PhD, Professor, Human Development, School of Family Life, Brigham Young University. Try to move past this into a "we can do this" mindset. "We can have conversations. We can use parental media strategies in effective ways. We can empower our kids to use their devices in ways that will help them to thrive, and not just survive, in this digital environment."

Research indicates guilt and stress about media use can negatively impact the parent-child relationship, notes Lara Wolfers, PhD, Faculty of Psychology, University of Basel. While constructive concern about your own and your child's media use can be useful for managing habits, overstressing should be avoided. Parent guilt and stress about media use over time was found in a recent study to be related to a lower parent-child relationship satisfaction, says Wolfers.

"There's no app for love. There's no video game that replaces you. So you have to take really good care of yourselves, and that means cutting yourself slack. Don't feel guilty if your kids are on screens today or tomorrow longer than you want," says Catherine Steiner-Adair, PhD, clinical psychologist and author of ***The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age.***

> ***Communicating why you are delaying access can be done with kindness and compassion - and information."***
>
> **Titania Jordan**
> BARK TECHNOLOGIES

Delay Full Access to Internet/Online Media

Parents may be swayed by a child begging for the same digital access their peers may be enjoying. Know that "it's okay for your kid to be left out," says Titania Jordan, Chief Parent Officer, Bark Technologies. "My son was very, very convincing with his arguments for why he needed a smartphone when he got one, or access to social media before he was ready…What I didn't realize at the time, though, is that by allowing him [the phone], it actually just allowed him to be included in bullying and exposure to problematic content and themes that negatively impacted his mental and physical health." (More on assessing smartphone readiness)

Communicating why you are delaying access can be done with kindness and compassion — and information, suggests Jordan. Explain that you don't want them to be left out but that you don't think their heart or mind are ready for the problematic things they will likely experience once they get fully online.

Protect Against Online Predators — Get Your Kids' Login Information

It's a sad fact that predators and content encouraging self-harm or drug use can be found on all platforms popular with children — from Discord, to Snapchat to TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. Platforms have been slow or reluctant to shore up protections for children as well as enforce age restrictions. At a minimum, parents of children who are allowed to use connected online platforms should make sure they have kids' username and passwords for all of the devices and the platforms they use, says Samuel Chapman, CEO of Parent Collective Inc. Use these logins to check in as much as possible on their in-app messaging and content — and make sure you explain to your child that you are doing so, and why.

Harmful content can be found on all platforms popular with children.

Don't Put All Your Trust in Parental Controls

Many parents ask — "What parental controls should I use?" While some basic controls are helpful in the early years of media use, many experts caution against parental controls being the main strategy for parenting around media use. "One of my biggest concerns about parental controls is that they don't work. They may provide some semblance of surveillance and control and supervision, but unfortunately, I hear all the time from parents whose kids have found the workarounds. They also cannot monitor in-app content, which is usually one of parent's biggest concerns," says Emily Cherkin, MEd, author of ***The Screentime Solution***.

Parental controls can be seen as a "first line" of defense, particularly when children are at the age they are starting to spend more time online, says Sara Grimes, PhD, Wolfe Chair in Scientific and Technological Literacy and Full Professor, Communication Studies, McGill University. "They can provide a really excellent and easy entry point for conversations between parents and kids about key issues like cyberbullying, and ads, and privacy."

Parental controls can be useful tools for sparking real conversations between parents and kids about healthy media use, says Adam Pletter, PsyD, Clinical Child Psychologist and Founder of iParent101. He recommends setting them up early on every device — not as punishment, but as guardrails and predictable prompts to talk about what's working and what's not. When a limit inevitably fails, it's a chance to shift from 'control' to 'care,' emphasizing that the goal isn't restriction but helping kids slowly build genuine self-regulation skills — essential for childhood.

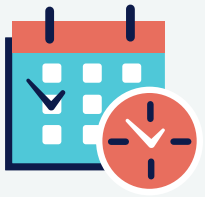
Beware that any third-party app may have security or privacy issues that you should evaluate before using them with your family, cautions internet safety expert Fareedah Shaheed.

Set Rules for Media Use — Any Rules

Being intentional about setting boundaries around media use, and sticking to them, is a key parenting strategy that pays dividends over time, says Vicki Shotbolt, Founder and CEO of ParentZone. While the boundaries will vary by family, the consistency in enforcing and sticking to them creates predictability and helps make house rules a habit that is formed internally in the child instead of continually enforced in a "top down" way by a parent.

A recent study indicates that the presence of rules in the home around media is associated not only with less screen time by children but with many other indicators of child well-being, including physical health, school performance, and social wellness, says Douglas A. Gentile, PhD, Distinguished Professor in Liberal Arts and Sciences, Department of Psychology at Iowa State University. "We studied over 1300 families of third- through fifth-graders. When we followed them out to the end of the school year, those kids whose parents had more rules for children's media use at the beginning of the school year, those kids are getting better sleep, which in turn is related to lower weight gain, so less risk for obesity. Those kids were getting better grades in school. Those kids were less aggressive as rated by teachers, which is kind of surprising because the teachers don't know what family rules for media are at home, but they see the behaviors in the classroom. And they are more prosocial, as rated by teachers."

Gentile notes that it is rare for one variable — the setting limits on the amount and content of children's media influences — to have so many effects on different types of wellness, and all of them positive. Limit-setting, therefore, is a protective factor that has many beneficial effects.



Co-create Rules and Schedules with Your Children

Rules and schedules that incorporate children's perspectives and buy-in are often more successful than more authoritarian "top-down" directives, say many experts. "Don't forget to involve the kids in the rule setting itself," says Stephen Balkam, Founder and CEO, Family Online Safety Institute. Focus on what the child and family prioritize such as family time, low-dopamine "down time," homework time, meal times, and build in agreed-upon windows for media use that fits within the priorities.

"I cannot stress enough how important it is to agree on boundaries with your child before you start allowing them to use technology. It doesn't really matter what those boundaries are. They're going to be different for every single family. They're going to be different for every child, potentially. But having them is the thing that is really crucial," says Shotbolt.

Children can also be involved in setting consequences for rule-breaking — parents need not think they have to be the expert on what is appropriate. "Ask your kids what they think. Discuss those ground rules before putting any restrictions in place and then really be in charge. You don't have to be an expert to have these conversations with young people. Let them be clear. Set those restrictions that work for your family," says Kev Clelland, Director of Insight and Engagement, YGAM.

Periodic cooperative reassessment of the rules, such as at the beginning of a new school year, is also helpful, notes Donna Tetreault, Parenting Journalist and author of ***The CASTLE Method*** and ***Dear Me: Letters to Myself for All of my Emotion***s.

> *Open the Internet up to them in little doses so that they learn to manage the risks along the way."*

Pamela Wisniewski, PhD
INTERNATIONAL COMPUTER SCIENCE INSTITUTE.

Gradually Increase Tech Access and Independence as Children Display Readiness

Media access should not be an "all or nothing" affair, note most experts. Much as you do not hand the keys to a car to a new driver without limits, or allow unlimited sugar consumption at all times, tech use should be similar, says Shimi Kang, MD, FRCPC, psychiatrist, author of ***The Tech Solution***, and Clinical Associate Professor at The University of British Columbia. Start small, such as just allowing text messaging and homework, she suggests. If a child shows signs of being able to successfully exhibit self-regulation around this limited use, perhaps they can move on to other uses. If not, parents can take back the privilege until the child is more ready. Moving forward with firmness and expectations provides children with the scaffolding they need to progressively take more responsibility for their media use.

This slow "scaffolding" approach is important to helping children learn to manage risks along the way of increasing responsibility, says Pamela Wisniewski, PhD, Principal Research Scientist, International Computer Science Institute. "The common scenario that we hear from parents is that they give their children open access and then they take it away if they screw up. That's not really a positive developmental scaffolded approach of having your kids go online. If you do that, they will get into an accident. Open the Internet up to them in little doses so that they learn to manage the risks along the way."

Think not only about where your child is now, but where you want them to be as they get older, urges Stephanie Reich, PhD, Professor, School of Education, University of California, Irvine. When they are 18 or a young adult, you want them to be functional users of their digital devices.

Parents can also successfully implement an "apprenticeship" model to media use, says Wisniewski. For example, allow your child very limited access to your own social media accounts before allowing them to open their own.

Link Calm Transitions and Responsible Behavior to Increased Privileges

Once boundaries and expectations are set for tech-free times, let kids know that non-combative behavior around transitions from screen time to non-screen time will result in more responsibility and privilege with their own media use, suggests Englander. "Make sure kids understand that the better they behave during the transition, the more privileges and freedom and choices they get. These two things should be linked. It really helps." Set your family up for success by having predictable, consistent times of the day when kids know you are with them, paying attention, screen-free, she notes.

Revisiting rules based on a child's demonstrated behavior helps align expectations with their developmental readiness, says Pletter. Every child communicates their strengths, sensitivities, and limits through their choices and actions — they'll show you what they can manage and what overwhelms them. Like a learner's permit for driving, gradually expanding digital access based on demonstrated responsibility feels safer and more comfortable for both parent and child.

Make sure kids understand that the better they behave during the transition, the more privileges and freedom and choices they will get."

Elizabeth Englander, PhD
MASSACHUSETTS AGGRESSION REDUCTION CENTER
BRIDGEWATER STATE UNIVERSITY

Help Kids Balance "Junk Food" Tech Time with Healthy Screen Uses

When thinking of a child's "tech diet," parents should help children learn to balance the "high-dopamine" activities that act like "junk food" with screen activities that release other more beneficial neurotransmitters, such as endorphins through self-care, oxytocin through positive social connection or community building, and serotonin through learning, play, and creativity, says Kang.

Examples of this include using screensavers of nature, listening to waves or bird sounds, and using apps for problem-solving, breathing exercises, or mindfulness. "Wire and fire" this healthy use of tech early so that young people start associating tech use with something that is serving them for their benefit, health, or social connectivity, says Kang.

Instead of starting with screen time amounts, visualize with your child all the things that you want to happen in the child's day, suggests David Hill, MD, FAAP, Hospital Pediatrician, Goldsboro Pediatrics, Adjunct Assistant Professor of Pediatrics, UNC School of Medicine, Former Chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics Council of Communications and Media, author of ***Co-parenting Through Separation and Divorce***. Write it all out — including eating times, reading, outdoor time, homework, and bedtimes, and look at what's left that might be okay to allow media time when not doing those other things.

Support Development of Self-Regulation Skills

Evidence indicates that making a habit of letting children lead activities until they need help, and only providing assistance or help when needed is neurally beneficial to the child, says Sarah Myruski, PhD, Assistant Research Professor in Psychology, Associate Lab Director, Emotion Development Lab at Pennsylvania State University. Allow your child to try activities on their own and only provide help or assistance if a mistake needs correcting. When the child gets it right, back off. This approach is called "parent scaffolding" and is associated with children developing emotion regulation skills that are essential to healthy development.

This self-regulation can eventually be applied to online behaviors and choices as well. Eventually, the aim is for children to develop the ability to choose their own media, understand why they are engaging in it, and be able to walk away if it's not feeling good or healthy to them.

Avoid mindless overconsumption of media by children… turn off the 'autoplay' function on their preferred video platform."

Jessica Piotrowski, PhD
UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

Build Structure and Habits for Stopping Media Use

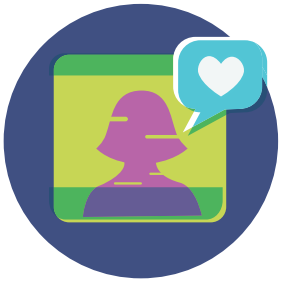
One of the most effective tools for school-age kids developing healthy media habits is to put a clock near where they are using technology, and even using alarms to remind them to stretch and walk and disconnect for a minute, says psychologist, attorney, and author Lisa Strohman, JD, PhD, Founder and Director of Digital Citizen Academy. This helps them develop the skills to regulate themselves, and over time ingrains them with the ability to self-stop by third or fourth grade if started early, she notes.

One useful strategy to avoid mindless overconsumption of media by children is to turn off the "autoplay" function on their preferred video platform, says Jessica Piotrowski, PhD, Associate Professor, School of Communication Research Director, Center for Research on Children, Adolescents, and the Media (CCaM), University of Amsterdam. "As humans, what we know is we actually respond very well when we have a 'stop.' That red light actually makes us stop and makes us think for a second to be a little bit aware." Kids are still working on self-regulation skills and, without a built-in stop, are easily led to media overconsumption through the continuous content delivery systems of modern platforms.

Allow Reasonable Stop Points vs. Strict Limit Enforcement

Being reasonable about media stop points can help avoid an "us versus them" mentality when it comes to screen time, say many experts. Instead of cutting off a video game at the exact agreed upon time when media time ends, assess the situation and see if you can allow them to finish the game or video within reasonable limits, says Fineberg. When possible, using media-driven stop points from the outset can avoid lack of clarity or endless negotiation, but this might vary by media type. For example, "watching one episode" of a show is more defined than "beating one level" of a game, in terms of how much time it will take.

Avoid an "us versus them" mentality when it comes to screen time.



Normalize Conversation Over Restriction to Grow Children's Media Awareness

Talk early and talk often, says Culver. The conversation about media use should start from the first time you hand them a device and continue throughout childhood. For school-age children, this includes going beyond "this is media time and this is not" to how they feel about what they are watching or playing. This will help children grow up with an understanding of "I make choices about the media that I use, I think about it, and then I take action related to it" that will serve the child well for healthy media use long-term.

Older children are experts at circumventing nearly every rule or restriction on their media use, notes digital addiction psychologist Ed Spector, PsyD. "Realize that the clock is really limited in terms of how long you're going to be able to [restrict access]. So the dialogue becomes far more important because we need to prepare them for whatever environments they happen to be in rather than stop them from being in them, because eventually they are going to be there. You want to make sure that that dialogue is still happening."

Plan for Boredom

Every parent is familiar with the "I'm bored!" complaint from children. Plan for bored time in advance to avoid the negative feelings and the strong temptation for passive screen time to remedy it. "Sit down and talk to children in moments when they're not bored and say, 'Okay, you know what this feels like, next time when it comes on, what's your list of four things that you might go to?'" suggests James Danckert, PhD, Professor of Cognitive Neuroscience, Cognitive Neuroscience Research Area Head, University of Waterloo. One of those options might include creative time on screens which isn't necessarily bad. Take into account the level of engagement the activity might require. Boredom isn't good or bad, it's what we do with it that matters, says Danckert. There might be some negative outcomes if the response is to do something unhealthy, but the state of boredom is actually an opportunity to make choices to engage with something that can be engaging and positive.

Ask Don't Assume About Children's Online Lives and Content

Be curious about your child's online experiences instead of starting with judgement, even if you privately may feel negatively about the content they are consuming, say several experts. This means "asking more than assuming," says Coyne. "Instead of saying 'Stop using TikTok,' ask 'Why do you like it?' or 'What do you wish I understood about it?'" Approaching with empathy over eye-rolling will help you uncover what's working for your child and what is not, and have productive discussions instead of conflicts where the child feels like you do not understand their online lives.

Validate what children are experiencing before attempting to regulate it, says Bradley J. Bond, PhD, Professor of Communication, University of San Diego. Online relationships, even parasocial ones, are perceived by children to be real because they are real to them and involve real emotions. "I always tell parents that if you're interested in what your children are doing online, talk to them about their online connections the same way you would about their classmates, their teammates, or their friends that they have in real life."

Interact During Media Time

When allowing media time, it's helpful for young kids to have "joint media engagement" with their parents or caregiver, which means watching it together and having conversations to help the child understand the meaning of what they are watching says Heather Kirkorian, PhD, Laura M. Secord Chair in Early Childhood Development School of Human Ecology, University of Wisconsin-Madison. It's important to have this interaction rather than just sit and watch TV. Or play video games together, says Reich. Doing so will provide opportunities for discussion and cultivate the parent-child relationship, as well as avoid reinforcing the impression that media time and space are "non-parent" zones, she notes.

Watch for Signs of Problematic or Addictive Media Use

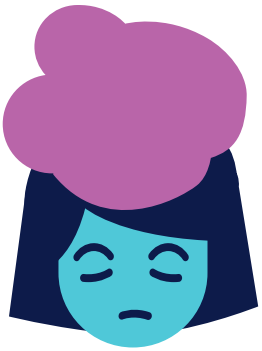
Addictive media use patterns can begin at any age. The longer problematic media use goes on, the more ingrained the behavior becomes and the more significant the impacts to child health and development. Signs of problematic media use usually involve impairment of function.

Evaluate for the following:

- **Is the behavior interfering with the ability to do schoolwork?**
- **Is it interfering with professional lives (if adult)?**
- **Is it interfering with physical health or remembering to eat?**
- **Is it preventing good sleep habits and durations?**
- **Is it interfering with our mental health? Are moods worse?**
- **Is it interfering with our relationships?**
- **Is there a substantial change to the personality?**
- **Is the child engaging less with friends or only seeking friends that also game?**
- **Is there increased isolation and withdrawal into games and gaming behavior?**
- **Is the child attempting to hide their media use?**
- **Is the child giving up other activities they enjoy like sports or music or other after school activities?**

(Alok Kanojia, MD, MPH, President and Co-Founder of Healthy Gamer, Douglas Gentile, PhD, Distinguished Professor in Liberal Arts and Sciences, Department of Psychology at Iowa State University.

Chia-chen Yang, PhD, Associate Professor of Educational Psychology, School of Educational Foundations, Leadership and Aviation at Oklahoma State University)



Monitor for Other Conditions Coexisting with Problematic Screen Use

Children who develop compulsive and problematic patterns around technology use often have co-occurring conditions such as anxiety, ADHD, autism, and/or depression, says Spector. Keep an eye out for if you may need to address these conditions instead of the media use patterns. “These are the four best friends to compulsive tech use. All of those kinds of problems will lead to a compulsive pattern. The road that gets you to the compulsive pattern is often the road that gets you out. So if you know you or someone you love is struggling with compulsive tech use, you want to be sniffing around for some of what these other problems are and that the treatment needs to include both.”

Consider Community Agreements

It's hard to make your own path as a parent, especially if you are looking to limit media more than others in your child's peer friend group or community. Many parents have found it helpful to enter into community or school-wide agreements such as "Wait until Eighth" to provide community support to each other in waiting to delay smartphone ownership, for example. Entering into this kind of "social compact" is a real help to parents feeling isolated or under a lot of pressure, notes Balkam. Some families have also found working with the school PTA for agreements on curfews or "media off" times to be successful, says Balkam. This avoids one parent feeling or being labeled as the "worst parent in the world" when it's what everyone in the community is doing.

Staying connected to what your children are engaging with online allows parents to be in tune with warning signs.

Vicki Harrison, MSW
CENTER FOR YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING
STANFORD UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

Monitor Content and Media Use

Monitor children's well-being around their media use using the "Three 'W's'", to identify if their media use is a concern, says child and adolescent psychiatrist and leadership coach Tracy Asamoah, MD:

- **When are they using it** — *are they using it at agreed upon times of day or in the middle of the night?*
- **What are they doing** — *how much time are they spending on positive and prosocial activities versus mindless scrolling or consuming content?*
- **Where are they using it** — *is access limited in specific areas such as the kitchen table, their bedroom at night, or the classroom?*
- **Why are they using it** — *are they using it for positive social connection, or self-medicating negative emotions?*

Staying connected to what your children are engaging with online allows parents to be in tune with warning signs of inappropriate content or problematic use, says Vicki Harrison, MSW, Program Director, Center for Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Stanford University School of Medicine.

Preserve Privacy and Self-Ownership — Minimize "Sharenting"

Parents' sharing ("sharenting") of family moments on personal social media profiles is common. However, experts warn that not only can sharing child photos online pose a risk to their privacy, it can affect the development of their sense of self. "When does a child learn that their face, their image, and their stories are theirs, as opposed to them just being the product?" says Ryan Allen, MS, LPCC-S, Licensed Professional Counselor, Preschool Therapy and Consulting.

Being constantly asked to pose for pictures to be posted online also teaches children that connection becomes conditional on their compliance to getting these pictures for you, causing damage to the parent-child relationship as well, notes Allen.

When does a child learn that their face, their image, and their stories are theirs, as opposed to them just being the product?"

Ryan Allen, MS, LPCC-S
PRESCHOOL THERAPY AND CONSULTING.

Strategies for Co-Parenting Situations

Navigating screen time rules can be difficult in co-parenting situations where different parents or caregivers may not see eye to eye on what's appropriate for the child. It's a challenge that is best navigated without playing out the conflict in interactions with your child, says Reich. "Co-parenting is a really robust area of research where parents really need to have communication skills, they have to find ways to support each other and not undermine each other, especially in front of children, and they should be aligned on their rules." It's a stressor on the child to comment on the other parent's rules negatively, so try to work it out amongst the adults.

If arriving at the "same page" with media use is impossible and there is conflict, utilize strategies much like when your child goes to a friend's house. Keep consistent to your own media rules at home, and convey to the child that the media rules at their other home do not affect your own. Do so in a consistent, responsive, warm way so that your child can maintain a sense of security and predictability, says Reich.

The Big Question — When to Get a First Phone

When to introduce personal device ownership to children has become one of the biggest parenting decisions in the digital age. In most families, the question of introducing a smartphone has become less about "if" than "when" and "how." Assess your child for developmental readiness and consider a gradual introduction of personal device technology and access, maintaining open lines of communication and support at every stage.

My Kid is Ready for a Phone — What Now?

If you've decided your child is developmentally ready for a smartphone, continue to guide them toward healthy and safe use. Children and Screens' tip sheet *"After the Smartphone: What Now?"* contains parenting tips for this guidance as well as information on how to work with your child to address use that may have become problematic.

Hold off as long as you can on browsers and apps. Kids can still communicate with their friends without those."

Lisa Damour, PhD

Consider Introducing A "Less Smart" Device First

The prevalence of smartphones may lead some parents to believe that their child should go straight from no device to a smartphone. Experts caution against this all-or-nothing thinking and most recommend a gradual stepwise approach to device ownership. "Go slow in giving kids technology," says psychologist and author Lisa Damour, PhD. "Hold off as long as you can on browsers and apps. Kids can still communicate with their friends without those. You can give your kid a phone with no browser and no apps, and they can use it as a 'walkie talkie text machine' to be in touch with their friends." These devices can be set up to require parent approval to add apps, she notes.

Elizabeth Milovidov, PhD, JD, Founder of DigitalParentingCoach.com, also urges parents to think about another introductory device first. "Does your child actually need access to the web? They may not if it's just for phone calls and for texting — a flip phone will work quite well."

Safety concerns are another reason many caregivers introduce a smartphone. Stephen Balkam, Founder and CEO of the Family Online Safety Institute, suggests instead introducing a device like a smart watch, which can offer the child the ability to make a call, text, and in some cases take a photograph but are not open to the Web and do not allow the download of social media apps. "Get them something, a device that they can wear that looks cool, that allows them to communicate with a certain number of friends and family members, but doesn't open them up to everything that the web has to offer," says Balkam.

Personal Device Readiness Checklist

Different children have different levels of maturity when it comes to readiness for personal devices. While community compacts like "Wait until Eighth" can provide a community benchmark, in absence of a target age to introduce personal device ownership with children, experts recommend evaluating your child for signs that they can handle incorporating digital device use into a balanced and healthy life.

If the answer to more than a few of these questions is "No," then discuss with your child and set up a plan for what milestones you'd like them to achieve before allowing them a device.

- **Is the child able to regulate their emotions and behavior around screen time (TV, tablet, gaming) and transitions?**
- **Is the child showing maturity and restraint about being able to turn off screens themselves at agreed upon times?**
- **Does the child understand there should be rules around smartphone use?**
- **Can the child handle conversations about rules around device use calmly/without emotional outbursts?**
- **Is the child following your screen use rules like not downloading from the internet without permission, or keeping screens out of the bedroom?**
- **Does your child demonstrate impulse control and is able to keep track of time spent on activities?**
- **Do they have competence when it comes to interacting with peers and extracurricular activities that they find enjoyable and they like to do?**
- **Are they responsible and taking ownership in other areas of their life?**
  - » *Do they do chores?*
  - » *Are they able to get themselves out of bed and get ready in the morning to go to school?*
  - » *Do they make their own lunch?*
  - » *Are they responsible for transporting themselves to and from places in the community via transit or bike?*
- **Academically, are they connected at school? Do they feel like they fit in and that they have a sense of identity in their school environment?**

(Jenny Radesky, Tracy Markle, Devorah Heitner, Elizabeth Englander)

Special Considerations for Neurodivergent Children

Children with neurodivergence — a catchall term for those not neurologically "typical" that includes several conditions such as autism and ADHD — "can come with both strengths, like unique approaches to problem solving, and challenges, such as with social communication and a heightened risk of anxiety," says Meryl Alper, PhD, Associate Professor of Communication Studies at Northeastern University.

For neurodivergent children, "how they use these tools can vary significantly depending on lots of factors, whether it's co-occurring conditions, like if they rely on speech alone to communicate or if they also have an intellectual disability," says Alper. "One kid in my research actually prefers talking on the phone than texting because the social cues are much richer and easier to comprehend via voice than texting."

The challenges around neurodivergent children and device use are not limited to the specific biological and neurological situation of the individual child, but also the physical and social environment that can itself be disabling or challenging for these youth, says Alper. Alper cites research showing that autistic children want to make and maintain friendships, but that can become much more difficult in middle school with increased social stigma from peers, just when smartphones might start to be considered.

Alper suggests keeping the unique needs of each neurodivergent child in mind when considering when and what type of smart device to introduce. Consider factors such as:

- **Safety** — *"Parents might have valid concerns about their autistic child not being able to be located, finding themselves in a very dangerous situation that the parent isn't there to see. Being able to locate them might not be being a helicopter parent, but it could be legitimately lifesaving."*
- **Sensory sensitivities** — *"An autistic child might have sensory sensitivities that can make wearing a smartwatch challenging."*
- **Accessibility** — *"A phone might not just be for social purposes, but also task lists, calendars, reminders – that's important for kids with ADHD and for speaking too. So how do you support success?"*
- **Agency** — *"Kids with disabilities have a lot of decisions made for them, so it's really important to find ways to give them choices and respect their agency and how they present themselves online and what interest they'd like to pursue."*
- **Challenges with privacy settings** — *"Research shows that while adolescents on the spectrum might actually be more risk averse than non-autistic peers, they also have more challenges in navigating privacy settings, such as blocking unwanted contacts. One tip is to continually review privacy and safety settings and do it together. It's not just the one time that you get the phone or you give it to them. For example, notifications — knowing how to turn notifications off and those notifications potentially bringing unwanted material to a kid."*
- **Digital literacy tailored to their interest areas** — *"If the child has a focused interest as some kids on the spectrum do, can you utilize that interest to be like 'Okay, you're really interested in finding information about this one particular fandom online? How do we navigate those communities online? How do we search for that material? What apps on your phone are you using to connect with those people?' Doing it through the lens of that interest is going to be much more useful than in this general abstract way."*

Talk it Out – Tips for Conversations with Kids about Media Habits and Content

Conversations with your child about media use and media content should start early in childhood and continue through adolescence. As children get older, it can sometimes get harder to know how to start important conversations about problematic or sensitive topics such as media overuse or violent or sexual content online.

Start with Curious "Drive-By" Conversations

Children often respond more easily and honestly to conversations that occur naturally in everyday moments like car rides, waiting in line, or dinner time, instead of a more structured (and intimidating) "it's time to talk about X" approach, say many experts. These informal moments have "real power in them," says Ranjana Das, PhD, Professor in Media and Communication, University of Surrey.

You can start the conversation by casually asking about what they are enjoying online — and why.

Some conversation prompts:

- **What are you watching?**
- **What is your favorite TV show? What other media do you like?**
- **What's something new you are into?**
- **Why is a particular video coming up in your media feed?**
- **Why do you watch a certain YouTube influencer?**
- **What's the funniest thing you've heard about or seen on YouTube?**
- **What's the most upsetting or cringey or disturbing thing you have seen?**
- **Who are you following on YouTube and why?**
- **What parts of TikTok are you exploring… who's on your 'For You' page and why?**

(Ranjana Das, Soraya Giaccardi, Ed Spector)

In order to understand your child's media experience — and whether it needs intervention or guidance — a good relationship is crucial and vice versa, says Emily Cherkin, MEd, author of ***The Screentime Solution***. The way to achieve both the good relationship and the understanding of their media experience is through these "drive-by" parenting moments, she says.

Having conversations in these everyday moments, when children are relatively calm, is much more effective than when a child is having dysregulated behavior, or is about to start their screen time, notes Brandon T. McDaniel, PhD, Senior Research Scientist at the Parkview Mirro Center for Research and Innovation.

Validate and Connect — Ask Kids For Tips on How to Talk to Them

By the time they reach elementary school, children already "have some good ideas about what their parents might do or not do that makes it easier or more difficult for them to talk honestly." This is especially important around topics "like their screen use and behavior, as well as what might make them listen to parents more," says Sandra Whitehouse, PhD, Senior Psychologist, Associate Clinical Director, Anxiety Disorders Center, Child Mind Institute.

Ask your child:

- **How can we have a conversation that will feel safe and that you will feel listened to and heard, and that I also feel listened to or heard?**
- **What are our ground rules for this conversation?**

Being validating as well as staying calm in these conversations goes a long way, says Whitehouse.

Co-create Family Life Based on Values

Older children are more than able to work with you to create the family life you desire, and you can include them in thinking and mutual decision-making about screen use and family life, says McDaniel.

Questions you can ask to help co-create family life rules that incorporate your child's perspective:

- **What is it you want to have in your family?**
- **What kinds of connections do you want to have in the family?**
- **How do you feel loved?**
- **What do you enjoy most?**
- **What are things that we can do together in our family that make us be the best that we can be?**

Older children are more than able to work with you to create the family life you desire."

Brandon T. McDaniel, PhD,
PARKVIEW MIRRO CENTER FOR RESEARCH AND INNOVATION.

Problem-Solve Power Struggles Around Media Time

Learning to collaboratively problem-solve with your child when there are parent-child issues around screen time builds trust and a sense of personal agency with children, and will help them develop the skills to eventually better regulate their behavior around screen time. To do so, start with stating the problem in specific solvable terms, says Dan Shapiro, MD, Developmental-Behavioral Pediatrician, Creator, Parent Child Journey.

That means, ask the "5WH" questions:

- **What's the problem?**
- **Who's it with?**
- **Where are you having it?**
- **When does it tend to happen?**
- **Why is it a problem for you?**
- **How big is the problem for you?**

From there, both you and your child can come up with possible solutions to collaboratively evaluate the best mutually acceptable one, as well as agree to get back together at a later date and see if it's working, says Shapiro.

Dialogue for Addressing Peer Issues/Cyberbullying

The most important factor for helping children who may be dealing with peer issues or cyberbullying, besides having supportive peer friendships, is having parents who just ask what's going on, says Englander. Gently inquire by asking things like "You know, I've heard that on TikToks, sometimes kids leave mean things in the comments. Has that ever happened to you? How do you handle it, how does it make you feel? And how could your friends help you with that?" she suggests. This approach, rather than a reflexive reaction to remove tech access when something concerning happens, is much more likely to make your child feel comfortable to come to you later with problems that you can solve together, she says.

Let kids know you are aware of the types of things that can happen online, says Englander. Keep the conversation going by telling them your own stories or stories you have heard about other kids that you think they should know about.

Some peer issues and feelings of social isolation may arise because your rules around technology access are more restrictive than their friends. Problem-solve this together, suggests Khadijah B. Watkins, MD, MPH, DFAACAP, Director, Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Residency Training, Massachusetts General Hospital, Associate Director, The Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds, Harvard Medical School. See if there is room for compromise — if they are truly being left out, perhaps they can have access to just one platform that you feel more comfortable with, and set ground rules together.

Teach Critical Thinking About Content and Sources for Long Term Safety

"Media literacy" is a phrase used to describe the ability to critically think about media. Developing these skills is essential for online safety, say experts. Teach media literacy by skipping formal "here's how to have media literacy" lectures and more informally getting children to ask questions of the content they consume, says Sherri Hope Culver, Director of the Center for Media and Information Literacy and Professor at Temple University.

Get your child to learn to ask:

- **Who created the content/message?**
- **What is the purpose?**
- **What are the creative techniques being used?**
- **Who's the audience for this content?**
- **How does it make me feel? Which parts make you feel good or not so good?**

These conversations can and should start as soon as children start using digital media early in life, says Culver. "The most important thing about media literacy and the online safety space is to talk early and often. This is something that needs to happen from the very minute that you're handing a child a tablet. When they are toddlers, you can talk to your children about basic media use decisions. Conversations can help your children understand, 'Now we're going to use media, now we're going to put it away. Now we look at it, now we don't.'"

When children become older, they can use these ingrained skills and questions to help develop a feeling of agency about making choices of media use, noticing how it makes them feel, and taking appropriate action from that, says Culver.

Talk About Safety — Calmly

Talk to your children starting at early ages about healthy and safe screen use. Inquire about whether strangers are approaching them online or requesting a photo, says Elizabeth Englander, PhD, Professor of Psychology and Executive Director and Founder of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center at Bridgewater State University.

However, Englander cautions to practice keeping your calm, even if you receive an upsetting answer, so that your child will continue to tell you about situations that may develop in the future that may need your intervention and guidance. "Don't get upset and don't get mad. Practice being calm yourself and emphasize to your kids that you really, really want to know."

Protect Kids By Having "The Conversation"

It's now easier than ever for even young children to accidentally see porn on the internet. The average age of first seeing pornography is 12 years old, says Debra Herbenick, PhD, MPH, Provost Professor and Director of the Center for Sexual Health Promotion at the Indiana University School of Public Health-Bloomington. Let them know that if this happens, they need to stop looking, turn off the device, shut it down, and then come and tell you, says Amy Lang, MA, Sexual Health Educator at Birds & Bees & Kids. Even more important — tell them they will not be in trouble for seeing what they see. "This should be something you say eight million times," she says, so that they will feel comfortable telling you when they encounter inappropriate or disturbing content and you can help them take steps to process what they have seen — and avoid it in the future.

The prevalence of accidental exposure to porn is high enough that sexual educator Lang stresses the importance of starting conversations early with young children about porn, using very simple language. "I'm a big believer in using the simplest words you can, partially for you because it's easier to get stuff out of your mouth, and then also for your kids because it's easier for them to understand. This is a very simple kind of generic explanation of what porn is: it's videos, cartoons, pictures, or books, about people having sex or doing sexual things. Its main purpose is to make people have sexual feelings — but this is not a safe or healthy way to get those feelings."

Having talks about sex with children is protective, says Lang, as it gives them a space to learn while also showing them that you know what you're talking about and that they can trust you and talk to you.

Don't tell yourself that your kids won't see porn. "One hundred percent they will see porn," says Lang. "Think about it in terms of preparation. Talking with your kids about sexuality is really important in terms of helping them manage their pornography exposure. Talking about it decreases curiosity about it." Children themselves report these conversations as valuable, says Englander. "Kids who told us that their parents had conversations with them about these kinds of issues – about two thirds of them said that conversations with their parents were really helpful."

Hold the Judgment to Keep the Communication Going

Starting conversations with kids from a place of fear and judgment is a one-way ticket to shutting down all conversation altogether, agree many experts. Get all the information calmly if you suspect a content or media use rule has been broken rather than assuming that it was done intentionally, for example, says Pamela Wisniewski, PhD, Principal Research Scientist, International Computer Science Institute. One common reaction that children have to oppressive mediation tactics is more rule-breaking, such as getting a phone behind their parents' backs, she notes. The non-judgmental tone and stance is really really important, agrees Watkins.

Being able to continue to have conversations is the most important thing, says Meenakshi Gigi Durham, PhD, Professor and Collegiate Scholar, University of Iowa. "Listen to your children, express your own feelings, but don't be judgemental. Stay interested in the media that your children are consuming. Talk to them about it. If you need to regulate their media, explain why you're doing it, be reasonable, be loving, because lecturing kids never works. Even though we all do it sometimes, it's not really a winning strategy."

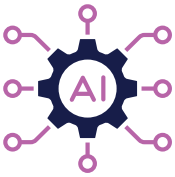
Discuss Violent Media

Exposure to violent media has shown many impacts to child health. If parents do not address and talk about media violence, especially if they are co-viewing it with children, children may assume it's not a big deal, says Brad J. Bushman, PhD, Professor of Communication, The Ohio State University. Even if violent media isn't being watched in your household, chances are your child is seeing something secondhand in other places. Be proactive, and start a conversation with your child in a comfortable time and place.

Starting the conversation early will let you introduce the issue on your terms, and will also let your child know that you are available if they have any concerns or questions that come up later. Consider the age and maturity of your children when deciding what and how to share. One simple guideline is to follow their questions and let them steer the conversation. You might even start with open-ended questions to get a sense of what they already know. Promise to meet them where they are, provide answers suitable for their age and understanding, and assure them that if you don't know something, you'll discover it together.

Chances are your child is seeing [violent media] secondhand in other places."

Brad Bushman, PhD
THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY



Model and Narrate Appropriate Use of AI

AI tools are deeply ingrained into daily digital life. Even young children are aware of what people are talking about and it's informing the environment they live in. Start explicitly talking to children about AI early and modeling how to use these powerful tools in appropriate ways — children will understand more than you think at early ages, says Judith Danovitch, PhD, Professor of Psychological and Brain Sciences, University of Louisville.

Danovitch suggests narrating when you do and don't use AI and why. "Say things like 'I'm going to use this AI to solve this kind of problem because it's really good at solving that kind of problem,' or, 'I'm not using AI here because it's probably not going to give me the right answer.' Children learn a great deal from modeling and from parent-child conversations."

This guide/tip sheet was created based on content shared in Children and Screens' #AskTheExperts webinars and "Screen Deep" podcast episodes from 2020-2025.

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