Institute of
Child Psychology

MANAGING SCREENTIME

IN YOUR HOME

A LETTER TO PARENTS

> "I hope you read your favorite Dr. Seuss books so many times you start inventing your own stories... I hope you run as many laps around the living room as you want. And then I hope you take a lot of naps. I hope you're a great sleeper. And I hope—even in your dreams—you can feel how much we love you."
>
> **—Mark Zuckerberg and Priscilla Chan**

In a world where technology is woven into nearly every moment, how do we give our kids the best of both worlds? How do we help them grow up digitally fluent, but also deeply connected to the real world around them?

This guide is for every parent who's ever felt unsure about how much screen time is too much—and wants to raise kids who are curious, creative, and well.

SCREENS & THE GROWING BRAIN

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Children's brains are incredibly malleable. They're shaped by every experience, every interaction, and every environment they're immersed in—including digital ones.

The Research

- Preschoolers with higher screen use showed less development in brain areas related to language, literacy, and executive functioning (JAMA Pediatrics, 2020).

- Children exposed to more screen time at age 2 showed lower math and classroom engagement in Grade 4 (Quebec Longitudinal Study).

- The Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development Study found that more digital media use is associated with reduced cortical thickness and surface area—especially in areas tied to memory, attention, and behavior.

These aren't just abstract findings—they show up in the everyday:

- *Difficulty paying attention*
- *Less interest in outdoor play*
- *Poor sleep*
- *Meltdowns when the device turns off*

THE FOUR FOUNDATIONAL HARMS

SOCIAL DEPRIVATION

Children build their social skills by watching faces, practicing back-and-forth conversation, and navigating conflict in real time. Screens interfere with this learning.

Girls often show increased anxiety and depression with excessive screen use.

Boys are more impacted by "experience blocking"—missing out on real-world problem-solving and movement-based learning.

Deep play and face-to-face relationships are irreplaceable for social development.

SLEEP DEPRIVATION

Screens interfere with melatonin production, keeping kids wired long after the screen is off. This leads to:

- *Trouble falling asleep and staying asleep*
- *Reduced brain volume and connectivity*
- *Higher rates of mood issues, attention problems, and academic struggles*

Sleep is the scaffolding for emotional regulation, learning, and growth.

THE FOUR FOUNDATIONAL HARMS

ATTENTION FRAGMENTATION

Children's brains aren't wired to multitask. The fast-switching nature of digital devices trains the brain to expect instant rewards—and makes deeper focus harder to access.
This can mimic or exacerbate symptoms of ADHD:

- *Jumping from one task to another*
- *Difficulty finishing assignments*
- *Frustration with anything that takes time*

Attention is the foundation of all higher-order thinking—when it fragments, learning and emotional regulation suffer.
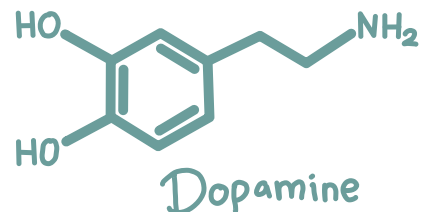
ADDICTION ISSUES

Screens provide fast, easy dopamine. Over time, this can blunt kids' interest in offline activities:

- *Less interest in going outside*
- *More resistance to boredom*
- *Emotional meltdowns when devices are removed*

"We're losing our capacity to delay gratification, solve problems and deal with frustration and pain in its many different forms."
- Dr. Lembke

THE UPSIDE OF TECH

Its not about demonizing screens—it's about being thoughtful and intentional. Technology can enhance a child's life when used wisely.

Benefits of Digital Tools:

- *Connection to niche communities, friends, and supportive online spaces*

- *Education via interactive learning platforms, online courses, and apps that support diverse learning styles*

- *Creativity through video editing, digital art, music creation, and storytelling*

Digital Veggies vs Digital Candy:

Not all screen time is created equal. Some content nourishes your child's mind like veggies—think educational apps, creative tools, documentaries, or coding games. These "digital veggies" build skills, curiosity, and creativity.

On the other hand, "digital candy" (like endless YouTube shorts, fast-paced video games, or social media scrolling) may be fun in the moment, but too much can leave kids overstimulated and under-engaged.

According to Common Sense Media (2023), only about 20% of children's screen time is spent on educational content—meaning the other 80% is mostly digital candy. The goal isn't to cut out all digital candy—but to serve it alongside a healthy portion of digital veggies, with balance and intention..

Be a Digital Mentor

Kids learn how to use technology by watching you. The most effective screen-time strategy? Warm, connected, consistent parenting. That means:

- *Co-view and co-play. Be involved from an early age!*
- *Use movies to talk about real world experiences*
- *Sharing your own values about kindness, safety, and balance*
- *Setting limits with empathy and consistency*
- *Create a Family Media Plan together:*
- *Set screen-free zones (like bedrooms or dinner tables)*
- *Choose daily screen time windows*
- *No screens for at least an hour before bedtime*
- *Revisit the plan as kids grow*
- *Keep technology out of bedrooms*
- *Prioritize single tasking*
- *Talk to them about how to nurture strong brains (play, connection, engagement in offline activities, community involvement movement)*

Use Parental Controls to build-not replace- Connection

- *Apple's Screen Time*
- *Android's Digital Wellbeing*
- *Windows & Mac user profiles*

Apps & Devices:

- *Circle, NetNanny, Secure Teen, Torch*

WHEN CONFLICT ARISES

Screen-time struggles are normal. When they happen:

- Don't try to teach in the heat of a meltdown
- Stay calm and firm
- Use a Family Media Agreement to set expectations clearly
- Offer natural consequences and empathy
- If needed, hit the reset button and rebuild new habits together
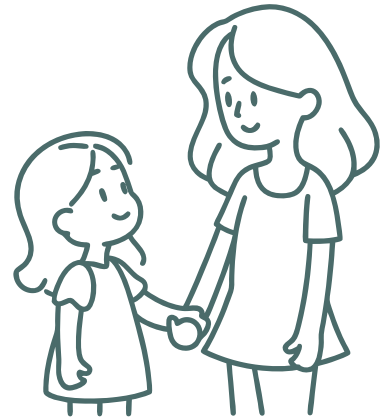
The calmer and more consistent you are, the more quickly your child will adjust

Transitions

Shifting off screens is hard for kids—especially if they're deeply immersed in fast-moving, rewarding content. Make transitions smoother by:

- *Sit down next to them, use your voice and touch. Talk to them about their game to bring them out of the "dopmaine trance." Do this a few minutes before the end of screen time. Once screen time ends, keep the limit and help them to transition to a new activity.*

- *Give them a 5-10 minute warning*

- *"Out of sight, out of mind"- Don't leave devices lying around. If possible, put them away so it is not la temptation*

- *Build predictable rotuines (devices off at 6pm, bath at 6.30 etc)*

- *Remember: boredom is not a problem, it is where creativity begins.*

HELPFUL RESOURCES

- Common Sense Media: Trusted reviews, screen-time tools, and parent guides

- HealthyChildren.org: Build your Family Media Plan

- "The Anxious Generation" by Jonathan Haidt – A must-read on tech and mental health

- ABCD Study (NIH) – Longitudinal research on tech and the adolescent brain

- https://parents.thorn.org: Helping Parents have conversations with their kids about online safety (sexting, nudes, risks of different platforms)

- Raising Digital Citizens: https://raisingdigitalcitizens.com

- https://www.waituntil8th.org: Delaying smartphones (U.S.A.)

- https://unpluggedcanada.com: Dealying smartphones (Canada)

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The **Institute of Child Psychology** was founded to educate parents and professionals on issues pertaining to children's mental health, and to promote the psychological and emotional well-being of children and adolescents.

Our mission is to empower parents, teachers, therapists, social workers and psychologists by giving them pertinent insights, skills, and tools necessary to help children thrive.