A Parent's Guide to Healthy Screen Time

By Emma Martin LaPlant, MA, LAMFT

Technology permeates every aspect of our children and teens' lives, from tech-based learning tools to smartphones to video games to social media. The up-and-coming generation interacts with technology far more than any of their predecessors, and they truly are on the edge of the new frontier of tech. While the advancement of technology creates incredible opportunities, our young people need us for support, to set boundaries, and to help them become responsible consumers and users of technology.

Teaching Digital Health

Our children and students need us to teach them how to be responsible consumers of technology. As their brains are continuing to grow and mature, students are not physically capable of setting and maintaining their own boundaries and limits. They need ongoing support from the adults in their lives to create, model, and enforce these limits.

Too much technology use can lead to loneliness, sadness, and worry. Work with your child to establish rules and boundaries around tech use that apply to everyone -- including yourself. Try establishing no-phone times, balancing tech times with non-tech activities, taking tech out of the bedroom, and taking a tech-free day.

Just as we teach young people how to be polite face-to-face, we need to teach them how to interact kindly with others online. Explain how sarcasm can be misinterpreted online, model how to not respond to every message immediately, and remind them that every online encounter can be recorded.

No matter how mature your child is, they are not immune to making decisions that may put them in a risky situation. Create and reinforce rules about sharing information, downloading content, protecting passwords, posting and sharing photos, talking to or friending people you don't know, purchasing things online, and other online interactions.

How Much Is "Too Much"?

Parents, caregivers, and teachers often struggle to know how much screen time is "too much." Some activities are developmentally integral to children and teenagers; if screen time is getting in the way of these, it's probably time to establish better limits. For example, if screen time is interfering with seeing friends and interacting with them in real life, participating in extracurricular activities, keeping up with academic classes and doing homework, building positive relationships with family members, or getting enough sleep, then that could be "too much."

Every family sets its own rules around screen time. For some, it might be none on weeknights and one- to two-hour periods on the weekends. For others, allowing a half hour each weeknight when homework is finished might be appropriate. Consider your own family's activities and rhythms to determine the tech rules that work for you.

As Arthur C. Clarke once said, "Before you become too entranced with gorgeous gadgets and mesmerizing video displays, let me remind you that information is not knowledge, knowledge is not wisdom, and wisdom is not foresight. Each grows out of the other, and we need them all."

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