A Drama-Free

(well, almost)

Strategy for Managing Screen Time

Saleema Noon smart things to say

Screen Time

Full disclosure: This resource may be more aptly titled "Smart Things I *Wish* I Had Known, Done and Said About Screen Time" as much of it reflects my own experience as a parent in the screen time trenches with my now-adult stepdaughters. I fully respect and acknowledge that different approaches work for different parenting styles, so please take what feels right for your family and leave the rest!

- Saleema 💗

Smart Things to Know

- Too much screen time has been linked in research to mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety and low self-esteem. (*Psychology Today, 2021*)

- There is a movement, supported by top technology innovators, that strongly recommends children do not have smartphones until age 14 (grade 8) and are not given a data plan until age 16 (grade 11 or 12). (*www.waituntil8th.org*)

- 8- to 12-year-olds in the US use screens for entertainment for an average of 4 hours, 44 minutes a day, and 13- to 18-year-olds are on screens for an average of 7 hours, 22 minutes each day. These numbers don't count time using screens for schoolwork or homework. (*Common Sense Media, 2019*)

- Two University of Ottawa studies have consistently found the best mental health and cognitive outcomes in teens who do one hour of physical activity each day, sleep 8 to 10 hours a day and use screens recreationally less than two hours a day. (*Common Sense Media, 2019*)

- Many teens report that they *want* to put their screen down but *they just can't*. (*Psychology Today, 2021*)

- No parent has ever said, "I wish I got my kid a phone earlier!".

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Smart Things to Know (cont'd)

- We don't yet have clear scientific evidence on how much screen time is too much or on the impact of different types of activities that involve screens. (*American Psychological Association (APA), 2020*)

- Parents' micromanagement of their kids' screen time may get in the way of young people learning the important ability to self-regulate.

- Screens have changed our lives, in many ways for the better.

- Especially during the pandemic, screen time has helped young people to connect with friends and family, have a laugh and take a break from everyday stressors.

- Kids *learn* online (i.e. how to do nail art, how to do card tricks, how to draw dragons…).

- As they get older, much of our kids' social lives happen on a device.

- FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) is real, valid and human at every age and needs to be considered.

- Not all screen time is created equal. *What we do* on screens may be more important than *time spent* on them.

- In most families, total abstinence from screens isn't a viable option. And it can backfire.

- It's never too early to start teaching healthy screen habits.

- Research tells us that behaviours are more likely to be changed through positive incentives than negative consequences or punishment.

- By being intentional with their screen time, young people can take control of their devices (rather than the other way around).

- With clear family agreements, ongoing conversations, some flexibility and a collaborative approach, navigating screen time with kids can be (almost) drama-free.

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Smart Things to Do

Before discussing screen time with your child, **ask yourself these questions:**

- What is it that concerns me about my child having too much screen time? What am I afraid will happen? Will it kill brain cells? Is it getting in the way of their basic human needs (i.e. sleep, physical activity, a healthy diet, in-person social interaction)?

- Is my child's screen time getting in the way of healthy real-life activities and responsibilities (i.e. chores, homework, family time)?

- Is my child's screen time negatively impacting their mental health or social and emotional development (i.e. Are they showing symptoms of feeling isolated? Lonely? Depressed? Anxious? Is this more pronounced when they finish their screen time?)?

- Is my child using their screen time to connect with others or is it isolating?

- When is it most important to me that my child is screen-free (i.e. meal times, bed time, weekday mornings, when friends are over, in class)?

- Do I know what my child is consuming online? Are they using at least some of their screen time to do meaningful, educational, productive things?

- Is my child generally having a positive experience online?

- Is too much screen time riskier for my child than for others (i.e. Do they have difficulties self-regulating? Do they lack social skills and connections in real life? Will this add to an already sedentary lifestyle)?

- How does my child feel about their screen time? Do they feel it's healthy?

- How can I create space for open conversations about screen time (i.e. use non-confrontational conversation starters, be deliberate around the timing of conversations, ask for their input)?

- How do I feel about my own use of screens? Can I be a better role model for my child (be honest!)?

Consider creating a family agreement around screen time *before it becomes an issue*.

- Involve your kids in this process, the goal being to set healthy screen use habits for the whole family (parents included).

- Explain to your child why creating a family agreement around screen time is important to you and that you want it to be a collaborative process.

- Make it fun. Be light-hearted, incorporate yummy snacks and encourage idea sharing.

- Use positive language in your agreement (i.e. Rather than "Screens aren't allowed in bedrooms.", say, "Screens may be used in the kitchen and family room.").

- Explore these questions in your discussion (be as specific as possible):

When?

- When will devices be allowed (i.e. after homework or chores are done, only at certain times during the day)?
- When will devices not be allowed (i.e. after a certain time each night, during meal times, during family time, when guests are over, during class, weekday mornings, when homework isn't done)?
- When will there be more flexibility? (i.e. on weekends, on vacation, when kids are showing responsible decision-making)?

How much?

- Will there be a time limit to screen time per day/week?
- Will there be black out periods during the day (i.e. after 9pm., before 7am)?
- Will limits include connecting with friends and family (i.e. FaceTime)?
- Will screen time be dependent on how responsibly it's being used?
- Will screen time be dependent on the type of activity (being creative vs. being entertained)?
- Will screen time be dependent on age or developmental needs?
- What will happen when the screen time limit has been reached (i.e. Are kids expected to turn devices off or will parents give reminders?)?

Where?

- Where will devices be used? (i.e. in public areas of the house, in the car)?
- Where will devices go at night? (i.e. on the kitchen counter charging)?

What about privacy and safety?

- Who will have access to passwords and accounts?
- How much privacy will children have on their devices?
- Will a parent look at their child's screen time activity if needed? Will the child know about this? Will the child be present?
- How much monitoring will parents do? Will parents be able to look over a child's shoulder while they're on a screen?
- How will family members respect their bodies as private when using devices?
- If a child finds themselves getting into a dangerous or uncomfortable or upsetting situation, can they feel safe telling a parent? Will they get in trouble for this?

What?

- How will family members create a balance between constructive and not-so-constructive screen time?
- What will be ok and not ok to do/watch?
- What will family members be doing with most of their screen time?
- What will expectations be for interacting with others online?
- What are safe and unsafe online behaviours?

What about incentives, rewards and consequences?

- Allow your child to share ideas of reasonable consequences.
- Think carefully before taking away your child's phone.
- Choose consequences that are natural and related (i.e. Don't take their screen time away because they didn't do their chores that week unless it's wrapped up in broader family agreements).
- Will there be extra screen time for smart decision-making (i.e. getting off their screen before you have to ask them)?
- Can kids earn their lost screen time back?

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Smart Things to Do (cont'd)

Connect before correcting. Creating and maintaining a strong relationship with our kids is more important than managing screen time. Take time to have positive interactions around screens (and not). Be empathetic. Show your child that you understand how important screen time is to them and demonstrate that you support it in moderation. This will make it less likely that conversations around screens will be met with opposition. Plus, the stronger relationship we have with our kids, the more our own behaviour will influence them in positive ways.

Consider using **family sharing and the screen time function** on your devices to track how much time family members are spending on them. Reflect on how everyone feels about their screen time.

Set some goals. Have a **friendly contest** between family members to see who can reach theirs first or decrease their weekly screen time the most.

Take **regular screen-free downtime** as a family.

Consider using **tools offered by your internet provider** to schedule the wifi in your home to be turned off at a certain time every night and on again at a certain time in the morning.

Use **parental controls**, but don't rely on them completely.

Consider having all family devices **charging in a designated spot** at a designated time every night.

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Smart Things to Do (cont'd)

Provide alternatives to screen time (i.e. invite a friend over, make dinner together, do a craft).

Play "What would you do?" as a refresher every now and then. (i.e. What would you do if you got a negative comment on Instagram? if you experienced discriminatory language or behaviour while gaming? if you came across sexual content? if you were being bullied online?).

Walk the talk. Share how you are working to maintain healthy screen habits.

Get personal. Talk out loud about your own struggles with screen time.

Take a **calm, collaborative approach** to every conversation. A "because I said so" attitude won't take you very far.

Make your child the expert. Ask for their thoughts and opinions whenever possible and consider them.

Express curiosity, not judgement. Ask, "How are you feeling about your screen time these days?" rather than "It seems like you're addicted to your phone these days!".

Use the "sandwich technique" by placing a concern in between two positive comments (i.e. "I know your screen time is important to you and you've been pretty respectful of our agreement. You've been pushing the boundaries a bit lately, but I trust you to use good judgement and pull back a little bit.").

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Smart Things to Do (cont'd)

Praise good choices.

When you feel the need to look at your child's accounts **let them know ahead of time** and **do it with them** present, whenever possible.

Dig deeper—don't blame your child's struggles on too much screen time. Ask them what's going on for them and if you can help.

Talk about how **features in apps manipulate young people** into spending more and more time using them (i.e. Snap Streaks make it very difficult for kids to get off Snapchat).

Go slow. Don't try to change too much at once. Taking extreme measures isn't productive.

Be empathetic. Give your kids space to make mistakes and adjust to new agreements.

Talk about the **importance of focusing on one screen activity at a time** rather than bouncing from one thing to another. Support them to create blocks of uninterrupted time to accomplish certain tasks (i.e. homework) without being bombarded by notifications and other distractions. Schedule in breaks to stretch their legs or text friends back.

Accept that we can't control everything our kids do, see and watch on a screen, especially as they get older.

Be firm, but allow some wiggle room. The goal is "good enough".

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You asked,

"When should I get my child get a smartphone?"

- Trust your gut to determine when the timing is right. There's no magic age that's right for every child.

- Remember that age is less important than maturity and sense of responsibility.

- Delay as long as possible (despite what they tell you, your child won't be the only one in their grade that doesn't have a phone!).

- Take baby steps: start with calling and texting only and then add data when trust is established.

- Remind your child that having a phone is a privilege, not a right.

- Remind your child that, because you pay the bill, the phone is yours. You're just allowing them to use it.

- Have a solid family agreement (including consequences) around how the phone will be used.

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Smart Things to Say

- "I notice it's really hard for us to talk about screen time use but I don't want to fight."
- "Let's work together to create healthy screen habits."
- "I recognize now that we should have been having these conversations a long time ago but I know we can agree on something that works for both of us."
- "Don't worry, we're not going to change everything at once."
- "What do you think is a reasonable amount of screen time for someone your age?"

- "What do you think are reasonable consequences for when our agreement isn't met?"
- "I trust you to make smart decisions about what you do with your screen time."
- "What's your favorite thing to do with your screen time?"
- "That YouTube video you showed me was so hilarious!"
- "Want to go check out that new Lego store together this weekend?"
- "Do you notice when you've had too much screen time? How do you regulate yourself?"
- "How do you feel when your screen time is up?"
- "Good screen habits are about your health, wellness and safety, which are my responsibility as your parent."

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Smart Things to Say (cont'd)

- "Do you feel like your screen time makes your life better?"
- "I've noticed you've been more connected to your phone lately…is everything ok? Anything you want to talk about?"
- "I've noticed that I haven't had to ask you even once to get off your screen this week. Nice work!"

- "Ugh, I found myself mindlessly scrolling Instagram when I was in line the other day. If you see me doing that, can you please call me on it?"
- "I find that spending time with my friends in-person makes what's happening online less important."
- "Do many people your age ——?"
- "I heard on the news that ------. Does that sound right?"