

Healthy Screen Use Guidelines

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1. Structure is critical to a balanced life. A consistent schedule with plenty of offline activities, commitments, and routines, allows for minimal unstructured time. The less unstructured time in each day, the less need to follow the rest of these guidelines.
2. Environmental accommodations may help preserve offline time, such as tech free zones and tech zones within the house. Tech-free zones may include, distraction-free rooms for doing homework, access to physical exercise, and a tech free family entertainment room, which may contain board games, table top games, books, pool/ping pong tables, hobbies, crafts, etc. A tech zone may be a room or two (preferably with locks on the door) containing all digital entertainment devices. It is easier sometimes for a child to change zones than for a parent to remove a device from a child. If the child leaves a tech zone, the devices stay in the zone.
3. Meals should be spent screen free, and ideally should be social, to work on face-to-face interpersonal skills. Digital devices should be charge outside the bedroom and not used within one hour of bedtime.
4. Every block of screen time* should be followed by another block of offline time of similar length. This allows dopamine receptors to recover and trains delayed gratification.
5. Each block of screen time should be limited to a consistent length of time (it is recommended to use two timers, one for the child and one for the supervising guardian). This adds routine and structure, protects from time distortion, and trains “commuter instinct”, in which users are able to stop when they need to and time their online activities accordingly. A suggested time range for younger children is 20 minutes to half an hour. A suggested time range for Teenagers is 45 minutes to 1 hour.
6. A family-wide digital detox, such as a week-long camping trip, may be warranted if screen use is getting excessive in one or multiple family members as a “reset”, followed by carefully following these guidelines upon return.
7. Limits and consequences of both violating and following house screen rules should be ideally discussed ahead of time and be carried out consistently. A consequence should be as natural (similar to the way real life works) and logical (reasonable and relevant to the behavior) as possible. For example, going X minutes over the time allotted could result in 3X minutes removed from the next screen block. If a child transitions off a screen independently when their timer goes off, without needing a parental prompt, they may earn a point towards an

agreed upon reward. (Note: Because the goal is to achieve consistent balance, extra screen time as a reward is not recommended)

8. While it may be difficult for parents to tell the age at which their child is ready for a smart phone, parents may use more retro devices such as a flip phone or gabb phone both to start the transition or as a replacement if a child demonstrates they are not ready for a smart phone yet.
9. Parents should get help if a child or teen's excessive use results in significant negative consequences, such as aggression, suicidal thoughts, sleep deprivation, absence from school, other substantial decline in functioning socially, academically, or occupationally, or physical and mental health problems.

*"screen time" in this context is defined by all digital entertainment that provides instant and continuous stimulation, also referred to in Dr. Sussman's literature as "High Dopamine Activities (HDA)". This includes cell phone, TV, YouTube, social media apps, or just surfing the internet. Exceptions may be made for on screen activities that have more delayed gratification, such using a word processor to write a paper for homework, creating some artwork on a computer, or editing photos in photoshop, but this should be done with caution because the user may be constantly tempted to open a browser or a video game on the same device. This would be similar to one with alcohol use disorder attempting to drink water in a bar.