

10 tips: Help kids strike a better balance with tech

Missy Keenan, Special to the Register April 27, 2015



Scott Timm's nightly routine involves some diligent parental reconnaissance. To keep his 11-year-old son Gabe (not his real name) from sneaking middle-of-the-night screen time, Timm rounds up the laptop, iPods and tablets before bedtime, then locks them in a backpack.

Timm's children are allowed screen time on weekends only, but Gabe had been sneaking video games well after bedtime on school nights. A few months ago, Timm discovered that Gabe had cut a hole in a side pocket of the locked backpack so he could slip an iPod out undetected.

"I was livid," said Timm, who lives with his family in Fairfield. "For a while we had been in a cycle. He'd sneak electronics, so he'd lose the privilege, but then he would sneak it again, then lose more time. It was a constant struggle."

The Timms aren't alone in their efforts to regulate screen time, and many families are facing issues with even more extreme electronic use. The American Academy of Pediatrics says kids spend an average of seven hours a day on electronic devices.

"Studies have shown that excessive media use can lead to attention problems, school difficulties, sleep and eating disorders and obesity," says the AAP website. "In addition, the Internet and cell phones can provide platforms for illicit and risky behaviors."

As parents help their kids regulate the duration of their screen time or the nature of the content, for many families technology has become an unpleasant parent/child battleground.

If you're looking for ways to help your kids strike a better balance with technology, here are 10 tips to consider:

1. Understand that technology is a stimulant.

Although adults often watch TV or surf the Internet to wind down after a long day, "technology for kids is an upper, not a downer," Dr. Joe Dilley writes in the book "The Game is Playing Your Kid."

"It tends to have more of a stimulating than a calming effect," writes Dilley, who grew up in Des Moines and received his undergraduate degree at the University of Iowa. "The enjoyment of technology increases the flow of dopamine, and the excitement of the game boosts adrenaline, while the blue light emitted by the screen inhibits the production of melatonin, a natural sleep agent. As such, UCLA psychiatrist Dr. Peter Whybrow aptly refers to computers as 'electronic cocaine.'"

2. Garbage in, garbage out.

Consider whether your child's electronic content is age-appropriate, overly violent or sexual, or shows disrespect to adults. Dilley says to ask yourself, "Do I want my kid acting like what he's wanting to watch or play?"

If you want to keep closer tabs on your kids' electronic content, Dilley recommends www.opendns.org, which compiles the browser history before the cache is cleared. And programs like Mac App Blocker and Windows Application Blocker allow you to designate what apps your child can access and when. Devices like Kindle tablets also have parental controls.

3. Model desired behavior.

"It's difficult to enforce limits on screen time if you can talk the talk but can't walk the walk," the book stresses. "Junior's observation of you passing countless hours in front of your screen silently implies that it is your most prized possession. He understandably questions if perhaps he will find his time best spent in front of a screen as well."

4. Set appropriate time limits.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no screens for infants and children under age 2. For older children, the AAP recommends no more than one or two hours per day. Once you set limits for your family, use a timer to help kids stick to them.

Some families consider even the AAP's limits to be too much screen time. At 11, Gabe Timm gets about five hours on weekends; his eight-year-old sister gets two or three hours on weekends; his six-year-old sister is still largely screen-free.

5. Technology use is a privilege.

"The privilege to use technology is earned, and it can be lost," Timm said. "It is earned with good behavior, completing homework and chores. It is lost when the kids get snarky or don't do their chores, or if they try to sneak it on weekdays."

Technology should be earned *after* your child has completed the desired behavior, not before, as the task is less likely to get done if the reward comes first.

Dilley also encourages immediately reinforcing the connection between the desired behavior and the reward. "Even if it's not feasible for Junior to hit the jackpot and play a video game instantaneously after he takes out the trash, you can alert him to the fact that you're tallying his screen time the very moment he begins the act of taking out the trash."

6. Change the environment.

If you've set the rules and your kids refuse to follow them, sometimes you need to change the environment to make it hard for them to cheat. You can lock up tech devices like Timm does, remove the device or the power cord from the house, or try installing passwords so your kid can't access it.

7. Losing access.

"This might sound like a semantic difference," Dilley's book says, "but it's critical that you not 'take away' screens from your child, but that your child 'lose access' to them temporarily (because his misbehavior limits what he likes). You don't want your child to resent you; you want him to know whether you think he's ready to handle the privilege at hand and, if he's not ready, what the response cost is."

8. Kids will test limits.

"Children should sometimes test limits," Dilley reminds readers, "especially about a privilege that's as tantalizing as tech use, precisely because that's what maturing children do."

9. Try a week without screens.

Screen-free Week is an annual event encouraging children and adults to turn off digital entertainment and celebrate being unplugged. This year's Screen-free Week is May 4-10. Learn more at www.screenfree.org.

10. Help kids learn self-control.

"After the backpack-cutting incident, he lost technology for a couple of weeks," Timm said. "But that is also when I realized that we had to help him develop *self-control*. There was only so much I could do to stop him. So we started being less reactive, offering strategies and reflecting with him more about it. There are still consequences for when he sneaks it, but we can tell he really feels badly when he does it. If he is blurry-eyed in school, we hear about it from his teacher, or he forgets a homework assignment. He is starting to see it is not worth it. He'll get his tech time on the weekends, and it'll be a lot more fun."

As children mature, the goal is for parents to guide and monitor less and allow for natural consequences so children will learn for themselves. Although children usually need initial guidance around technology, you ultimately want to help them make good decisions on their own.

The Game is Playing Your Kid

THE BOOK: "The Game is Playing Your Kid: How to Unplug and Reconnect in the Digital Age" teaches families how to break their bad screen habits without having to power down indefinitely. In addition to tips included in this article, the book includes many specific suggestions to use when kids' tech use gets out of hand.

THE AUTHOR: Psychologist Dr. Joe Dilley grew up in Des Moines and received his undergraduate degree at the University of Iowa. He and his wife, Dr. Carrie Dilley, run a private practice in Los Angeles, Synergy Psychological.

FOR MORE INFORMATION OR TO PURCHASE THE BOOK: Visit www.dontgetplayed.com. The book will be available May 12.