

Tips for Managing Screens

Create a family workstation- Create a central family workstation where the technology device is wired-in. This makes the screen less convenient, helps adults keep track of usage, and helps reduce limit pushing that naturally happens behind the safety of a screen with no supervision. This will also help in reducing media multitasking creating less stress on the brain and decreasing overall screen use while increasing productivity.

Minimize screen-time after sundown- Try to get children to do any computer-related homework as early in the afternoon or evening as possible. Reducing the bright screen induced light at night will help you get a better quality and more restorative sleep to help with overall functioning.

Go outside in the mornings- Exposing yourself to 15 minutes or more of morning sunlight will help resynchronize your body rhythms. If you can't make it outside at least sit next to a window that lets in direct light.

Match screen-time with exercise time- Require an hour of physical activity at home before your children or even you earn screen-time for the day. Exercise changes the brain releasing neurochemicals and growth factors that can fight depression, poor focus, insomnia, addiction, and anxiety which can all be exacerbated by screen time.

Make screen-time a privilege not a right- It is okay and even suggested to set standards that must be met before giving children screen-time. This can look like having a list of chores that must be completed or it can even look like having them meet behavioral standards like respectfulness if needed.

Ban media multitasking- Media multitasking is the use of more than one media outlet (researching online for school work while texting with friends or playing a video game while listening to other music for example). This practice fractures attention and magnifies hyperarousal and cognitive overload. Classical music is the only alternative media that has not been found to impede attention.

Change your environment- We use things that are more cumbersome to access so try to keep tempting technology as far away from you as they can be i.e. keep your phone in your desk instead of on it, keep your tablet in your bag or across the house from you etc.

Keep bedrooms screen free- This reduces evening and overall screen use- which is associated with improved sleep, better grades, less depression, and healthier weight. This will also allow parents to monitor screen-time more effectively.

Device baskets and checkouts- Have a device basket that everyone puts their device in upon entering the home. Keep a log next to the basket for people to check in or out the devices. This helps keep devices from being too convenient while also giving some accountability to the time spent on them with logging their usage.

Designate screen-free times and zones- Establish certain times or places that are always screen free. Some suggestions for these are meal preparation, mealtimes, car rides, mornings before school, family and one-on-one outings, holidays, birthdays, and other special events. Also recommended would be at least an hour prior to bedtime.

Use timers- Using an old fashioned kitchen timer is a good way to keep track of your or your child's screen time. It allows you freedom from watching the clock while creating a stopping cue and consistent boundary at the same time.

Use smaller screens and view them farther away- Try to view at a distance 2.5-3.5 times the size of the screen measured diagonally. This helps to reduce the toxicity of the screen and will also help with body position and keeping screens further from the eyes.

Parents manage your own screen time- It is virtually impossible to manage your child's screen-time if you are not managing your own. Adults also experience frontal lobe impact from using screens, making it hard to follow rules and keep track of things. Parents as well as their children experience time distortion making us less organized, more rushed, and less aware of how long children have been on their devices. It is a good idea to check in with your kids to see what they think of your screen

The timing question- Ask yourself whether you could afford to lose a certain amount of time to the experience today. Your level of spare time today is an excellent guide to how much time you'll have in a couple of months. If the answer is no generally it is not something you should get started.

Change the patterns in how you watch your shows- It is good to understand the structure of binge-viewing to make it easier to avoid falling into the binge viewing trap. Instead of watching each forty-two minute episode from start to finish, you can watch the first thirty seven minutes of each episode, turning off the show before the cliffhanger arrives or you can watch from the fifth minute of every episode to the fifth minute of the next one to allow the cliffhanger to resolve. This helps keep the psychological need to complete the cliffhanger from running you into hours of show watching.

Choose your words- Instead of "I can't use Facebook" say "I don't use Facebook." This first statement takes away your control while the second empowers you. It may sound too simple, but in one study where this change of phrase was used with women working out, 10% persisted with their goal when they were told to say I can't, but 80% persisted when they said I don't miss my workout.

Distraction- replace your time with your electronic device with something else. This could be time with friends, finding something else to do with your hands, or playing a game with real world manipulatives

Use the "don't waste your money motivator"- Each time you miss your technology usage goal you give money to something frivolous or an organization you don't like. When you meet your goal spend your money relationally like taking a friend to dinner or buying your kid an ice cream. The sum of money used for this should feel significant, but not so large that losing it four weeks in a row is financially crippling.

The "house" phone- You can use a prepaid cell phone or cheap flip phone added onto your plan to use as the "house" phone. This phone could be one that every member of the family has access to for calls and texting only. It could be a phone that could leave the house with children on a case by case basis, but it never becomes "their" phone. Having a shared phone like limits the amount of time your child spends on the phone, increase the levels of self-control a child uses knowing that others will be using the phone, and delays the onset of phone ownership.

To Restore Attention and Counteract Stress Levels

Attention Restoration Theory- Get yourself outside in nature more. Studies show green environments reduce aggressive acts and improve attention, impulse control, and academic performance. Greenery draws the eye but lowers heart rate and blood pressure, thereby restoring focus and our ability to tolerate stress. Time spent outside in nature is most powerful, but pictures of greenery and viewing nature out of window help.

Engage in creative pursuits- Creativity stimulates the right brain which can become underactive during too much screen time. Studies show that screen-time diminishes imaginary play. When the brain is fed so much stimulation it deadens the creative drive. Counteract screen time brain effects by actively engaging your right brain with art, music, creative writing, or imaginary play.

Mindfulness, meditation, and yoga- All of these practices help quiet the brain and reduce stimulation. Meditation is also associated with increased thickness in areas of the frontal lobe associated with attention and emotional regulation.

Human touch, empathy, and love- One of the most consistent determinants in how well children learn to speak, read, and write is access to face-to-face conversations with an adult. It is important to activate the parts of your child's brain that do not get as much activation while using screens. As simple as these three suggestions sound, they go a very long way.

Free Apps to Help

Reduce the brightness of your Screen- When you make the screen match the surrounding environment as much as possible it reduces overstimulation, eye irritation, and melatonin suppression. One free software application that can help with this is f.lux which can be found at <https://justgetflux.com>. This program works by gradually changes the screen's appearance by adding warmer tones as night falls to reduce light at night exposure.

Facebook Demetricator- is a web browser add-on that hides the metrics that are addicting on Facebook. Instead of seeing how many likes, comments, or shares you have gotten the Facebook Demetricator will simply tell you that you have some.

WasteNoTime- is a software application that monitors how long you spend on sites that you add to a block list and then block those sites when you have reached your predetermined amount of time. It also has an instant lockdown feature that gives you limited access to the internet during times you designate as work time. This can be found in the app store.

