

# How Parents Can Hit the Pause Button on Screen Time

**Making time for open, unstructured, unplugged play improves relationships and helps children build self-management skills.**

BY MARK BERTIN

All parents want happy and successful children. Yet, too often we are led to believe that the best way to ensure that is to add more of everything to our children's lives—more studying, more lessons, and more sports practices. That makes for a jam-packed, high-pressure family life for everyone.

As a developmental pediatrician, I've seen firsthand how families feel when caught between packed activity schedules and the social media-driven push to be "perfect." In my new book, *How Children Thrive*, I pull from my experience and developmental research to reassure parents that they need not push so hard to assure their family's well-being.

What children require to thrive is a whole lot more straightforward than it feels nowadays—and learning about how children develop makes life easier for both parents and their children. For starters, children today don't require any more than children generations ago. They rely on stable and loving home environments, the opportunity to test limits we set, and adult support while discovering their own capacity to overcome challenges.

They also need to play—and not just on screens. As stated in an American Academy of Pediatrics policy statement, traditional play is "essential to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children and youth." Children need unstructured, "unplugged" play—away from screens and computers—to grow in ways that will help them thrive throughout life.

In particular, executive function-based self-management skills—such as the ability to delay gratification, plan ahead, and control impulses—are crucial building blocks of resilience. These skills allow a child to not only succeed in normal circumstances, but to bounce back from adversity. One-time, early-childhood measures of these self-management skills correlate with later measures of achievement and well-being, including better test scores in high school, improved odds of graduating college on time, less likelihood of obesity as an adult, and even a higher adult income. In contrast to free play, video games rely on the game creator's imagination (not the child's) and promote a type of rapidly shifting attention, making it harder for children to focus in the real world.

That doesn't mean we have to shut down video games all the time. Rather, healthy play is much like the image of a nutrition plate used to teach children to eat well: A balanced approach to "brain nutrition" requires a lifestyle mixing all sorts of mentally

engaging activities. You cannot make a child enjoy anything specific, but you can reinforce a sensible variety of activities that includes lots of down time and play. Life isn't predictable, so rather than aiming to perfect and control everything, we set children up for success by building their resilience. Thankfully, the starting point for that resilience is child's play.

### **Why is it so hard to keep kids off of screens?**

While parents may understand that their kids would fare better without so much screen time, it's not always easy to get them off. Screens have become a ubiquitous part of modern life.

A recent statistic showed that teens average nine hours of screen time daily beyond any time for work or school—as do their parents. This obsession with our screens is tied to poorer sleep, academic achievement, behavior, focus, and mood, leading to greater stress, less success, and careless mistakes.

### **Why is it so hard to let go of screens?**

Part of the problem is that these products are carefully honed to be as addictive and time-consuming as possible. If adults struggle with controlling their usage, certainly a child or teen—whose self-management skills are by definition immature until their mid 20s—will, too.

While healthy and intentional tech use is perfectly fine, we cannot expect children to safely manage screens without first receiving adult guidance. Like learning to drive a car, children require instruction around how to use devices well, instead of getting used by them.

To support our children, we must first model healthy behavior with screens ourselves. In one survey, nearly seventy percent of kids felt their parents are on their devices too much, suggesting that we are sometimes part of the problem. Recognizing if we habitually turn on a device when bored or fatigued may help break that habit as we develop other ways of coping with these unpleasant emotional states. Children unconsciously mirror their parents' behavior in countless ways, so if we want them off their screens more often, that change starts with us.

Whatever you prioritize yourself, your children typically learn to prioritize, too. If you want your child to seek out open-ended playtime, then seek it out yourself. If you want your child to be a reader, they must see you reading a book, not a screen, since if you're on a device, they have no idea if you're playing a first-person shooter or reading a novel. Instead, turn off the TV and go outdoors, visit museums, volunteer, or socialize

with friends—all of which will increase your own well-being while modeling healthy behavior for your kids.

If our kids still find it hard to let go of their screens, then we must come back to understanding brain development. Most children require more than role-modeling, learning from clear boundaries set by parents around how much screen use, when, and what type of content is appropriate. Until children show their own capacity to handle technology well, parents must monitor screen use in this way. In fact, strong parental monitoring of screen time all on its own correlates with better academic, social and even physical outcomes in children.

All modern parents must grapple with the simple fact that raising healthy children in the modern world requires adult management and supervision of their screen time. Though it can be difficult to change habits, anything we do to establish a healthier way of living is well worth it.

### **Hitting the pause button and getting to play**

When it comes down to it, we cannot protect our children from everything, and we cannot (and should not) aim to determine exactly how they live and what they enjoy. But we can catch ourselves and reassess how we're living. What is it that our family would most benefit from for the next stretch of time, and what might we set aside? One useful activity to help answer that question—adapted from my book—is to periodically pause and check up on your family time. By doing the exercise below, you can figure out what can be cut or simplified in your family calendar and find time to prioritize what's most important.

- **Lay out your family's schedule as it is now.** On a daily calendar or blank paper, record a typical weekday and a weekend day. Get into the details. For each family member, include when everyone wakes and goes to bed and unavoidable logistics, like cooking, cleaning, your job, homework, and getting ready for school. Estimate time spent checking email, surfing the web, playing games, and watching television, as well as time spent on recreation, driving, and all the rest of the family's logistics.
- **Create a new calendar from scratch.** On a second blank page, record what you'd like to prioritize. Start with what's nonnegotiable—school hours, bedtime, homework, or anything else that may not change right now, noting what's fixed (the bus comes at 6:50 a.m.) versus what's adjustable (bedtime at 8:30 p.m. might work better this year).
- **Fill in next what you value most.** Include whatever you choose to prioritize, for yourself and your children, like exercise, spending time with friends or family, reading, creative pursuits, after-school activities and social time, and engaging in fun and positive activities together. Make sure to

include your self-care, and schedule downtime for your children if that tends to get lost in the shuffle.

- **Consider what to do with any unscheduled time.** Time remaining is potentially available for nonessential activities: another after-school activity, television or video games, or whatever has been consuming family time. Or leave that time blank and see what happens next. Stay patient, since changing the rules by cutting back on screen time may mean your children will have to learn to entertain themselves again over time.

Family life gets stressful, and we cannot anticipate everything our children will face. What we can do, though, is pause often, settle ourselves, and refocus our attention on what really matters. Family time, affection, and consistent caregiving are the key to happier, healthier children. And remember: It's both fun and useful to set aside time for child's play. Doing so probably has more value for your children than whatever else encroaches on your time.

**Modified from:**

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