

## **A Good Takeaway**

By resident education specialist **Perk Musacchio**

One mom of an 8 year-old decided to take away all screen games. Her son looked at her in dismay and said, "Don't take away the only thing I love." Mom then knew that she had made the right decision. This is a true experience as shared by Melanie Hempe in her latest book, *The ScreenStrong Solution*. Taking away screens is definitely more challenging than preventing their overuse in the beginning. For parents of very young children, you have the wonderful opportunity to avoid the technology battles altogether, knowing that time spent on screens is time that is NOT spent engaging in activities that are needed for healthy brain and body development. Consider these recommendations from educators, counselors, physicians, and other parents.

**Children under 2:** NO SCREENS AT ALL. Children need personal interaction like back and forth games such as peek a boo, sound and mimic games like sticking out a tongue, raising eyebrows, and making funny sounds, and of course, lots of tummy time. They need sensory experiences like cuddling, bath time, water toys, sound making toys, high chair time smushing food, and lots of reading picture books aloud, especially nursery rhymes. Parents should narrate what they are doing during the day to encourage their babies to start matching words with objects and names with faces. Children this age need face time and conversation with people, and 360 degree sensory experiences to build their language, gross and fine motor skills, peripheral vision, and strengthen neural connections.

**Pre-school:** The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no more than an hour a day for this age group. Consider TV shows like Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood (PBSKids, Amazon Prime and now at <https://www.misterogers.org/watch/>), Sesame Street (PBS), Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood (PBS), Doc McStuffins (Disney), Word Party (Netflix), Blue's Clues (Nickelodeon), Bookaboo (Amazon Prime) etc., and maybe short periods of website games like [www.pbskids.org](http://www.pbskids.org) or [www.abcya.com](http://www.abcya.com), [www.readingeggs.com](http://www.readingeggs.com), or [www.abcmouse.com](http://www.abcmouse.com) but always with a parent alongside to help point out connections to things in real life. If on a screen, play with them and try to avoid giving them the phone or iPad to use as a babysitter or time filler in waiting rooms, lines or restaurants. Manners and good public behavior take adult modeling and practice. While screen time does keep kids quiet, it robs them of learning about the importance and long-term benefits of self-control. When children give up that parent coveted nap, insist that they have an hour or so of "quiet time" in their bedroom. Looking at books, coloring, or quietly playing with toys is okay. If they are tired, they will fall asleep. If not, they will be learning how to amuse themselves, and you will get a break to make a phone call, get some chores done or just relax. Also, consider plugging into community resources like the local "Y", museums, playdates, and moms' groups to keep your kids busy and connected to people.

**Elementary:** One way to allow screens is to have a weekly family movie night. This can become a treasured tradition and an opportunity to snuggle and have teachable moments about important topics that "parent selected" movies can provide. Regarding the use of smartphones and tablets, **it's okay to delay**. Try to hold off giving them their own phone for as long as possible, although it can be

difficult when there is no landline and your children are home alone. Parents of teens who have ended up with mental health issues would tell you to wait until at least high school or later. When you do make the decision to purchase a phone, consider having your kids sign a contract and enable the grayscale settings, which will be much less appealing than Technicolor. (Sample contract)

<https://cyberbullying.org/technology-use-contract-2014.pdf>

Encourage everyone in the family to talk about what they like to spend screen time doing. Be aware that kids can use shared documents like Google docs to "text" each other in real time even if they don't have a phone, so make sure you know what they are doing if you notice a lot of typing. Lots of elementary school kids start group texts by sharing a google doc with a certain friend group. While this can be fun and mostly innocent, it can be exclusionary and used to gossip or bully. It is also a misuse of school g-mail accounts and can be monitored and read by school administrators. Kids can receive disciplinary action if repeatedly caught using their school email accounts for this type of unkind digital social interaction. Kids tend to be a lot more inappropriate and or mean online, so keep the discussion open about empathy and consequences. "Don't be mean behind the screen" and "Only write/post what you would be comfy having your parents/grandparents read" are good tips for kids. Set limits on use and check in on this often. Set parental controls, monitor sites being visited and/or use a system like Circle Home Plus by Disney, a device that watches your kids' online activity when you can't. Also, beware that young kids can easily rack up massive charges of purchases on certain games, if they are not disabled.

**Middle and High School:** Social media was not designed for tweens. Their brains are still under construction, so delay the use of social media accounts in lieu of real conversations and in person get together. When the day comes, monitor all social media accounts and still encourage lots of real world activities to make sure there are parts of their life that they feel good about, as this can be a protective factor against the inevitable self-esteem dip due to comparison to others.

Instead of hours on Snapchat and Instagram, you can encourage teens to use technology to build future "adulting" skills. Ask them to teach you about what how they are using technology (photo editing, podcasts, movie making, video games, setting up streaming accounts, wireless speakers, etc.) so they see that you are interested. Maybe they can make a creative presentation for the next family celebration! This way you can find out more about what they are doing, they end up feeling competent, and technology will build important family connections. There are many ways to use technology while enhancing communication skills now to build marketable skills and reduce future anxiety when they are thrown into the real world later. Some other "adulting" ideas include:

- \*Internet research for family vacations or purchases and then have your teen make any necessary follow-up phone calls to finalize plans
- \*research a recipe, shop for the required ingredients (online or in store), and prepare a weekly and/or special occasion meal
- \*complete an ATM transaction and track banking activity/bill paying online (own account prior to graduation)
- \*make appointments (doctor's, hair, dog grooming, etc.) on the phone to enhance critical communication skills

\*call tech support when there is a problem in the home so you don't get a frantic phone call from college

\*participate in real life activities and troubleshooting problems WITH your teen. It's easier to help them fumble through and offer suggestions while they are still at home. Don't assume they don't want to spend time with you just because they are older. Older teens actually crave parental attention and closeness even when they seem like they don't.

Remind teens that their digital footprint can, and most likely will, be looked at when applying to colleges or for a job, so they should make sure that they check their accounts to reflect good behavior and morals. Privacy settings and use of non-embarrassing usernames are important at this age level. Also, remind them what to do if they receive any inappropriate photos of under age children. They are considered child pornography and can end up causing people to become labeled sex offenders.

Finally, here are some preventative suggestions from Dr. Victoria Dunckley, screen addiction specialist, that should be considered:

Spend time outdoors in nature and the sunlight to relax, restore, and recharge.

Don't forget to play. Laughter and movement are healing and energizing. They do a body good!

Get plenty of sleep. More time in REM, or deep, sleep can help the brain "clean house" and consolidate learning.

Give your kids chores. The Learning Habit Study showed that kids with the highest GPA's did more chores, had less than 30 minutes of daily screen time, and spent more time with their parents. Another study showed that preschoolers who did chores at age 3 or 4 were more likely to be more self-sufficient.

Parents, it's a good idea to enforce a sleeping sanctuary that avoids blue lights from devices to interfere with REM sleep and late night texting and social media check-ins. If your teen is reluctant to disconnect at night, consider turning off your wireless during the evening/nighttime in order to encourage healthy sleep patterns and give nervous systems a break.

If your children or teens are already engaged in more screen usage than you think is healthy, you may find yourself in the reactive mode of operation. In this case, you may need the help of professionals who are now specializing in screen addiction.

As you continue the quest to find a way to balance the use of technology, just remember what Billy Cox says~ "Technology should improve your life . . . Not become your life." Good luck!

A special thanks to my friend, colleague and school counselor, Laura Toner, for her wisdom and suggestions.

Resources for parents~

Great website for parents for reviews of movies, games, apps, etc.

<https://www.commonsemmedia.org/>

*No Manual? No Problem! Strategies and Interventions to Help Your Children Thrive in Today's World* by Monica Reinhard-Gorney and Perk Musacchio

*The Student's Guide to Communication and Self-Presentation* by Monica Reinhard-Gorney and Perk Musacchio

Families Managing Media- <https://screenstrong.com/solutions/>

*Can Your Teen Survive- and Thrive -Without a SmartPhone?* by Melanie Hempe

*The ScreenStrong Solution* by Melanie Hempe

Shape the Sky- <http://www.shapethesky.org/>

*Reset Your Child's Brain: A Four-Week Plan to End Meltdowns, Raise Grades, and Boost Social Skills by Reversing the Effects of Electronic Screen-Time* by Victoria Dunckley, MD

*Glow Kids: How Screen Addiction is Hijacking Our Kids and How to Break the Trance* by Nicholas Kardaras

