

# 7 House Rules for Limiting Screen Time All Summer

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By Elizabeth Jenkins

## No one is going full Swiss Family Robinson.

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Photo by Christopher Silas Neal

“Remember that forbidden fruit is the tastiest,” says Lucy Jo Palladino, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in Encinitas, California, and the author of *Parenting in the Age of Attention Snatchers*. Don’t go crazy. (*I’m throwing the iPad in the ocean! Long live summer!*) “If you have unreasonable expectations and rules, you will simply double their desire,” says Palladino. To help them make good choices when they do get screen time, have a little back-and-forth. You ask about their favorite shows or let them teach you a game. They feel heard and are more likely to get on board.

## But everyone is going outside. A lot.

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Get kids excited about all of the things they get to do—swimming, neighborhood soccer games, digging in the garden—that are pushed aside during the school months. And explain that being outside helps their brains. “Scientists call the sights and sounds of nature ‘soft fascination,’ ” says Palladino. “They stimulate the brain peacefully, so it no longer craves the hyperstimulation of electronics.” Research shows improvements in attention spans after time spent outside. Sell this in terms of preparation for the next school year. “I’m so proud of how hard you worked in first grade. Let’s keep your body and brain on the right track so you’re ready for second!”

## Screens come out only in the afternoon.

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Our minds are sharper in the morning, ready for imaginative fort building or the problem solving needed for setting up a lemonade stand, says Palladino. Also, once kids engage in an activity like watching a show, she says, “they’re in a passive, receptive mode. If you start the day that way, you’ll wind up going against a stronger current to turn the TV off and get going.” Afternoon, after kids have exhausted themselves at the playground and when it’s hottest, is the time to cave—for a limited time. Or plan for an hour in the evening, as you get dinner ready.

## There will be a (flexible) plan.

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Summer should be relaxed, but you can’t expect kids to entertain themselves for 12 hours a day (especially without Minecraft as an option). Have a loose schedule. “It’s good for them, and it’s good for you,” says Jenn Mann, a psychologist in Los Angeles and the author of *The A to Z Guide to Raising Happy, Confident Kids*. “Maybe it’s hide-and-seek with Mommy in the

backyard from 11 to 12, lunch from 12 to 1, and free reading from 1 to 2.” Give kids possible activities or projects at the beginning of the week and let them choose. If the day involves errands your child isn’t keen on, well, tough. “We all have to do things that aren’t our first-choice activity,” says Mann. “That’s life.”

## “I’m bored!” won’t get you anywhere.

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It doesn’t mean they won’t try. But stand strong: Boredom is important developmentally. It forces creativity. “Having nothing going on and working to invent an activity is good for their minds,” says Dan Siegel, a clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine and a coauthor of *The Whole-Brain Child*. Have a (prebrainstormed) list of activities—one that your child compiles with you—to refer to. And be prepared to participate *initially*, especially with little kids, even if you’re just sitting side by side. (You write thank-you notes while your child pens a fairy tale.) “With craft projects, toss out a few ideas, get them going, and then back out,” says Bobbi Conner, the author of *The Giant Book of Creativity for Kids*.

## No going over to so-and-so’s house to sneak in Xbox time.

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*Because his parents are doing the same thing!* Make your summer screen plans a neighborhood or classwide movement—or, at the very least, a shared idea among close friends. “Say, ‘We are trying to do more unplugged play at our house,’ and then cook up—and agree upon—some alternative activities,” says Conner. Pool money to buy new board games (or fly swatters and balloons—see *Bye, Bye, iPad—14 Screen-Free Activities for Kids*).

## Mom and Dad are taking a break, too.

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You know your tech habits heavily influence your kids’. Mann says parents need to break down how much quality time they *actually* get with their children. It might be eye-opening. “Even if you’re at home, the kids may be at camp, and you’ve got from 3 p.m. to 8 p.m. with them. That’s only five hours,” says Mann. “There’s no reason you can’t put your phone away for that long.”