

How to Manage Parental Control Over Your Child's Screen Time

By ALAN KAZDIN
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Kazdin is Sterling Professor of Psychology and Child Psychiatry at Yale University and director of the Yale Parenting Center; he is a former President of the American Psychological Association and teaches a course open to the public on Coursera: Everyday Parenting: The ABCs of Child Rearing.

If you are wondering when to start setting up parental controls to [limit your child's access to technology](#), now might be a pretty good time. One survey of parents and children noted that parents allow access to the Internet on average when their child is three years old. Moreover, [children spend twice as much time online as their parents believe](#). Despite the wealth of parental control apps for phones and other digital devices, young children note their screen time averages about two hours per day. And during that time, depending on age and time on the computer or smartphone, children can often get around whatever digital parental control limits have been installed and can witness self-harm, porn, clinical problems such as eating disorders, and many things that [they themselves regard as disturbing](#). They also often share personal information on social media that can widely be circulated and serve as another source of bullying.

This is a perfect storm: Children have open access to digital media and do all they say they do, while parents believe that there is no problem or that things are under control.

Yet digital media cannot be simply labeled “good” or “bad.” They can be both and neither. We know that viewing [aggressive video games can increase aggressive behavior](#) of people who view them. Less well known is that viewing pro-social videos that display honesty, respect and being kind to others increases those pro-social behaviors. Also, access to digital media is critical to routine educational and school activities and to later job opportunities. Children not only need access to the digital media and the worlds they open, but also must be very competent in using them.

You cannot cut off a child’s access to all digital media. But if you believe that it is a problem in your home, there are some things you can do to exercise some parental control.

Limit screen time. Parents at our center have noted that their children log many hours of screen time, long into the night, and then most of the day during the weekends. Some of the children barely take breaks for family meals. It is fine in such cases to limit the time. [But how you place restrictions](#) — either through a parental control app or your own monitoring — is extremely important. Authoritarian approaches and arguments to control screen time are likely to lead to backlash. Try to explain, negotiate and be calm as you discuss the limits (no heat-of-the-moment uses of “over my dead body” or “because I said so,” and no use of harsh reprimands). But even if you can limit screen time on phones, computers and tablets, complete control is very difficult to achieve.

Assume your child is skilled at getting around any content blocking, in all likelihood. At the Yale Parenting Center, we were surprised initially when we heard parents say that children’s screen time was well-controlled at home, only to hear from the child about the scores of tricks they used or devised,

often with the help of peers, that completely thwarted parents' efforts. Which is why you should...

Spend some together time on the computer (or tablet or smartphone) to help establish this is not just a solitary activity. Play a joint game. Watch a movie together. [Do a creative project](#). Take up a new hobby, topic or interest together (something about a country, a sport, a type of art, a game, a superhero, an animal, a type of music) and spend time online together working on that. Make it fun — don not use exams, quizzes or reprimands during this time. Ideally, let the child select the topic, with you providing the final say.

Anticipate that if your child is prone to aggressive behavior or anxiety, the content of any video games or other material might make things worse. For example, [anxiety and fears](#), common in early childhood, can be made worse by devoting screen time to trauma or events that depict terroristic acts, violence, death and dying in detail.

Know that explaining is not enough. Parents might adopt the view that if they just inform the child of the dangers and reach some verbal understanding that will help. Certainly, explain things to the child — that has broad benefits well beyond too much screen time. Yet, explaining the need for parental control alone is not usually an effective method for changing behavior.

Monitor your child's and adolescent's screen time. This can help your child from catching some behaviors you do not want them to have. Yet it does not mean hovering. Instead, [keep track of what the child is doing and with whom](#). Additionally, being directly involved in activities with a child are like mental-health vaccinations that help them from catching some behaviors you do not want them to have. (If you need further help with this, there are useful

guidelines online; two that seem especially sound are from SafeKids and the American Academy of Pediatrics.)

Model the behavior you want to see. Parents sometimes engage in some of the same screen-time activities they would not want their child to do: playing very aggressive games with strangers online, watching porn that their children happen to see or being in the same room but playing independently on screens. Modeling is critical.

In short, digital media bring new worries and concerns to parents, and with good reason. Yet there is much parents can do to influence a child in positive ways, to integrate the use of media into family activity and maximize the benefits that these new technologies provide.