

School-Year Screen-Time Rules from a Teacher

Take it from a middle school teacher and mom: Kids need to manage their online activities -- and parents need to help them do it. By [Rebecca Young](#) 9/5/2018



This article is part of Common Sense Media's Parent Voices series, which provides a platform for opinions about parenting in the digital age. All ideas expressed are the writer's own.

Last year [Fortnite](#) invaded my middle school classroom -- as I believe it did to middle school classrooms across the country. Students who were usually on task and high-performing were nodding off and "[forgetting](#)" to do their homework. The morning conversations about how late they stayed up or who was the [last man standing](#) became part of our early morning check-ins. Then the phone calls with parents started: Over several months, I had numerous telephone and after-school meetings with parents concerned about their kids' performance. When I brought up [screen time](#), there were a range of reactions. Some parents seemed oblivious as to what their children were doing after hours, some didn't know how to rein in screen time, and some thought they had it all under control -- but clearly did not.

I get it. I'm not just a teacher: I'm a mom who struggles with screen time, too. I spent [last summer](#) trying to keep my own middle school daughter unplugged in the rural English countryside. After the first week, when the iPad started appearing little by little, I tried to use my own advice -- "However much you read is how much screen time you get" -- and reasoning, "Make sure you balance your learning games with your other games." But then I'd hear my daughter yelling at a friend who'd just left her online game, and I'd feel like I'd lost the battle.

The thing is, I'm not anti-screen. I've seen technology bring some [amazing teaching moments](#) to my classroom -- and to my own life. One student, whom I could never get to write a complete sentence on paper, wrote the most heartfelt poem about how he "nearly won" in *Fortnite*. It became [his breakthrough](#), and he hasn't stopped writing since. Other kids made parallels to the [dystopian books](#) they were reading and wrote very poignant compare-and-contrast papers to prove their points. And, far away from her friends in the United States, my daughter was able to stay in touch with her friends online, keep herself occupied with [Roblox](#), and feel a part of pop culture by watching every [Miranda Sings](#) video ever made.

Those breakthrough moments of connection, creativity, and critical thinking are what I strive for as a teacher and a mother. What it tells me is that however parents handle the management of their kids' screen time, it really does have to be a balance. And knowing middle school kids as well as I do, I know that they aren't always able to [shut down Fortnite](#) or YouTube without the guidance and [support of their parents](#). I've also discovered that tech is never going to be a one-size-fits-all thing. What works for some kids will not work for others. Finding what is best for your family can involve a bit of trial and error.

These are the strategies that worked for many of my parents last year and that I'm sure I will be trying with my middle schooler this year:

Be present. Know what your child is playing and when. That seems simple, but it is so important. So many of my parents last year had no idea that their child was staying up until all hours in the morning playing games. I heard more than once, "I have never had to worry about their screen use. They have been so good up until now." I remind them that this is middle school, they are not bad kids, and they are just testing the boundaries -- so set them!

Control the Wi-Fi. I touched base with some of my parents after their children made improvements in class, and I found that they had put in place simple household internet controls. The kids had passwords to access the internet, and the parents put a time limit on when the password could be used. Please note that a few of my tech-savvy kids confided that they were able to "override" this function.

Remove the temptation. Some families took all screens out of the children's bedrooms and stored cellphones in a locked charging box until morning. This might seem extreme, but I know for at least one of my students this worked. He was struggling socially and trying so hard to fit in with a certain crowd. He later acknowledged that he needed help -- beyond the gaming community.

Parental-control apps. I've had students tell their parents that they have online homework to do and then end up playing a game instead. Parental-control apps can help, but it takes some research to find the right one for your needs. Making the homework space at the dining room table or another central location can make it easier to keep an eye on kids, too.

Balance. Kids need downtime. I have these hormonal, opinionated, stressed-out middle schoolers for two hours a day, and I push them. I know that the other teachers at my school also carry high expectations. Finding time to completely unplug is important. One parent told me today that they have a hard rule of no screen time except for homework on weekdays, and the way to lose weekend play time is by breaking that rule. I personally allow weekday screen time, but I reserve the right to change my mind.