

Should Children Have Screen Time Limits?

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Twenty-first-century parents are extremely concerned about their children's technology use. There has been a recent spate of news reports about parents who are concerned that their children are addicted to the game Fortnite. I have been approached by 10 news services and dozens of parents who have asked my opinion about Fortnite addiction and excessive screen time. Unquestionably, children are routinely using technology for their social lives, recreation, communication, and schoolwork. As I have stated many times in my books and blogs, in promoting a healthy "Play Diet" as an antidote to excessive screen time, the paramount issue is not the screen time itself but the activities and other opportunities that it replaces. I am most concerned when screen time takes away from children's sleep, physical activity, and time with the family. But there can be many other concerns, as well, that one has to take into account when considering screen time limits.

In the past few years, parental concern regarding screen time limits has increased dramatically. A 2015 study of Australian parents found excessive screen time to be the number one child health problem, more than obesity, drug use, and poor nutrition. A more recent study conducted by the American family survey in 2018 indicated that parents believe that the overuse of technology is the most important issue facing teenagers. The study of 498 parents indicated that overuse of technology was their single most important concern. In the study, 53% of parents described it as one of the most

important issues facing teams, followed by 45% for bullying, 36% for mental health issues, 35% for family breakdown/divorce, and 34% for the pressure to use drugs or alcohol. And while I do not have any definitive data, the parents of my patients (who are most often diagnosed with ADHD, autism, Learning Disabilities, executive-functioning problems, anxiety, and depression) are even more concerned about the impact of excessive screen-time limits on their children.

While parents are expressing these serious concerns about children's overuse of technology, they frequently appear to be doing very little to address it. Parental efforts at engaging children about their use of technology is primarily restrictive in nature. Most parents appear to prefer to set screen time limits from afar rather than being directly involved with their children's technology use. Parents generally don't participate in children's use of media: they don't play games with them and rarely use social media together or engage in joint media engagement.

In a world where games, technology, and screen-based media are not going away, I believe it is imperative that parents become more involved with their children's screen use. At a minimum, kids who cannot disengage from media (these are often those with ADHD, Learning Disabilities, and autism) need their parents to set effective limits for them. In addition, modeling appropriate limit setting on the part of parents is crucial. Without appropriate modeling of one's own screen time use, it is very hard to enforce limits on children.

Fortunately, many child care experts have begun to develop useful and reasonable prescriptions for handling these concerns. These prescriptive approaches, which can be found in some great new books, generally involve more parental engagement than is typical and require parents to engage in kid-friendly conversations about the amount and content of children's screen time. Parents are the frontline in helping kids to recognize the place of digital media and screens in their lives and creating a balance with other activities and responsibilities they will encounter.

Here are a few of the books I recommend on the subject of screen time limits:

Playing Smarter in a Digital World: A Guide to Choosing and Using Popular Video Games and Apps to Improve Executive Functioning in Children and Teens by Randy Kulman, Specialty Press, 2014. *My focuses on kids with special needs. An excellent source of information about the impact of screen time on children with ADHD, executive-functioning concerns, and autism. Introduces the concept of a healthy "Play Diet" as a tool to balance digital play with other activities and instructs parents how to leverage popular games and apps into learning opportunities.*

Screen-Smart Parenting: How to Find Balance and Benefit in Your Child's Use of Social Media, Apps, and Digital Devices by Jodi Gold, A Division of Guilford Publications, Inc, 2014. *From Amazon, "Dr. Gold weaves together scientific knowledge and everyday practical advice to help you foster your child's healthy relationship to technology, from birth to the teen years." I liked her chapter on kids with ADHD and thought it had some great insights about their screen use.*

The Parent App: Understanding Families in the Digital Age by Lynn Schofield Clark, The Oxford University Press, 2014. *From Amazon, "The Parent App is more than an advice manual. As Clark admits, technology changes too rapidly for that. Rather, she puts parenting in context, exploring the meaning of media challenges and the consequences of our responses – for our lives as family members and as members of society." I found the author had some excellent insights into why parents are not active mediators in their kids' screen time. It gives readers some methods to get more involved.*

The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age by Catherine Steiner-Adair and Teresa H. Barker, Harper Publications, 2013. *From Amazon: "Steiner-Adair offers insights and advice that can help parents achieve greater understanding, authority, and confidence as they engage with the tech revolution unfolding in their living rooms." As a psychologist, I found this book to be extremely well researched and the developmental aspects of the book to be very useful.*