



Parenting in a digital age: Managing screen time

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As a parent I know that technology can be the cause of much stress in the family, but it can be the source of wonder and delight too. So, how do we avoid the battles and enjoy the very best of what tech can offer?

Talk and listen

Like anything, too much technology can be unhealthy for young people. If they're using it too much, it could mean they're not giving themselves enough time during the day to do other things like play, study, talk or even sleep. Think about the way your children use technology and talk about it together as a family.

Get the right balance

Try to agree limits together, just as you would for the amount of time they might like to spend on other activities. Getting a balance of physical activity, interaction with others, as well as time to eat and sleep can help you come to a mutually agreeable approach to the use of technology.

Explore together

For younger children, it's important to explore media together, whether that's watching Peppa Pig or playing on the CBeebies App, sharing will give you the opportunity to talk about what they have seen and explore how that might apply to the world around them.

Good Example

Try to set a good example. If you decide that meal times should be tech-free, make sure that you stick to the agreement too.

Enjoy

Tech can help unite you with your children, so whether you enjoy a movie together on a Saturday night, or you get competitive with games, tech can provide you with a valuable platform to connect with your child.

Value

Remember that not all screen time is equal. Spending hours flicking through Instagram does not have the same value as watching YouTube to help you learn a new skill, or chatting online with friends about a home learning project, so try to understand what your child is doing with tech and the value that it can bring.

Learn

Increasingly, schools may expect children to access online resources to support their learning at home. If your child isn't keen on reading books, but loves tech, it can help to trigger a literary interest, through literacy focussed apps and games to digital stories and interactives. Encourage your children to share what they are doing online and try to learn alongside them.

Relax

Many apps and games have educational value, others may just be for the fun of it, and that's fine too. We all need time to unwind – you might enjoy a cup of tea in front of the weekly soap, your child may enjoy half an hour popping bubbles on an app on their phone, and that's ok.

In reality

In my house there are two teenagers and a 7 year old, all girls, and whilst we certainly don't get it right all of the time, we're not in bad shape:

1. The use of tech is positively encouraged
2. I try to encourage focussing on specific activities, such as finding new recipes, researching home learning projects, keeping up to date with current affairs, finding best buys and checking out hairstyles and new makeup techniques
3. Meal-times are definitely media free, but we will often share funny video clips or favourite songs during after dinner chats
4. Tech is discouraged from all bedrooms (this is an ongoing discussion though!)
5. Tech is also discouraged for an hour or so before bedtime and we try to have a quiet time for reading, crafts or just chatting
6. I keep in contact with my teens through social media through the channels they prefer (not Facebook!)
7. We talk about behaviour online, just as we do offline – the same rules apply.

My 7 year old would happily zone out in front of the TV all morning but we are in the habit of getting on with the day; doing chores, home learning, going for a lovely walk, or playing with Lego or a game. And then, perhaps as I'm preparing lunch, we'll choose something nice to watch on the TV, or a fun app to play on the iPad.

My 14 year old, who has additional learning needs, can become attached to her phone. She loves watching (and re-watching) clips on YouTube. We've opted for YouTube Kids, which has more appropriate content, and I find that agreeing a time limit for when the tech time will finish suits us best.

My 13 year old is connected to her friends through a number of social channels, including Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp! She feels that it's really important that she is able to be in contact with them, and that's fine with me. We talk regularly about good behaviours online (and offline), and what to do if she ever feels uncomfortable.

Last week I brought home the 'Google Cardboard'; if you haven't seen one it's a pair of cardboard goggles which can deliver a virtual reality experience through your smartphone. We have had so much fun; we've been to Paris, Egypt and Antarctica. We've flown jets and dived into the ocean. We've also had some of the best conversations that we've had in a long time too.