parenting *ideas
insights

The role of parents and screen time

by Martine Oglethorpe

These little devices that connect us, entertain us, provide us with information, show us where to go, keep us organised and allow us to indulge in retail therapy from almost anywhere, have become an integral part of our daily lives. Most of us won't leave home for long periods of time without being tethered to a digital device.

But when it comes to our children and their screen-time habits, we are often lamenting the role the devices play. These little screens that offer so much and answer so many of our needs also leave us wondering how much is too much for our kids, and how do we keep it under control?

When parents ask me this I urge them to dig a little deeper and look at what else they could really be asking. We need to look at how each individual child is coping with their screen time. Are they still doing the things they always enjoyed before they had access to a screen? Are they able to put the screen away without a fight? What sorts of things are they doing on the screen? Is it a positive experience? Are they learning something? Are they interacting with it or merely consuming media? These are questions we need to be constantly revisiting throughout their adolescent years.

At the same time, we need to make sure they are learning good habits from the beginning and gaining the skills and behaviours they need to stay in control of their screen time. To help form these habits, here are a few things you can do to keep screen time under control ... without your kids resorting to techno-tantrums.

Look at how you are role modelling screen-time behaviours

We know our kids learn much more from watching what we do, as opposed to listening to what we say. So how is your technology use affecting you? Are you ignoring others because you are scrolling? Are you falling asleep with a phone or tablet landing on your forehead? Are you able to give yourself over to certain tasks and focus without being distracted by beeps and notifications? Are you giving yourself some time without a device to enjoy family, friends and activities that keep you healthy and balanced?

Have rules that are 'no brainers' for your family

When it comes to technology, the rules often change as our children develop and mature. But we can also make some universal rules for the whole family based on our individual family values and what is important to us. It may be that there are no phones in the bedroom at night. It may be that there is no technology after a certain time of the day. It should certainly be that devices never ever come to the table at dinner time. Aiming for at least a few meals where the family is eating together is crucial. Your kids need this time to talk, connect with family and have a break from being 'switched on' to a device. They need to get into the habit of not eating and

scrolling. So make your rules early and stick to them.

Build a culture of balanced play in your home

There is no doubt that we as parents need to work harder today to nurture all the many elements of a child's development.When a small device appears to provide them with so much it is little wonder our kids have trouble putting them down and going outside to play. Unlike a book or a game there is often no end to what happens with a device. There is always something more to see or do, another level to reach, another city to build or another army to destroy. So we need to get better at providing lots of other ways for our kids to be entertained, informed and connected to others. This may mean we have to physically go outside and play with them rather than simply tell them to go out. It may mean we have to insist on visits to places where devices don't come out. Kids still want to run and jump and play – they just need to be reminded and encouraged to do so even more today. By building other ways to learn, play and interact into our kids' lives from an early age, we are helping these things become part of their daily lives – habits that in turn become behaviours.

So while we often feel like the devices are taking over, all of these strategies rely on us – the parents. *We* need to be the ones to get in early and help show them the way. We need to take a look at what we are modelling to them in terms of our own device use and our own lifestyle. We need to be helping them form the right behaviours. There are many wonderful benefits that come with these devices, so ensuring we are using them in positive ways, and are in control, will go a long way to ensuring we are all reaping those benefits.

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