



## FAMILY SCREEN TIME How to Set Boundaries in the Digital Era

by April Thompson

**M**inecraft. Pokemon. Snapchat. Digital media dominates childhood. That time youngsters used to spend playing with friends, being with family or sleeping has been zapped. According to a study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, 8-to-10-year-olds are daily exposed to nearly eight hours of on-screen media and heavy media users are twice as likely to report poor grades.

Conscientious and concerned parents are setting limits on screen time and reclaiming family time. Experts, too, are working to define a “new healthy” at a time when many activities, from homework to shopping, are moving online.

“How can you begin to limit kids’ screen time when teachers are increasingly using media?” queries Pediatrician Corinn Cross, who practices in Los Angeles. “It’s hard. None of us grew up with this level of technology, and it’s moving faster than any advice can.”

### Nip It Early

Cross co-authored the American Academy of Pediatrics’ (AAP) recently updated digital media guidelines, which shifted from strict time limits to greater flexibility for and within different age groups. For children under 18 months, the recommendation is to avoid media altogether outside of video chats with loved ones. In the older age ranges, the guidelines are less prescriptive and more about setting individual limits that ensure getting enough sleep and physical activity along with achieving other developmental needs.

Cross believes excessive screen time is particularly detrimental for younger kids that have fewer waking hours and more developing to do. “Toddlers don’t learn well from screens, so you will have limited return from using screens for education,” she observes.

Kathy Marrocco, an Oakland Township, Michigan, blogger with *YourOrganicChild.com*, initially worried about her kids’ potential adverse exposure to radiation from cell phone use. Her concern soon turned to other big impacts of digital media encroaching on their lives. She cites a study of 3,000 parents of grade-school-aged kids, which found that nearly two-thirds of the children are using their devices at night instead of sleeping, with a corresponding drop in concentration, memory and energy.

Marrocco maintains firm boundaries with her daughter, 13, and son, 18, prohibiting the use of electronics at the kitchen table and in their rooms at night, in line with AAP recommendations. “They can only have devices in their room at night if they are in offline ‘airplane mode’ so they won’t be tempted to check or respond to incoming messages,” she says.

Kids don’t sleep well next to their phones, agrees Cross, a mother of three, ages 4, 6 and 8. “They have trouble falling and staying asleep.” She also doesn’t let her children use e-readers instead of books.

### Prevent Screen Addiction

Psychotherapist Nicholas Kardaras, Ph.D., an addiction expert and executive director of The Dunes, a rehab clinic in East Hampton, New York, is even firmer about screen time, having seen some kids go off the digital deep end. Delaying the onset of screen exposure is the most critical step a parent can take, suggests Kardaras. “There’s no evidence to suggest media exposure is beneficial to child development. Most tech geniuses, including the founders of Google, Amazon and Apple, were not exposed to it until adolescence.

“Treating digital addiction is challenging because you can’t be digitally abstinent in this society,” he continues. “Prevention is the key.”

Digital media abuse can have lasting developmental impacts, according to Kardaras, author of *Glow Kids: How Screen Addiction is Hijacking our Kids and How to Break the Trance*.

*DrKardaras.com* cites numerous studies on the effects of such intensive use, from

increased prevalence of attention deficit disorder to higher rates of depression. Brain imaging studies from institutions such as the medical schools at Indiana University and University of Utah have shown how heavy exposure to digital media has effects on the brain similar to substance addiction, reports Kardaras, affecting areas of the brain linked with functions like impulse control, brain

connectivity and processing speed.

In his practice, red flags for potential digital addiction include strong reactions when devices are taken away, disinterest in “offline” activities, worsening of interpersonal relationships and dropping grades.

Modeling good practices is as important as monitoring kids’ behavior, suggests Cross. In her household, all

electronic tablets and cell phones are kept in a drawer when not in use. “If I have work to do or have to take a phone call, I’ll go to another room, then come back and be present with the kids,” she says. “Quality, face-to-face time is important.”

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## FOUR WAYS TO SET DIGITAL LIMITS



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**K**eeping the family in sync about the amount of digital media use is challenging. Here are some expert tips on maintaining a healthy balance.

### 1 **Decide the ground rules.**

“Determine rules that make sense for everyone, and it’ll be much easier to get your kids on board, as they won’t see it as arbitrary when you tell them to put their devices away,” advises Pediatrician

Corinn Cross. [HealthyChildren.org/MediaUsePlan](http://HealthyChildren.org/MediaUsePlan) offers a free interactive online tool to create a personalized family media use plan.

If kids don’t comply with rules, Kathy Marrocco suggests turning the Wi-Fi off at night or taking away devices altogether. But don’t leave a void, cautions Cross. SubstitutOute fun, fulfilling activities.

### 2 **Be wary of even “good” screen time.**

Test educational apps before approving them for kids to ensure their quality and so parents can help reinforce the learning, says Cross. She likes [CommonSenseMedia.org](http://CommonSenseMedia.org) for parental reviews and information to filter media of all kinds, from apps and games to TV shows.

Consider advocating for limiting screen time in local schools. “I asked my boys’

elementary school not to give them portable devices until they were 10,” says Nicholas Kardaras, the father of 9-year-old twins.

**3 Watch out for rewards.** Some screen time is more mesmerizing for kids than others, according to Kardaras, who treats such addictions. Most video games are designed on a variable reward schedule, similar to slot machines, which intentionally stimulates players to chase future rewards. Consider stricter limits on such media.

### 4 **Play first in the real world.**

Because it reduces overall exercise, screen overuse can contribute to obesity. Cross recommends prioritizing exercising before daily allotted screen time; after being online, it’s more difficult to engage kids in physical activity.