TECHNOFERENCE:

STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING FAMILY SCREEN TIME

DR. BRANDON MCDANIEL & DR. DAVE SCHRAMM

DRDAVESCHRAMM.COM

Are you concerned about your own or your children's screen use? You are not alone! Not long ago it was fairly easy to manage screen use, as the main screens were the TV and computer, located right there in your home. Today, media and screen use has shifted to multiple devices, many of which are mobile.

We have formed strong relationships and habits with some of our devices (often our smartphones). There has even been a term developed for this: Technoference—the everyday interruptions and intrusions caused by devices in our face-to-face interactions with others. Here are a few steps and strategies to manage family screen time.

1 GET TO KNOW THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE

2 SET UP A FAMILY MEDIA PLAN/AGREEMENT

3 LEAD BY EXAMPLE

4 CONTINUE TO HAVE DISCUSSIONS ABOUT MEDIA USE

The principles of good parenting haven't changed, but the media landscape has! To be the best parent you can be, it is important to set limits appropriate for your child's age, communicate the reasons behind these limits, and love and support your children in their interests, accomplishments, and struggles. However, it is difficult to set meaningful limits that will work if you don't understand the devices, games, apps, or other technologies that your family or children use.

Is this a tall order to get to know all of these things? It certainly is, but it is vitally important. Most parents would not send their child somewhere without knowing where they were going or what was happening there. The same consideration should be made for the media landscape your children are immersed in. So where to begin? Here are some pointers:

Take an Inventory of all of the devices in your home.

Keep this list updated and easily accessible

Figure out how devices can be used and which games, programs, and apps are on the devices.

If there are things you are not comfortable with, first ask yourself why you are uncomfortable. Is it because you don't yet understand it? Or is it because it violates one of your family values?

If it is because you don't understand it, it may be helpful to work on understanding it first before making a decision. Be open to seeing it from different perspectives and willing to change your views.

If it violates a family value, then make sure you can explain your reasoning and it may be time to set limits and/or remove it (e.g., delete, block, set parental controls).

How can I possibly get to know all of these games, programs, apps, etc.?

You won't always know everything, but you can try to know a good deal more than you know now, so don't give up just because it seems overwhelming!

A good resource to use is **CommonSenseMedia.org** where you can:

Check out the "Parents Need to Know" tab on the website to get started

Get age and media use recommendations

Search for information on specific types of content (such as movies, apps, etc.)

Read up on current media issues (such as the newest or biggest game or app craze with children or teens) or various parenting topics and suggestions

Don't forget that your job is never done here.

There are always new ways that devices can be used or new games/apps that are released (or that you just don't know about yet).

IMPORTANT TIP: Figure out the settings for when/how games and apps can be downloaded on your devices. Set expectations for what children can/can't do and set parental controls or passwords/PINs, if possible, on the installation of new games/apps.

2 SET UP A FAMILY MEDIA PLAN/AGREEMENT

With so many devices around us, it can be easy to fall unknowingly into patterns or not realize how our technology use is affecting our relationships. To be successful in limiting screen and media time and teaching your children about the positive and the negative with regard to media use, *everyone needs to be included* in these discussions and plans. This process may not be easy, but involving everyone will at least help all family members to be more invested in the plan and to better understand what is expected.

There are a variety of options for plans, agreements, or contracts available on the web to get you started. Find one that fits best with your values. Here are some recommendations:

AAP Family Media Plan
HealthyChildren.org/MediaUsePlan

Common Sense Media Family Agreement

CommonSenseMedia.org/Family-Media-Agreement

These may be helpful because they get family members talking with one another about potential rules and guide you through steps such as:

- Screen-free zones/times
- Device curfews
- Balancing online/offline time
- Media manners with/around others
- Digital citizenship (going to new sites, bullying, etc.)
- Online safety (privacy, sharing photos, etc.)
- Sleep and exercise

What is a screen-free zone or time?

A zone is a space in your home or vehicle where you all have agreed that screens will not be used. For example, you might decide that phones (even yours!) will not be used in your young child's bedroom.

A time would be a certain period or activity of the day during which you all have agreed to not use screens. For example, dinner time, 1 hour before bedtime, first 30 minutes after waking up, etc.

How do I create effective media/screen time limits?

An important first step in establishing media/screen limits is understanding what type of use and how much use is appropriate for children of various ages. Fortunately, the American Academy of Pediatrics has released research-based recommendations, with a few of their points summarized below.

Younger than 18 months – NO SCREEN TIME. Exception: Skype/FaceTime or other video conferencing platform used to interact with others.

18 to 24 months – can begin to introduce high quality programs sometimes AND co-use with child.

2 to 5 years – limit to 1 hour per day of high quality programs or games/apps. Continue to co-use.

5 to 18 years – set consistent media limits (i.e. 2 hours per day), encourage healthy habits (at least 1 hour of physical activity and 8 to 12 hours of sleep per day), and discourage using media while also doing other things (such as eating, homework, interacting with others).

NOTE: It is more difficult to set an exact time limit in this "5 to 18 years" group (especially as children get older), as they may have their own device, use devices at school, and may also use or need to use devices for homework, socializing, etc. Instead, focus on teaching about balance and healthy habits, while doing your best to set limits on specific kinds of media or screen use. Don't be afraid to set limits when limits are needed, and remember it is best if these limits are part of your family media plan that everyone has agreed to follow.

It is difficult to expect your children to act one way while you act another. If you often watch TV or are frequently on your phone, your children likely will follow your lead or at least argue with you about why they cannot do it too. Children will also see the kinds of shows and apps we value. Additionally, digital distractions are common, they affect us (even if we think they don't), and our children and teens frequently feel it too. Technoference is not just a parenting concern for children, it is a concern for adults who are parenting (for example, checking your phone during time with your child).

When parents are distracted with devices, they are often less likely to respond to their children, talk less with their children, may misinterpret child needs, and, are more likely to respond harshly (if they respond at all).

According to teens, 28% feel parents are addicted,[1] 33% want parents to use devices less,[1] 51% feel parents are distracted at least sometimes by the phone during conversations,[2] and 78% say tech interruptions occur due to parental device use at least sometimes.[3] Moreover, interviews with and research on children and teens reveal they often feel ignored, sad, angry, lonely, or worse about themselves when thinking about their parents' phone use.[4] Many teens feel parents who are distracted with their phones are less warm and loving,[3] and young children show increased behavior problems (e.g., acting out) in response to parents being distracted with devices.[5]
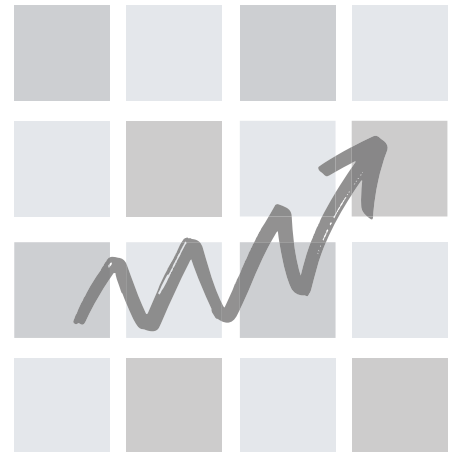
Some questions to consider while leading by example

- Is my media use necessary right at this moment? (Ask yourself...why am I getting on my device? Am I stressed? Bored? Lonely? Overwhelmed? Working too much? Am I being "strategic" with my use?)

- What is my use of technology teaching my children right now?

- Do I follow the media rules/plan we have developed as a family? How could I improve?

- Am I showing my children positive ways to use media?

- Do I have and show balance in my life between my media use and other activities?

- Do I model good habits when I am with others? (e.g., eye contact when others are speaking, putting the device away during family time, meals)

Tips for reducing (or at least being more mindful of) your phone use:

- Instead of only focusing on "reducing phone use," reframe your thoughts to everything you get to do because you are not on your phone (e.g., the things you enjoy, spending time with your family).

- Create triggers that remind you of your goals (e.g., a sticky note on your mirror)

- Disable notifications that are not absolutely necessary (e.g., social media, news, or game notifications)

- Create barriers to immediate phone use (e.g., put something on top of or around your phone, such as a book, wrap a rubber band around it, put a photo of your child on your lock screen as a reminder to focus on them)

- Use time-tracking apps such as Quality Time, Moment, (OFFTIME), Freedom, or Flipd. Some of these apps will also allow you to set usage reminders or block access to certain apps.

# 4 CONTINUE HAVING FREQUENT DISCUSSION WITH FAMILY ABOUT MEDIA USE

Both children and technology are continually changing so it is important to have frequent (and regularly scheduled) discussions about technology and media use.

Informal Media Chats

Consistently look for ways to have informal and frequent discussions about media use, balancing media use and life, positive ways to use media, and much more—extra points if your children don't even realize you are doing it! What you want to avoid is for these discussions to only be negative scoldings or to only happen when you see something you don't like with media use.

Formal Weekly Media Discussions

Some parents have weekly discussions about the family's media use and media plan. This should be a time where all have a turn to speak, all truly listen to one another, all share experiences (both the positive and the negative) they are having with media use, and all work together to come up with solutions, adaptations, and plans that all agree to follow.
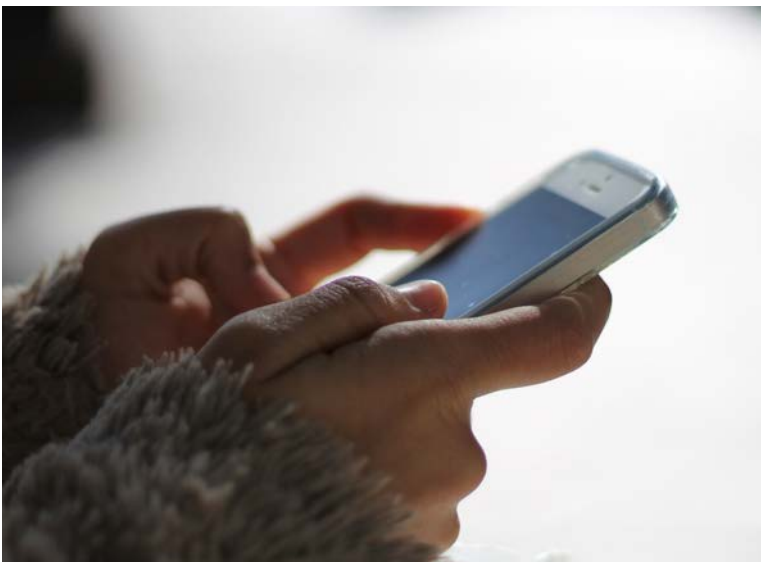
What should you use to structure these discussions?

Follow your media plan or agreement (mentioned earlier), but also feel free to come up with a structure that works for your family

You may decide to focus on these questions regarding the family's media use (and give everyone a chance to answer and discuss. This should NOT be a parental lecture):

- What went well this week?
- What could we improve on?
- Does anything about our plan need to be changed?
- Do we all agree on the plan?
- Do we all understand why it is important? (REMEMBER: Communicating the "why" behind limits and plans is crucial).6

How can I know important media topics to discuss?

TECH TALK TUESDAYS

- Sign up for weekly emails from Screenagers at: ScreenagersMovie.com/tech-talk-tuesdays
- These emails will come on Tuesdays, but you could save and discuss them on any day. They bring up important issues regarding teen phone and screen use (many of which may not even be on your tech radar!)
- Additionally, there is a list (at the above web link) of prior topics you can read through and use, including things like:

Ending bedtime madness

To track or not to track

Teen sexting

Stopping endless scrolling

Screen time monitoring apps

TAKE HOME
MESSAGES

This may all feel a bit overwhelming as you are getting started, but it is vitally important for your family's well-being. Consistently following the outlined steps below may help you to manage your family's screen time and avoid many of the potential pitfalls of screens and media use.

1 GET TO KNOW THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE

- Know what devices you have and how they can be used
- Gather information on the devices, games, apps, etc. through sites such as CommonSenseMedia.org

2 SET UP A FAMILY MEDIA PLAN/AGREEMENT

A couple of recommended plans include:
- CommonSenseMedia.org/Family-Media-Agreement
- HealthyChildren.org/MediaUsePlan

3 LEAD BY EXAMPLE

Your device use sends a clear message to children about how they should use devices and what you truly value.

4 CONTINUE TO HAVE DISCUSSIONS WITH FAMILY ABOUT MEDIA USE

Have both informal chats and formal weekly family discussions about media use and your media plan, without letting them turn into parent lectures.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Create a Family Media Plan/Agreement

- Common Sense Family Media Agreement - CommonSenseMedia.org/Family-Media-Agreement
- Official AAP Family Media Plan - HealthyChildren.org/MediaUsePlan
- Example Smartphone Contract - huffpost.com/entry/iphone-contract-from-your-mom_n_2372493
- Another Screen Time Contract - seangrover.com/the-best-technology-screen-time-contract-for-kids/

Family Media Toolkit - https://www.commonsensemedia.org/AAPtoolkit

Find articles/resources to help you understand and manage family media use:

- CommonSenseMedia.org
- HealthyChildren.org
- ScreenTimeNetwork.org
- ChildrenAndScreens.com/blog
- ScreenagersMovie.com/tech-talk-tuesdays
- LiveAboveTheNoise.com
- DigitalParentingCoach.com

Recommendations on age-appropriate content, movies, games and apps - CommonSenseMedia.org

A Parent's Guide to Young Children in the Digital Age -
https://screentimenetwork.org/resource/young-children-digital-age-parents-guide

Kids' Screen Myths and Facts -
https://screentimenetwork.org/resource/kids-screen-myths-and-facts

Ideas for Activities to Replace Screen Time:
- https://screentimenetwork.org/resource/help-what-can-we-do-replace-screen-time
- https://www.calgaryschild.com/family-fun/activities/1786-50-things-to-do-instead-of-screen-time

What Parents Should Know about Social Media:

https://www.commonsensemedia.org/blog/9-social-media-red-flags-parents-should-know-about

Cyberbullying, Haters, and Trolls Online:

https://www.commonsensemedia.org/cyberbullying

Time Tracking Apps for your Phone:

- Quality Time, Moment, (OFFTIME), Freedom, or Flipd.
- Note: If you have an Apple device, then the ScreenTime feature is also very helpful.

References

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5. McDaniel, B. T., & Radesky, J. (2018a). Technoference: Parent distraction by technology and associations with child behavior problems. Child Development, 89, 100-109.
6. Baumrind, D. (1991). The influence of parenting style on adolescent competence and substance use. Journal of Early Adolescence, 11, 56–95.

@DrDaveSchramm