

# 7 Step Digital Cleanse *for families*

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from a teenager's perspective



Aira Agrawal

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*FROM A TEENAGER'S PERSPECTIVE*

**AIRA AGRAWAL**



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To Dad, Mom, Aladdin, Elsa  
Baba, Nanu, Maa, Nani  
and everyone else who made this possible



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## INTRODUCTION

“Times They Are A-Changin’” - Bob Dylan

When I was a kid, I used to look forward to the monthly potluck dinners my family went to with all of our Indian family friends. I loved playing games and listening to the latest gossip in the other youngsters’ lives. These events are where I learned how to play Apples to Apples, Mafia, and even Poker. I was about 5 years old when the first models of Apple’s touch iPod and iPhone were released in 2007. At this point, the epidemic of electronics had not reached its current spread and, thus, few people under 18 had these handheld devices. Slowly but steadily, however, these touchscreen wonders began popping up in every household. When I was eleven, my beloved family dinner parties turned into group gaming sessions where everyone stayed glued to their iPods!

Today, my three year old-sister is obsessed with watching Peppa Pig on YouTube; my eleven year-old brother games on his Xbox and PC and Nintendo; my parents frequently check Facebook; and my guilty pleasure consists of binging the latest teen dramas. Similar to the average American household, my family uses our fair share of screens. But, when your brother is glued to his computer screen and your sister will only eat while watching videos, electronic devices become more than a simple past time.

For the past three years, debates over my brother’s screen usage have plagued my family. My brother—let’s call him Aladdin based

on his favorite Disney prince—got his first Xbox when he was eight years old. Then he received a PC system, a laptop, and an iPhone. It may seem like my parents were overly generous, but it's easy to cave when all of your son's friends had the same devices a year ago.

Technology is an integral part of our lives; it is how we communicate with friends, relieve stress, research new ideas and entertain ourselves. Since these devices are not going away anytime soon, my family and I realized *we* needed to change.

### *Many Parents Are Concerned*

My parents struggled to find a solution to track my brother's device usage and make sure he was not using inappropriate platforms. After searching high and low, it seemed they found the solution: Norton Family, a software that allows the controller to monitor and regulate others' device usage. With this discovery, my parents were able to limit Aladdin's Xbox usage to 1 hour on weekdays and 2 hours on weekends. However, the consistent weekend argument turned into my brother begging for more hours of video games and my parents attempting to decline.

On the other hand, my three year-old sister—let's call her Elsa based on her favorite Disney princess—learned about YouTube while looking for Bollywood songs to dance too and can now navigate the site like the back of her hand. If Elsa sees me playing Candy Crush on my phone, she is enthralled and will nag for a turn. She even loves Indian soap operas and can recite the name of every character better than my mom or I.

I am also challenged with my own screen time: frequently distracted by the shiny applications on my phone and the hottest movie on Netflix. There are times where I have sat down to study for my Biology test the next day, and have instead gotten lost in Instagram's endless "Explore" page; or, when I vowed to write a chapter for this book, and instead watched a whole two-hour movie. Oops!

## *But Screens Aren't The Enemy!*

Yes, many people abuse their screens and develop unhealthy habits, but there are also so many amazing uses for these devices. Have you ever gotten lost in NYC? Or had a deep craving for homemade chocolate cake with ganache? Or wanted to fact check someone in the midst of a heated debate? I have, and Google Maps, YouTube, and the Internet were my saviors. I believe that screens are more good than bad. Despite the downfalls, electronic devices offer infinite resources at the touch of your fingertip—literally!

Aladdin loves to play “shooting games,” especially Fortnite and Legend of Zelda, on his PC. He also likes to watch recordings, or streams, of other gamers playing these games on YouTube. Since I do not see the appeal of these activities, I sat down and had a mini Q&A session with him to understand all of the things I do not know about the gaming world. His interest in gaming started in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade when his older friends talked about how much fun video games were. Now, playing video games has become a way for my brother to relieve stress and have fun with friends.

A big component of screens is social pressure. Seeing all of your friends with shiny new toys will make anyone jealous. However, new social media platforms have also transformed the way millennials communicate. You can stay in contact with acquaintances as well as meet new people from across the world. Screens have now become an integral component in getting updates and staying connected in the era of technology.

## *There is Hope!*

Today, my family life cannot be more different than it was just a year ago. A majority of this improvement has come from changing the way my parents handled arguments about screen time. Before my parents started working on our family's screen time, a lot of fights between Aladdin and my parents would result in him

storming off to his room and slamming the door. Now, there are more peaceful conversations negotiating the terms of my brother's screen time. Similarly, although my baby sister still throws the occasional tantrum, my parents have started limiting her YouTube to fifteen minutes per day and only allow her to watch TV during family movie times. Elsa understands this daily rule now, and does not ask for more screen time after her fifteen minutes. My parents have finally learned the tricks that are successful in reducing our family's screen time and as a family, we're *all* much happier.

### *Finally, A Solution*

This book shows you how many of the current ideas addressing our obsession with screens are misguided and how my family was *actually* able to make changes. Many parenting resources have published their opinion on screens. However, their advice tends to be highly unreasonable, not only for kids, but also for parents to enforce. These solutions, such as checking your child's search history or never giving them a device in the first place, strip away your child's sense of independence. They can also lead to kids sneaking around instead of trying to create a healthy relationships with their devices. I am a high school senior, but until you finish this book, I am your best friend as well as your child's advocate! Parents and adults have given their feedback on this issue, yet there is still a wide gap in actually solving the problem. Maybe a teenager can provide a little more insight into the inner workings of our modern social world and help you become more confident in addressing your family's screen time!

In the chapters that follow, you will learn about why your kids are fascinated with their screens as well as real practical solutions you can implement in your household within a few weeks' time. You will also learn how your behavior sets the example for your children, so changing *everyone's* screen habits will lead to a calmer family life!

I will be honest: even after following the steps outlined in this book, screens have continued to take up a chunk of my family's day. However, cutting out those little times throughout the day where we picked up our phone for no reason was extraordinary. Of course screens continue to be a problem every now and then, but avoiding daily arguments about my brother's gaming time or my Netflix binges is a really good feeling. This book is not meant to cut out electronics from your or your children's lives. Instead, it will help your family form a healthier relationship with screens and reduce the unnecessary times you use your devices.

I know you want the best for your children, that's why you picked up this book! With the following steps, you will understand the key component to cutting down on your children's screen time: communication. At first, you may worry that communication will be difficult or will not work on the first try, but stay optimistic about the possibility of a healthier relationship with screens for your family. You are the captain of your family's ship and this book will guide you to the answers you have been seeking! A healthier relationship with not only your devices, but more importantly *each other*, is on the horizon. Follow these 7 steps and your family will be on the way to greater peace, harmony and happiness together.



# STEP 1

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## LEARNING THE SCIENCE

I want to start by saying: you have to remember that screens are not all bad. There are many benefits to electronics when used in a safe and healthy manner. Before you can implement the remaining 6 Steps in your household, your family needs to learn why it is important to develop healthier screen habits. The process of reducing your children's screen time may be difficult, but playing "technology police" is not going to help in any way. This step is all about learning some of the reasons your family rightly loves their screens, as well as reasons to change their screen usage. Understanding the big picture will help you and your family get motivated to follow through on the rules you will create in the steps that follow.

### *What Are the Benefits of Screens?*

Screens are all around us, so we have to acknowledge the positives of using such devices. The purpose of technology is to improve your quality of life by providing infinite resources at the touch of a button. Different people use their screens in numerous ways. Screens allow you to:

- Communicate with multiple people through group chats
- Entertain yourself with funny cat videos

- Facetime friends and family across the world
- Experiment with different recipes for new cuisines
- Find an answer to your silliest questions
- Record memories through photos and videos

Although this list shows how much you can do with your technology, you may remember that this chapter is supposed to be about science. So, does science show that screens can be good? The answer is yes!

A 2014 study led by Isabela Granic focused on the benefits rather than the negatives of playing video games.<sup>1</sup> Video games are interactive and allow for users to engage with the system they are using. The study found that playing video games positively impacted players' cognitive skills such as spatial navigation, problem-solving skills, and creativity. Video games also led users to develop social skills through interactions with fellow players. Although this study was only performed in video game users, it shows that science supports screens, so long as they are used in a healthy way!

### *What Are the Potential Problems With Screens?*

There are numerous physical, emotional, and mental problems associated with spending too much time on screens. These are some of the biggest reasons to be motivated to change your screen habits.

I think one of the biggest problems American culture will face in the coming decades is younger generations becoming heavily dependent on screens, whether for social interactions or academic purposes. For example, one of the biggest changes my generation has seen is the integration of calculators into math classes. This technology allows for us to solve complex equations and graph functions that could not be drawn by hand, but it also causes

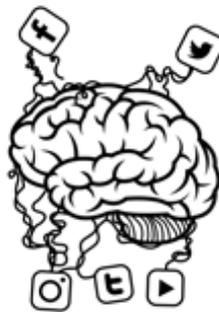
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<sup>1</sup> Isabela Granic, Adam Lobel, and Rutger C. M. E. Engels, "The Benefits of Playing Video Games," *American Psychologist*, January 2014, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24295515>.

self-doubt in simpler math processes. I always find myself checking what  $6 \times 8$  is just to double check my answer. Whenever I use a calculator, I feel like I lose confidence in my math abilities and start relying on the calculator to give me the right answer. Although this is only one example of how electronics have started to invade every part of our lives, it makes me worried about what will happen when even more advanced technology—like holograms or foldable smartphones—are introduced to society.

### *FOMO, “Addiction,” and Obsession*

When you play an exciting game or watch an entertaining video, dopamine (the feel good neurotransmitter involved in addiction habits) is released in the brain’s frontal cortex. Video games have been shown to raise dopamine levels as much as cocaine does. Many gaming companies actually target this factor and tweak their products to stimulate increased level of dopamine release in users.<sup>2</sup> Many psychologists question whether we are truly ‘addicted,’ but the fact remains many of us certainly have problems with our technology use!




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<sup>2</sup> Adam Alter, “Why We Can’t Look Away from Our Screens,” interview by Claudia Dreifus, *The New York Times*, last modified March 6, 2017, accessed August 30, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/06/science/technology-addiction-irresistible-by-adam-alter.html>.

I prefer to say: “we are obsessed.” Like drugs, screens become more attractive as usage increases. However, our love for screens is about more than wanting a dose of dopamine and increasing our pleasure. Dr. Larry Rosen, professor of Psychology at California State University and one of the leading experts in the “Psychology of Technology,” thinks that our need to check our screens stems from obsession or compulsion—both anxiety-driven issues.<sup>3</sup> This relates to FOMO, or the fear of missing out. We are anxious that being away from our phones and not checking our notifications will result in us missing out on something. This becomes an endless feedback loop in which the more we use our phone to look at updates, the more dependent we become on using these devices to connect us to reality and the outside world.

### *What Are The Top Reasons to Reduce Screen Use?*

Before you start cutting down on your family’s screen time, it is important to keep in mind *why* you are doing it. This way, you are motivated to keep going and keep your family on track. Below are just a few research-based reasons you and your kids may want to reduce your screen time:

1. **Less developed emotional and social interactions.** When kids are sitting inside playing on their phone or Xbox, they are losing time to have face-to-face interactions. Many young adults are making the decision to stay home and watch Netflix alone instead of getting out of the house and hanging out with friends. It’s almost like phones are replacing friends. While there can be some social benefits from interacting on video games, as discussed above, there

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<sup>3</sup> Larry D. Rosen, “Our Social Media Obsession,” *Psychology Today*, last modified July 18, 2014, accessed September 20, 2018, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/rewired-the-psychology-technology/201407/our-social-media-obsession>.

are negative consequences as well. As humans, we use more than just our words to communicate. Eye contact, facial expressions, and tone of voice give us information about a person's thoughts and feelings outside of the words they are saying. It is primarily during our childhood and teen years that we learn how to interpret these cues through our interactions with others. One interesting study by Yalda Uhls and her colleagues in 2014 found that spending just 5 days at a nature camp socializing away from technology resulted in kids having an easier time understanding other people's emotions.<sup>4</sup> If kids spend too much time on their screens, they may be missing out on important skills that will help not just relationships with family and friends, but also future work and educational opportunities.

2. **Obesity.** Children who are glued to their screens spend much less time going outside and playing than their parents' generation did when they were kids. This sedentary lifestyle with low amounts of exercise is often associated with many health problems, including obesity. Exercise also lowers stress, so when a neighborhood baseball game is replaced with the XBOX, kids are not getting the stress relief their bodies need. To make matters worse, when we are under stress, we're way more likely to reach for sugary, salty and fried foods! Some scientists even think that spending time in nature is beneficial for our brains and creativity. As Leya McCurdy and her associates wrote in 2010, having fun through "unstructured" free play allows kids to develop

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<sup>4</sup> Yalda T. Uhls et al., "Five Days at Outdoor Education Camp without Screens Improves Preeteen Skills with Nonverbal Emotion Cues," *Computers in Human Behaviour* 39 (October 2014), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563214003227?via%3Dihub>.

many social and problem-solving skills like sharing, negotiating and resolving conflicts.<sup>5</sup>

3. **Sleep problems.** To light up their LED displays, our screens emit wavelengths in the blue light range. This releases the same waking neurotransmitters in our brain that the morning sky does and suppresses the release of melatonin—the hormone that regulates sleep.<sup>6</sup> One study showed that children who kept small screens, such as smartphones, on and in their bedroom while sleeping caused insufficient rest.<sup>7</sup> Thus, more screen time—especially closer to bedtime—correlates with shorter sleep time and poorer quality of sleep.<sup>8</sup>
4. **Aches and Pains.** Craning your neck, slouching in your seat, and straining your wrists are just a few of the physical problems you may experience while using screens. Devices—especially smartphones and laptops—are usually positioned at lower heights and require neck and head flexion. The effect of screens on your posture will depend on which devices you use and if you use them without the correct support.

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<sup>5</sup> Ruth Ann Atchley, David L. Strayer, and Paul Atchley, “Creativity in the Wild: Improving Creative Reasoning through Immersion in Natural Settings,” *PLoS ONE*, December 12, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0051474>.

<sup>6</sup> Larry D. Rosen, “Go the F\*\*k to Sleep [Without Your Technology],” *Psychology Today*, last modified January 1, 2015, accessed September 20, 2018, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/rewired-the-psychology-technology/201501/go-the-fk-sleep-without-your-technology>.

<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Falbe et al., “Sleep Duration, Restfulness, and Screens in the Sleep Environment,” *Pediatrics* 135, no. 2 (February 2015), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4306800/>.

<sup>8</sup> Monique K. LeBourgeois et al., “Digital Media and Sleep in Childhood and Adolescence,” *Pediatrics*, November 13, 2017, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5658795/>.

5. **Vision Problems.** You may have heard the rumor that screen time affects your 20/20 vision. Although screen time is not directly associated with eye power, literature suggests screens may affect aggravate eyes. A study in 2017 compared the eyestrain in students who used an e-reader to those who read in print. Results showed that screens cause increased levels of eye irritation and eyestrain.<sup>9</sup>

### *Conclusion*

This chapter is to make your family more aware of the reasons you enjoy your screens, but also the reasons you should spend less time on screens. Helping your kids stay away from screens may not be effective if they do not understand *why* they should stay away. Thus, the first step to reducing your children's device usage is by acknowledging the great reasons they enjoy their devices, while also teaching them the issues with too much screen time. The aim is to give your children some motivation to be interested in managing screen time on their own.

Now that you and your children know both the positives and negatives of screens, keep reading to learn about your role in your children's relationship with screens!

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<sup>9</sup> Marlon M. Maduococ et al., "Visual Consequences of Electronic Reader Use: A Pilot Study," *International Ophthalmology* 37, no. 2 (April 2017), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5929099/>.

## STEP 2

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### MONKEY SEE, MONKEY DO

#### *Why YOU Need to Change YOUR Screen Time Too*

It doesn't matter if you *want* to change your screen use, you *have* to if you want to see any change in your kids. Throughout this book, you will notice that I use phrases like "your family will," or "your family should." This is not because I needed another phrase for children or kids! If you want your kids to stop being on their electronics all day, you need to change your own habits first. Kids learn by example. I know parents constantly preach that older siblings have to be the role model for their younger siblings, but parents are even bigger role models for them. If your child sees you using your screen, they are going to assume that it is ok for them to use theirs. This means that you have to find ways to not only reduce your children's screen time, but yours as well. The steps outlined in this book should be followed by every member of your household, including the adults!

#### *Why "Do As I Say, Not As I Do" Doesn't Work!*

If there's one idea kids *really* understand, it's whether or not something is "fair." And we don't like when things aren't fair! If your child sees you using your phone, he or she will feel jealous.

Even if you have really important work to do, your kids won't see the difference between you checking your email and them checking their social media. They'll just see that the rules are different, and that's not fair!

Besides, phones are a bit contagious, especially for younger kids who lack impulse control. Impulse control is when you feel the urge to do something, but your brain steps in and tells you whether or not it's actually a good idea to do it.<sup>10</sup> Young children lack this skill, as it must develop over time, which is why you might find your child eating an entire bag of Halloween candy until they get sick! Most adults, on the other hand, only eat a few pieces because they understand that they won't feel so good afterwards.

I remember one time where I was doing arts and crafts with Elsa and pulled out my phone for the first time in an hour. I had just wanted to check the time and any texts, but as soon as my sister saw the phone, she wanted to watch Peppa Pig. This example shows the temptation one feels when seeing another person on their devices. Transforming your effort to form healthier relationships with screens into a collective family one will help everyone stay on track and provide an example for your children.

### *Your Kids Feel the Same Way*

I know that not checking your email 24/7 can be stressful and feel like an impossible task, but that's the same way kids feel when they are not able to check their social media. It is likely that many of the emotions you go through while reducing your screen usage are the same ones your children will feel while giving their electronics up. This is why you have to be patient with yourself and your children. Screens have become a part of everyone in your family's life and cutting down will take time.

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel Ploskin, "What Are Impulse Control Disorders?," PsychCentral, last modified July 17, 2016, accessed September 28, 2018, <https://psychcentral.com/lib/what-are-impulse-control-disorders/>.



Talking about your feelings and how frustrating it can feel might help you relate to your kids as well. Similar to when Aladdin complains that he is bored when he is not playing video games, my parents have admitted that they watch TV when they have nothing else to do. If your children understand you are both going through the same thing, but that ultimately you will all be happier and healthier in the end, they may be more motivated to put down their screens. You are both on the same journey together!

### *You'll Feel Better Too!*

As I was the conductor of the experiment of reducing my family's screen time, my parents *did* have someone who was holding them responsible and reminding them to stay off of their screens. But that doesn't mean it was easy for them! I remember pointing out to my mom that she was on her phone and her saying that it was easier to do research and get work done on her phone rather than on her bigger laptop. When I did the same thing to my dad, he showed me all of the emails he was sending and calls he had to make. I understood these reasons, but it made me feel like the rules were unfair and that I should check my notifications too.

When my parents started spending less time on their devices, it made it easier for my brother and me to stay off of ours. Nobody was on their screens and tempting the others to hop on theirs.

When I asked my parents, they told me about the differences they saw after putting down their phones as well as the hardships with changing their screen habits. At first, they felt like they had nothing

to do when they couldn't check the news or their Facebook. However, with this they also realized that they had so much extra time on their hands and were forced to think about what else they could do besides being on the phone. My mom found that she was able to sleep earlier because she was not being woken up after spending time on her phone while lying in bed. This also meant feeling less fatigued and lazy, and having more energy to have fun with me and my siblings.

### *Conclusion*

You are the leader on your family's voyage to spending less time with screens. Only with your guidance will your kids understand how to cut down on their time with electronics. Now that you know you are the captain of your family's journey to reducing your screen time, let's talk about some of the specific rules you can implement to get started on the right path!

## STEP 3

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### ASK THE QUESTION 'WHY'

#### *Why Ask Why?*

If you are a parent who worries about what their child is doing online and would like to be a little more involved in their social media presence, this chapter is for you. I understand that some parents feel uncomfortable letting their children roam free on the internet. There are many violent and unfriendly things out there. At the same time, your kids are only using certain platforms because they are watching their friends. Asking your child 'why' they want to use their device does two things. First, it lets you know how your child is using their screens. Second, it makes your child reconsider if they actually need their device or are just goofing off.

The process of asking and telling 'why' is important if you are considering giving your child a little more independence with their screens. From a parent's perspective, asking your child 'why' they want to use their device helps you know what they intend to do with the screen from their perspective. From these conversations, you can learn how important their screen time is for them, what they think is so important, and help them feel that their opinion matters. Then your family can create a plan that works for your specific needs and preferences, as every family's challenges are unique.

### *First Ask Yourself, 'Why?'*

Remember “monkey see, monkey do?” It applies here too!

A good place to start is to ask *yourself* why you use your devices. Do you check your email constantly? Or look up the latest news updates? Or peek in on your Facebook friends? Or are you anxious, bored or avoiding something important? Becoming mindful of the things you are doing with your electronic devices is really important. Realizing *why* you use your phone obsessively can also help you understand *what* to cut out.

For example, several of my friends have gone on “social media cleanses” by deleting social media apps from their phone. They realized that a lot of their time was being spent on these apps and getting in the way of their work. By deleting the apps from their phone, they were not able to tap on an icon and have entertainment at their fingers anymore. A lot of them started spending less time on their phones because they had nothing to do on them. I know they said that it was liberating to procrastinate less, but at the same time, it was unsettling. Not being able to see what your friends are posting about is quite unnerving and is the reason none of my friends continued on the cleanse for more than a month at a time. This example shows why it is important to ask yourself why. It is important to my friends to keep up with one another, so they need a solution that will allow them to stay in touch without allowing phones to dominate their lives. The bottom line is that you may not be able to figure out what parts of your screen time to reduce if you do not know why you use electronics in the first place.

Sharing your own ‘why’s’ can help your child see that you struggle too. That means if they are having issues with your family’s changes, they will know they are not alone. You are all in this together as a family, working to create happier and healthier relationships with technology *and* each other. If you have conversations about positives and negatives about using phones, and share your own reasons ‘why’

you use yours, you will help your child evaluate why they are using their screens.

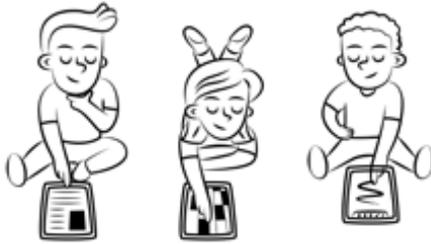
### *From Your Child's Perspective*

When parents worry about their children, sometimes they become overly controlling. Their worries are valid but the way parents approach their kids can cause more problems unintentionally. From the child's perspective, this is very uncomfortable and might even make them rebel—the opposite of what parents want! The process of asking and telling 'why' is significant because of the communication it creates between you and your child. Instead of demanding to see their search history or micromanage every video game they play, this is a way you can give your children a little independence with their screens while still being aware of how they are interacting with the internet and technology. Being more of a friend and less of a prison warden will make everyone feel better, and will make it easier for your child to follow along with your family's plan.

It is likely that your child is going to tell you what they want to do in a very convincing manner. It is almost like your child is marketing the concept of how they are going to use their device and you need to decide if you are going to accept the offer they make. This will help your child feel as though they are important and that their feelings matter. Since their opinions are being considered, it is also much more likely they will be on board with the plan. Nobody likes following rules that are based on "because I said so."

This skill—asking 'why' I am doing what I am doing—is important to help kids develop self-awareness. This can help them identify if they are "going with the crowd" and doing certain activities on their screens just because it is popular or if they are actually interested in it. This could be a good time for your child to ask themselves, "What do I really need?" Maybe they need some time to goof off; or maybe they are bored alone and

making plans with a friend would actually fill that need better than scrolling through social media. Introducing mindfulness as a skill with their screens could also plant the seed for your children to start becoming aware of their wants and needs in other parts of their day.



### *Common ‘Why’s’*

There are two types of ‘why’s’. First is the specific *activity* they are going to do using their device. For example, they may look something up on Google, play Fortnite, text a friend, or watch a movie on Netflix. This is where you learn the things your child is actually doing on their screens.

However, the second type of ‘why’ is a little bit more complicated. It involves the *purpose* of their usage. This could include to do schoolwork, to talk to a friend, or to check social media. Yet, it could also be because they are tired or bored, and in need of entertainment. These are valid reasons someone would want to use their device. Everyone needs a break and we have become accustomed to spending our free time on our screens. Although it is ok to use our screens as a break, I would suggest finding other things your kids enjoy doing if they are bored. Look at the options discussed in the “Step 6: Alternatives” chapter for some ideas.

## *Building Trust and Honesty*

You set the example for your child, so when you share your ‘why’s’—even if they are not positive—you set the example of being honest. When you tell your child, “Yesterday I noticed that I watched TV when I was stressed about my work; but looking back, a walk would have been a better choice to clear my mind,” they see that just because you make the rules does not mean you are perfect. That means they do not have to be perfect, either.

For this step, your child should be old enough. I think eight or nine years old is a good age to stop constantly watching over your children’s shoulder at their screens. Various resources and experts recommend purchasing a smartphone or tablet between the ages 11 and 13. Exactly when a parent decides to give their child his or her own device will vary based on the need that the device is filling and the parent’s preferences. However, it is also reasonable to start letting your child use electronics on their own before they get their own screen.

Second, asking and telling ‘why’ only works if your child is being honest with you. Let’s be real though, there is a 99.9% chance that there is going to be a time when your child lies to you about what they are using their device for.

One possibility is that they just wanted a break but didn’t feel comfortable telling you. I usually never lie to my parents, but there have been a few times where I told them I was using my laptop to do homework but was actually watching a TV show. It’s not because I was doing anything “bad” or against the rules; I didn’t even think that there would be consequences for using my screen when I wasn’t supposed to. I just didn’t want to disappoint my parents and have them think that my priorities were out of order. This might have been an irrational reason to lie, but sometimes that’s what happens.

If you find yourself and your child in this situation, you may want to sit down and have a conversation. Explain that it is ok to deviate sometimes, but that it should not be a reoccurring event.

When your child feels it is okay to mess up, they will feel more comfortable being honest rather than hiding because they are worried about punishment. Then you can try to problem solve together, and what would have been a big source of fear and worry can become a wonderful opportunity to strengthen your relationship.

However, there is still the possibility that they lie to you about what they are doing on their device. I imagine that this will happen less frequently than sneaking their phone from you, but this is a bigger deal. You want to ensure the safety of your child and have rules for what they should be exposed to on the internet based on their age. In this case, you should sit down with them and explain the possible alternatives. For example, you could block certain websites from being used in your household (this is discussed in the parental controls section in Tips and Tricks). You could also propose that your child has to be in the same room as you when using their device so that you can check in on what they are doing.

### *Conclusion*

Remember, one of the goals of reducing screen time is to improve the time you have together as a family. Having the ‘why’ conversation increases the quality family time many parents are seeking! You help strengthen their own communication skills by being open about your own ‘why’ and giving your children the opportunity to share honestly in return. By approaching screen use through communication instead of control, you and your child are playing on the same team. The goal is win-win-win for everyone!

# STEP 4

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## HIDE AND CONQUER

### *Out of Sight, Out of Mind*

Like all teenagers my age, I am constantly bombarded with updates and notifications on my phone giving me insight into the lives of friends and followers. If my phone is in eyesight, I tend to tap on the screen every five minutes with the intention of quickly checking these notifications. However, I often get sucked in by the screen and ten or fifteen minutes fly by without me realizing. That means a lot more time and effort goes into beating the next level of Candy Crush than doing homework. After starting this project, I noticed how drastically my phone affected me by simply sitting next to me. Thus, I made the conscious decision to place my phone in another room any time I sat down to do some work. So far, it has worked every time.

In the modern world of social media and technology, it is very tempting to constantly check your messages and notifications and emails. It is especially tempting when your phone is like a bright neon sign flashing the words “*PICK ME UP AND USE ME UNTIL YOU LOSE TRACK OF TIME!*” Now, I don’t know about you, but I usually do what flashing signs tell me. It is challenging to put space between yourself and the device you always seem to need, but the

simplest way to defeat the addiction of screens is by putting them away.

“Out of sight, out of mind” is the perfect description for why hiding your screens is important. Turning them off or setting them on airplane mode can be useful, but it is very simple to turn your phone back on or turn off airplane mode. Putting their devices in a separate room or in the screen basket will help your kids make the conscious decision to put distractions away and focus on their homework or chores.

### *All Portable Devices Go Into The Screen Basket*

One idea to make putting screens away more efficient is by establishing a screen basket. After school, everyone’s electronic devices should go into this basket until homework and chores are completed. Screens should also go into this bin during meals and family time. Although children may resist a little and claim that they “need their phone for their homework,” the act of placing screens into the basket will help your children focus and let you know where their devices are.

Everyone in my family was a little hesitant before placing their electronics in the screen basket, myself and my parents included! Aladdin questioned the need of having a screen basket if we couldn’t use our devices until designated screen time anyway (more on this in step 5). My parents claimed they needed to keep their phones to answer messages and take calls. Although the rules are more flexible for parents, this step will work more efficiently if everyone in the family follows it. Watching you check your email may remind your child that they also wanted to check Instagram and give them an excuse to fish their device out of the screen basket. Even though I was the one instigating this plan, even I was resistant in giving up my phone because I wanted to check Snapchat. But when the phone is there, it’s all the more tempting to just check “really quick” and lose another 20 minutes scrolling.

I recommend placing the screen basket in a secluded area of a common living space. This could be a table in the corner, a bookshelf, or wherever your family normally puts things down. Personally, my family's basket is where we keep our mail in our dining room/kitchen. As long as everyone in the family knows where it is and you are able to regularly check on whose devices are in it, the location of the basket should not be a huge deal.

### *Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)*

Not being able to constantly check your notifications is the hardest part of this step. Kids, especially 9 year-olds and older, want to be updated on the happenings in the group chat or keep up with their friends' posts on Instagram and will be frustrated when this endless privilege is taken away.

Personally, it was anxiety-provoking when I had to put my phone away. While I was working, I was worried about what was going on in the technology world that my phone provides me access to. I couldn't check my messages or Snapchat when I wanted and was concerned that something important would happen without me. However, it was extremely gratifying to get work done efficiently because my phone was far away.



### *But I NEEEEEEED My Phone!*

If your children want to take their device out of the screen basket for a specific reason, you may consider giving them “sign-out” privileges. This would include writing out the times the device was not in the screen basket and why your child wanted to use it.

It is understandable that kids may want to look something up or use the device as a resource for their homework. They may even be waiting for a message from one of their friends that they would like to respond to. Even if your child just wants to take a quick break in between doing their math homework and doing their reading, it is absolutely fine to let them use their device for 5-10 minutes if the time is being strictly monitored. The rules are flexible and we are just trying to make screens less of a distraction from the other things in our lives.

### *Why Am I Doing This, Anyway?*

Not having your device on hand whenever you want can make you recognize why you keep picking it up in the first place. We tend to pick up our phones when we are bored or as a distraction from the other things we are doing, so having to find another way to entertain ourselves takes time and effort. My family as a whole definitely did not love putting their devices away. Although the process was challenging, I found that my family was spending more time in the same room instead of isolating themselves to be on their phones. Having this free space will allow your family to (re)discover some of life's more simpler activities, like playing outside, learning card games or sharing family stories.

### *Too Big for a Basket!*

Portable electronics are the biggest distractions. It's too easy to pick up your phone or open up your laptop and check Instagram or start streaming Netflix. That is why the screen basket is mainly designed to address the problem of portable devices. When it comes to bigger screens, like the TV or gaming consoles, the biggest mistake you can make is keeping these in the bedroom. Because you cannot see when or how your child is using the device, it is harder to monitor screen usage when it is not in a common area.

My family struggled with the placement of my brother's video gaming system because the only place all of the bulky hardware would fit was in his room. Although I highly recommend trying to leave screens outside of the bedroom, if there is no other option, you can implement stricter rules on video game usage. For example, set up parental controls (see Tips and Tricks) to regulate video game time. Additionally, make sure to have your child's bedroom door open while they are playing so that you can check in on what games they are playing and who they are interacting with.

### *Conclusion*

Just as you would not place a delicious chocolate cake in front of your friend on a diet, it's important to keep the temptation of your screens away! *We know* these devices are fun. Giving your screens a home is the first step to actually reducing your family's screen time. Acknowledge your own FOMO and take responsibility at the same time. You and your kids may not be super excited for the screen basket at first, but a little effort now will feel much better in the big picture.

## STEP 5

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### CREATE A STICKY SCHEDULE

#### *What is a Sticky Schedule?*

The “sticky schedule” is a simple concept: you make a schedule and stick to it. The schedule is simply a set of guidelines for how much time and under what circumstances your family can use their screens. Many parents already set daily time limits on their children’s screen usage. However, the biggest aspect they struggle with is *following through* on these strictures. Whether taping this set of rules to your fridge or making everyone sign an agreement, your whole family should be aware of the rules surrounding screens in the household. This allows for clear communication between you and your kids as well as the definition of how much of everyone’s day is getting sucked up by screens.

Remember, when your phone is just sitting right there, it is so easy to pick it up for “just a second” and lose another 15 minutes without realizing. Before implementing the screen basket and scheduling habits, I thought the recreational use of my phone, laptop, and TV took up about 2-3 hours of my time every day. However, after downloading a time-tracking app called Moment, I found that there were days that I was spending more than 4 hours on my phone. This number does not even include the time I was

watching Netflix with my family or doing work on my laptop! If I, being so interested in this topic, was so wrong about my own screen use, chances are high that you and your children are too. Having a consistent daily schedule will allow your whole family to have a better balance between their screens and “real life.”

### *Creating the Schedule: Communication is Everything!*

While implementing this step, it is important to include others’ input into the schedule. It’s not fair to simply make up rules and impose them on your children. When I approached my family about forming some parameters for our electronic usage, taking everyone’s ideas and needs into account helped us effectively draft our schedule. Reaching a reasonable compromise was necessary for my family to follow through with our rules.

Communication doesn’t happen just once, it is important to stay open to considering your children’s needs as you move through the process of implementing the schedule. For example, in exchange for reducing their screen time during weekdays, your child might prefer having more screen time during the weekends which is when they have more free time. If you do not at least discuss these types of situations with them, your children may feel that their needs are not being listened to and, thus, will be more likely to rebel.

In my family, there were several days where I found my brother gaming on his PC two hours before screen time was supposed to start. Aladdin claimed that this was the time that all of his friends were playing online and that he wanted to play with them. The compromise was that he could play for one hour after school with his friends after he had finished most of his homework. After listening to his side of the story, our family was able to come up with an effective solution and still abide by the goals of our schedule. Aladdin was still upset that he could not play for more than 1 hour or whenever he desired, but was at least more cooperative because

our parents had listened to him. Compromising made the schedule seem like less of a threat to my family and helped us integrate it into our daily activities. If your schedule is based on your children's input and correlates with normal usage, your kids will not resist the rules surrounding screen time.



### *Consistency is Key!*

Every family's schedule will look different. I would recommend blocking screen time based on when your family usually uses their devices. Although this may seem counterproductive or not radical enough to change screen habits, simply defining the periods you use your devices and cutting down by even 30 minutes will be extremely beneficial. We would much rather have you maintain a constant schedule than deprive your children of screens one day and then have them binge the next. For instance, when Aladdin does not play video games on a certain day—because we are busy or go out somewhere—he will try to use the next day to make up for the time he missed. This results in him going over his screen time limit for the day. That is why my parents try not to implement irrational rules that Aladdin will not be able to follow on a daily basis. If he misses his screen time for the day, he misses it, period. We have a daily *schedule*, not an ongoing bank of screen time he can withdraw from whenever he likes. This consistency means my

parents no longer waste energy arguing with him because he knows what is expected.

Here are some rules to consider fitting into your schedule:

1. No screens during meals
2. No screens until homework and chores are completed
3. 2 hours of screen time every night from 7:00 to 9:00 (more for weekends)
4. Turn off screens 30 minutes before bedtime
5. Leave screens outside of the bedroom before sleeping

### *Sticky Challenges*

When it came to obeying the rules, I expected the most resistance from my eleven year old brother. However, *my parents* seemed to be the ones having the hardest time following the schedule! My siblings and I had already dealt with limits on our screen time, but our parents used their devices when desired. I know that my parents do not check Snapchat or binge Netflix as often as I might, but being held accountable for their device usage was a wake-up call to the notion that parents are also obsessed with their screens. However, you are the crucial entity to shifting your family's screen habits to a healthier alternative. Remember monkey see, monkey do? This means it is your job to enforce and make the "sticky schedule" stick!

On the other hand, children under 5 years old may not understand this step. Children tend to be impatient and expect their toys to be given to them when they want to play. This is a problem we faced with my three year-old sister. Generally, Elsa's daily screen time includes fifteen minutes of Peppa Pig on YouTube and then playing with her toys while the family watches TV in the same room. I had assumed that our schedule would mean that she would watch her Peppa Pig show in the allotted time after dinner. However, there are times she watches YouTube before dinner. Changing the schedule

around in this case is not a big deal because after watching her show for ten or fifteen minutes, Elsa understands that she has finished her screen time for the day. From this example, I would like you to take away two things. First, the schedule will change and you have to be willing to go with the flow. Second, certain rules work differently for certain ages; based on your children's age, you may choose to have different guidelines for each child.

### *Conclusion*

During the first few days after implementation, my family was a bit resistant to the sticky schedule. It was hard not to pick up our phones whenever we desired. However, everyone slowly discovered that the schedule was intended to help cut out the unnecessary screen usage that takes place throughout the day. Not having our phones constantly next to us helped us get work done more efficiently and have extra family time.

## STEP 6

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### FIND ALTERNATIVES

*“But I have nothing else to do!”*

There have been several instances where I have wished that my parents would take more severe action than scolding my brother when he argued about wanting more time for his video games. Once, when I told my mom that she needs to stop being so relaxed in his punishments, she told me that Aladdin has nothing else to do in his free time so he plays video games. I think this is true for many people nowadays, not just kids: electronics have become *the* source of entertainment. When you are bored, it is easy to pick up your phone and check Snapchat or grab the remote and watch a movie.

I was talking to my friend Mallory about how we often use our phones to fill the gaps in between activities and assignments. She mentioned that after finishing two pages of her economics homework, she likes to reward herself with something other than sugar, carbs, and fat. Thus, the duty of motivation falls to her phone. As she put it, “it is hard to find something as convenient as your phone to use as a study break.”

### *Why Look for Alternatives?*

Although everyone may not need a “study” break, we all certainly need breaks. Yet, we always seem to gravitate towards our phones and TVs and laptops when we want to escape from stress. But, instead of staring at our screens, what are the other ways that we can spend our free time?

Alternatives are the ways that we can fill up our free time without including screens. However, everyone will have different ways they want to spend this down time. I think phones are such useful tools—and entertainment devices—because they let you do so many things. Even if everyone in a room was on their phone, it is likely that they would all be doing different things. Someone could be reading a book, checking their Instagram feed, playing Angry Birds, or texting their friend who lives in another country. One device lets you do all of these things, and that is why your phone always seems like the best option to spend your free time.

### *Try These On For Size*

Everyone has different preferences which means everyone is going to want to spend their free time differently. But there are a lot of fun ways that you can fill up your time without screens. Below are a few suggestions to get your family started!

**Reading.** One of the most cliché yet important alternatives is reading. This is an activity you can do alone or in a group. You can read while sitting inside your nearest Barnes and Nobles or outside under a tree. You can take your family on a reading and feasting picnic at a park or make your own book club. You can even substitute books with audiobooks or read aloud for your children and get some bonding time. Although some kids may complain that it is too much like work, reading is the simplest alternative you can find to screens.

**Cooking and Baking.** What could be better than putting your screens away, bonding with your kids, and making good food all at the same time? Cooking is another activity that may seem dreary or simple, but kids need to learn more of it. Although teaching your kids to cook may seem like an intimidating task and extra burden, it does not have to be! You could start your kids off by simply cutting vegetables or stirring the pot—tasks they might already do. Then, dictating the steps to take and the ingredients to put in. Slowly, they can start making recipes by themselves and can cook a meal for the family. Although it may feel like another responsibility, preparing dinner once or twice a week means time away from their screens and teaches your children a new skill that will be useful in the future.

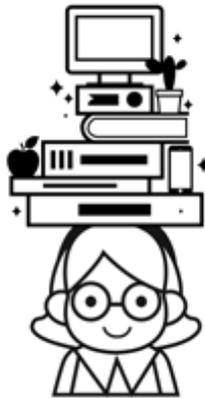
**Family Night.** Playing competitive trivia, making arts and crafts, or dishing out your favorite lyrics during karaoke are all fun examples of the activities your family can do together right in your living room. Movie marathons and family board game night are not your only options to spend time with your family. Making family night a weekly activity means that one night a week, everyone in your family is off of their screens and having fun with the family. This could help you spend more time with each other and could significantly reduce your family's screen time for the week.

**A morning, afternoon, or evening out.** This is another family activity! Do you see the trend yet? Visit a local farm and enjoy picking vegetables, fruits, or berries; then, go back home and cook with them! Volunteer at an animal shelter or soup kitchen to teach your children about giving back to the community. Paint pottery for your home at a nearby pottery studio. Explore a museum and learn about history, science, or ice cream. Plan a picnic at the park and bring some frisbees or books—or maybe even both. There are endless excursions you could make with your family so the only screen you need to bring is your camera!

**And so much more.** Bike around your neighborhood. Hike your local mountain. Fly a kite. Plant a garden. Make a scrapbook. Build a blanket and pillow fort. Have a spa day. Make a collage.

Write letters to friends and family. Solve puzzles. Give yourself a manicure or pedicure. Photograph nature. Have friends over. Turn on some music and dance like nobody is watching. Organize your room—participate in the “get rid of a 100 things” challenge. Paint using Bob Ross’ instructions.

To the parent reading this, think of your own childhood – what did you enjoy doing for fun? Chances are your family had only one TV and one telephone... And yet, you grew up just fine! What did you enjoy back in the “good old days” that you could share with your children today? What activities did you wish you could try back then but for one reason or another, couldn’t? Perhaps consider trying those fun activities with your kids today. Whether it becomes a family favorite, or just a one-time deal, playing around with your family’s leisure time can be enjoyable and make you forget about your devices altogether!



### *Trial and Error*

Some alternatives will work for your kids, and others will not. Remember how we discussed communication in the last chapter? This is why it is important to keep talking with your kids about their wants and needs. Your children might enjoy going out and doing

outdoor activities, or they might find that they are getting more tired and would prefer spending a little more time indoors. Everyone has different needs and preferences. Trying out different activities will help you figure out what works for your family.

A few months ago, Elsa started saying that she would not eat her dinner unless she was watching a video. My parents were not happy with this situation and decided to compromise by reading her books or telling her stories. Even today, this trick works and Elsa eats all of her food with little to no complaint. However, telling stories does require some effort from parents when they have to do it every night.

One night, I suggested using an audiobook to entertain Elsa while she was eating. My mom was overjoyed that she wouldn't have to keep talking and could simply feed my sister while the audiobook was playing. Yet, my solution failed. With other people talking, the audiobook was difficult for Elsa to hear. I also think my sister missed the excitement of correcting my parents' stories to her liking; often, she would name characters or pick what colors animals and objects were. But, "it's better to have tried and failed than to have never tried at all!" Trying to replace YouTube videos with storytelling and audiobooks was a fun experiment for my family. Even though it didn't work out, we still learned that audiobooks are a potential option for entertainment that does not involve staring at a screen.

### *New Family Fun Time*

Recently, my family has started doing more activities together. For example, my parents took Elsa vegetable picking. This was a new experience for her and she had an absolute blast. Even though it was only for an hour, it was time that they spent having fun without thinking about their screens. My family also went to a local fair during the weekend. The only times I picked up my phone during this trip was to take one picture and to call my dad when I lost him. Once every other week, my family will go out to eat dessert together. Although we often become busy finishing our ice cream and don't

talk, it is nice to spend some of my free time with my family and consume a little sugar.

### *Conclusion*

Phones and video games are amazing, but human beings evolved thousands of years before they were invented. That means we are more than capable of entertaining ourselves in many, many ways. Who knows? Having free space away from your devices may even help you or your family discover a new hobby or passion you would not have otherwise!

# STEP 7

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## REDUCE, DO NOT DOMINATE

### *Why Reduce?*

This chapter is targeted towards parents of preteens and young teenagers. Coming from the biased perspective of a teenager, parents tend to micromanage their children. It's called helicopter parenting. I know that you just want the best for your child, but one of the biggest mistakes you can make while trying to reduce your child's screen time is get rid of their device all together. There are plenty of sources that say taking away electronics cold-turkey is "the best way" for parents to get their children off of screens. Cutting off your children from all screens is definitely not the way to go. Electronic devices are this generation's toys. You can't just take a toy away from a kid without having a legitimate reason. Yes, the rebellious outbursts may die down after a week of no screens, but when your child sees other kids or you on your phone, all they're going to feel is jealous. As discussed in Step 2, children tend to learn from their surroundings. Everyone is on their screens nowadays, so it makes sense if your kids want to do the same thing.

## *The Problem With “Cold Turkey”*

When I first started looking for advice to help my parents manage my brother’s screen time, I watched several YouTube videos and read numerous articles about how to reduce kids’ screen time. During this research, a parenting platform said to never give your children their own devices in the first place while another mentioned cutting off kids’ devices “cold turkey.” This meant taking away their device permanently. After reading these recommendations on sites where many parents look to get advice from other parents, I was taken aback. First of all, what do parents do if their child already has their own electronics? Second, what are parents supposed to do if their children have technology for a certain purpose, such as calling or texting? Third, how are you supposed to deal with the predictable tantrum that will ensue?

The “cold turkey” approach can be very appealing to parents. When your child is not listening and misusing their screen privileges, taking away their screen seems like the natural solution. This is ok as long as it used in moderation.

I think going “cold turkey” and taking away your child’s screen is not a permanent solution. In the short-run, after a few days, your child may become less infuriated and develop a calmer persona. Yet, this approach is a bit extreme and increases the likelihood your child will lie or sneak behind your back. You strip away a level of communication between you and your child as well as a bit of their independence. I have read that this should be considered an ok practice because parents are not supposed to be their kid’s best friend and should be mainly concerned with their well-being. Although there may be some health benefits to reducing screen time, taking away a child’s device permanently without a legitimate reason is not reasonable.

## *We Tried It!*

There have been several times where my parents have been forced to cut off my brother from his screens. Once, Aladdin got very upset that he could not have more time added to his 2 hour gaming limit for the day. His tantrum included screaming, unplugging our TV, and hiding my mom's phone. After this outburst, my parents decided that he could not use any of his devices for the next 10 days. This meant no phone, laptop, gaming device, or TV. For the next two or three days, nobody else was able to watch TV because Aladdin would always come inside the room and watch with us. I believe he also stole some of our phones again. By the end of the 10 days, my brother's behavior was better, but it was unfortunate that nobody else was able to use their devices around him. From this example, you can see that if you are truly committed to taking away your child's screens, you have to be willing to give up your screens as well.

### *The Reward and Punishment Rabbit Hole*

Now, there is a difference between cutting off your child permanently and cutting them off for a certain period of time. There are going to be many instances when your child breaks a rule. For example, they could go over their daily time limit or put their screen above other responsibilities. When situations like this take place, firmly remind them that the device should be in the screen basket and take it away. You may even decide to take their screen away for the rest of the day.

However, try not to fall down the reward and punishment rabbit hole. This establishes a system where you "reward" your child with more screen time for good behavior and "punish" them by taking away their screen for bad behavior. Practicing this system leads your children to believe that they can use their screens whenever they are being good and does not actually motivate them to take initiative to

change their own habits. This approach manipulates their behavior to get the outcome you want, instead of teaching your children valuable lessons about moderation and awareness.

Through this system, screen time is also placed on a pedestal and becomes more important in your household than it should be. It makes screen time into the ultimate bartering good. Your children will only do things in exchange for more screen time, and you offer more screen time in exchange for your kids doing things. This endless negotiating cycle ties back to reward and punishment and will result in you falling down the rabbit hole.

### *Be Involved Without Controlling*

Much of the “helicopter parenting” that goes on during screen time involves making sure that kids are using age-appropriate platforms. One of the main concerns parents have with technology is the safety of their children. I have several friends who were not allowed to join social media until high school or even after because their parents did not feel comfortable. There are other parents who know the passwords to my friends’ phones so that they can check the apps that they use and websites they visit. Until a few months ago, my brother was not allowed to buy any video games without my parents’ permission.

Of course, you should be cautious about younger children’s interactions with social media and the internet. However, as your children get older, you may consider giving them a little more independence. For example, if your child would like to be on social media, you can create your own account and “follow” or “friend” them. This way, you are able to see what your child posts about, who they follow, and how they use their social media.

Another possibility you may consider is keeping bedroom doors open while using screens. This way you are able to listen to and easily check up on what your child is doing on their device. For younger children, it would be useful to use screens only in common spaces

and keep them out of the bedrooms. Overall, remember that kids tend to visit websites, join social media, or play video games based on what their friends are doing and what is popular on the internet at the time.



### *Conclusion*

With this last step, I just want you to remember that cutting down on screen time is a learning process for your kids just as much as it is for you. Certainly be involved in your children's screen lives, but cut yourself and your kids a little slack while doing it! The poet Alexander Pope says, "To err is human; to forgive, divine." Neither you nor your children will be perfect in this process, and allowing everyone their "human moments" is an excellent life lesson that will benefit your entire family.

# TIPS & TRICKS

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## THE BONUS CHAPTER

The 7 steps were a general outline to establishing a healthier relationship between a parent, their kids, and screens. However, every family is different and parents want their children to have different amounts of exposure to screens. This is why the 7 steps are basic guidelines, or approaches, to cutting down on unnecessary screen time. They do not address specific time limits or parental controls. Not every method is going to work for every parent's style of parenting. This is why I think previous answers to the "kids' screen obsession" epidemic have not been effective. Either the solutions are too cut-throat and unreasonable or they are too vague and do not explain "how to" in great enough detail. This "Tips and Tricks" chapter is intended to give you, the parent, more practical information to stay on track while cutting down on your family's screen time.

First, you have to figure out how to reduce your own screen time before reducing your children's. Some of the tips and tricks in this chapter may help you find a more specific way to do this. Additionally, your children will often forget that they have a time limit while in the middle of battling in the Legend of Zelda. For this, there are ways you can install controls to limit the time your

child uses their device, as well as monitor what they use their electronics for.

There are also some online resources that may help you learn more about reducing your kids' screen time. Some of these websites are from national organizations that have developed example "Family Screen Plans" based on scientific research and statistics. Other resources are parenting platforms where parents share their experience with giving screens to their children. These are all great resources, but they do not include a younger person's perspective and tend to give advice about "rules" rather than effective communication.

### *Tips and Tricks*

- **Moment.** This is my go-to app when I want to check how much time I have spent on my phone. Moment is only available for download on iOS, yet I highly recommend it if you have an iPhone or iPad. The app lets you see the periods of time you have spent on your device throughout the day. It also tells you how many times you have picked up your phone and unlocked it. I like this feature a lot because it is surprising how many times I simply pick up my phone in a day.

The one thing that could be improved is the feature to see which apps you are spending the most time on. Moment has a complicated way of managing your settings so it can calculate how much time you spend in an app. I have still not figured out how to turn on these settings. Yet, along with its free features, Moment offers a lot of great controls when you sign up for Premium. For example, you can set up notifications to alert you when you are reaching your time limit for the day. This is an amazing app to become mindful of how much time you are spending on your own device!

- **Time Limits Setting.** Recently, Apple came out with their Time Limits option in their devices' settings. You are able to see how much time you spend on specific apps, what times you pick up your phone, and how many notifications you get per day. There are also great time limit options. You can limit the amount of time spent per day in a certain type of app—for example, social media or games. You can also schedule “downtime” which shuts down your apps during a certain time period in the day. Further, there are parenting controls! You can go into your child's device's settings and set up parental controls with a password. You can add content restrictions and time limits that your child will not be able to bypass without your passcode. When your child's time is up, their phone will not allow them in another app until your passcode is put in. This way, there is no more arguing “for one more minute.” These controls are just as useful to you as they are to your children! If you want to check Facebook for five minutes, but do not want to get too distracted, this control will only allow the screen time you had planned for. Although these settings are a bit new and only available on iOS, they hold promise for what similar platforms to Apple will offer in the future.

### *Parental Controls*

- **ScreenTime.** This was the first app my parents used to regulate my brother's screen time. They paid a monthly subscription fee to control my brother's iPhone. My parents found that the time restrictions worked pretty well for the first few weeks. However, Aladdin later used a YouTube tutorial to disable the app. First, he got onto my mom's phone and granted himself permission to access the ScreenTime app downloaded on his phone. Then, he deleted the app's software from his phone which actually controlled

the device. Finally, he deleted the ScreenTime app from his phone all together. He tried to explain this process to me in greater detail, but it was so confusing! It was astonishing to see that my 11 year-old brother was able to find a YouTube video and get rid of these controls. ScreenTime is a great app to use if your child has iOS or Android devices; however, if they are tech savvy, they may be able to hack it.

- **Norton Family.** My parents used Norton Family to control my brother's PC and Xbox. It is a reputable brand for internet protection products and had great reviews which is why my parents wanted to try it out. There were different options to managing content access and time limits. However, my parents found that it was difficult to set up and change these settings. Also, similar to ScreenTime, Aladdin figured out how to disable it. He found another YouTube video, and this time he physically wrote code in his device's software to turn off Norton Family. After Aladdin did this, my parents were not able to use Norton Family to control his PC or Xbox again. When I talked to Aladdin, he mentioned that this was the best control our parents had used because it was difficult to disable. Yet, in the end, my determined younger brother got rid of yet another parental control.
- **WiFi Settings.** Controlling devices through WiFi settings has been the most effective form of parental control for my family. WiFi routers offer different parental control apps. The quality of these apps do vary based on the brand of the router, yet they often let you manage a variety of settings. My family has NetGear which has an app called Circle. Through this app, my parents are able to control the internet access of each device that is connected to our WiFi. They can control WiFi usage time, time windows, and content accessed. However, this also means that if there is something your child wants to do on their device that does not require WiFi, they can do it without being restricted. A lot of my

brother's activities require using WiFi so this has not been too much of an issue. Yet, my brother has also managed to hack this control using yet another YouTube tutorial. On the other hand, my parents have been able to restore the controls after they have been hacked. This is not a perfect system, but after trying so many apps and controls, my parents have found changing our WiFi settings to be the most successful form of controlling Aladdin's screen time.

- **DinnerTime / TimeAway.** There are many apps for smartphones and tablets that allow parents to control their children's screen time. DinnerTime and TimeAway are two of the most popular apps and have great reviews. DinnerTime is offered on both iOS and Android, while TimeAway is only offered by Android. They are both similar to ScreenTime, but TimeAway has the most features available for free. Again, finding the right app to set parental controls for your child's screen time is based on trial and error as well as preferences.

### *Control Issues*

There are many apps and other options available to set parental controls. However, technology is developing very fast. For example, platforms change their features dramatically with every device update. Thus, the apps offering parental controls may not be effective with every update unless they are well maintained. When choosing the controls you would like to use for your family, I recommend using the ones that work for the devices your children have and the features offered by the apps. Our experience shows that a smart preteen is able to hack almost all of these controls, so it may also be a trial and error process when finding the controls that work for you.

## *Online Resources*

- **Bye Bye Screen.** Bye Bye Screen is solely dedicated to helping parents understand screens from the perspective of their children. It is a great resource to stay updated on the popular ‘why’s’ kids and teens are using their devices. We also offer our opinions on common parental concerns with screen time. It features articles about screen time from other platforms as well as an updated blog run by all teens!
- **Common Sense Media.** This website is a nonprofit organization that serves to make media and technology a healthier part of families’ lives. They have many articles addressing parents’ concerns with screen time and offer recommendations on possible activities of a child based on their age.
- **Screen Free Parenting.** This site describes the experience of a husband-wife duo with two children who are all living a screen-free life. Although this approach may not be practical for all families, there are a lot of insightful ideas on this website. For example, they have created the S. P. O. I. L. system. This is a system that outlines the 5 most important activities your child should engage with every day. They also have the 1 million screen-free activities initiative where they post 5 new screen-free activities they did with their children per week. This website is a great resource to learn about these screen-free projects and how you can implement them with your family.
- **healthychildren.org.** If you are interested in learning about the health benefits and consequences of screen time for kids, I suggest looking at this website which is in collaboration with the American Academy of Pediatrics. This resource can provide up to date statistics, results from scientific studies, and professional recommendations about your children’s interactions with screens. They also offer recommendations

to create a “Family Media Plan”. This tool can help in brainstorming other ways screens can be left out of your children’s lives. Their “Media Time Calculator” is also a good tool to get an estimate for how much screen time your children should receive based on their age and activities.

Yet, I did find a few issues with their suggestions. First, the Family Media Plan treats different age ranges very similarly. For example, many of the suggested rules for 13-18 year-olds are the same as those for 6-12 years-old. These two age ranges are quite different and children should receive more independence as they grow older. Second, the plan only accounts for children. As discussed in Step 2, developing healthier screen habits should be a family effort and certain rules should pertain to the whole household. Overall, however, I highly recommend visiting this website to see what pediatricians are saying about screens and kids.

### *Conclusion*

Congratulations, you have learned about the 7 Steps as well as the Tips and Tricks to cutting down your family’s screen time! Now, it is time to start implementing these steps in your household and effectively reduce your children’s screen time through communication.



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