

How to Set Limits on Screen Time

 childmind.org/article/screen-time-during-the-coronavirus-crisis

Tips for prioritizing kids' wellness and keeping fights to a minimum

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Setting rules around screen time is never easy, but since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, it may feel impossible. Lots of kids are used to extra screen time at this point — is it time to cut back again? How do you know how much is too much? And is there any way to get kids on board if you do need to change the rules?

There's no one right answer when it comes to managing screen time during this ongoing crisis. But our experts have some tips to help you set reasonable expectations, support your child and — most important of all — cut yourself some slack.

Start with wellness

When you're thinking about the role that screen time plays in your child's life, it can be tempting to start counting hours of TV or TikTok. But David Anderson, PhD, a *clinicalpsychologist*

at the Child Mind Institute, recommends thinking in terms of your child's overall health and how they spend their time in general.

Dr. Anderson suggests that parents use the idea of a “developmental checklist” to consider whether a child is engaged in activities important for healthy development. The exact items on this checklist will vary depending on your family's circumstances (and any COVID restrictions that might affect daily routines), but the idea is to list the activities that your child needs to spend time on in order to stay happy and healthy. Try asking yourself:

- Is my child sleeping enough and eating a somewhat balanced diet?
- Are they getting some form of exercise every day?
- Are they spending some quality time with family?
- Do they keep in touch with friends?
- Are they invested in school and keeping up with homework?

- Do they spend time on the hobbies and extracurriculars that matter to them?

If you can answer yes to most of those questions, then it's probably not a huge deal if your child watches an extra episode (or three or five) of their favorite show.

The reverse is also true. If your teenager is spending all their time alone in their room, scrolling through social media, "that could be a sign of depression — pandemic or not," says Dr. Anderson. Or if your child is spending so much time gaming that you can't get them to exercise or eat properly, that's a sign that you need to intervene. "If the worry is that your child is having too much screen time, it's not about how much time that actually is," Dr. Anderson notes. "It's about what it infringes on."

Set reasonable limits

After working through the *developmental*

checklist, you may decide that you do need to set some new limits on your kids' screen time — or get serious about limits that have fallen by the wayside. But rules don't need to be rigid or extreme to be helpful. Try these techniques to set healthy boundaries and keep conflict to a minimum:

- **Start with compassion.** Unstructured screen time is an important source of comfort and entertainment for many kids. Letting your kids know that you understand their needs is a simple way to reduce stress for everyone. "You can say to your kids, 'Look, I know you need a break. I know you need to relax,'" says Dr. Anderson. "Let them know that a certain portion of their screen time is theirs to do what they like with."
- **Offer additional screen time as a bonus.** Try using extra screen time as an incentive for good behavior. If you go this route, be sure to let your child know exactly what is necessary to earn the extra time. For example, getting ready for bed without complaining might earn them an extra ten minutes the next day. You and your child can even write down the goal together and post it somewhere prominent as a reminder.
- **Brainstorm alternatives.** "When we tell kids not to do something, we almost always need to tell them what to be doing instead," says Stephanie Lee, PsyD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute. Dr. Lee recommends developing an "activity menu" with your child that lists their preferred non-screen activities (like crafts, reading or playing with a pet). That way, when they're feeling bored or overwhelmed, they'll have easy choices at the ready.
- **Keep a schedule.** It can also be helpful to set specific times of the day or week when your kids know they'll be allowed to use their screens. For instance, maybe the 30 minutes before dinner are always open for screen time. That kind of structure helps kids know what to expect and cuts down on their requests for screens at other times. Plus, it gives you space to schedule your own tasks at a time when you know your children will be busy.

- **Model healthy screen use.** If you make a point of setting aside your own screens during set times, your children will be more likely to do the same without putting up a fight. Plus, taking breaks from tech has the added benefit of helping you limit your own media intake and giving you moments of mindfulness with your kids.
- **Emphasize connection.** “The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no screen time for kids under the age of two — except for FaceTiming with relatives,” Dr. Anderson says. “FaceTime with family may be a source of connection for you, and it may also provide a way of maintaining relationships, especially for young kids.” Setting your children up to chat with relatives can also give you a chance to relax or get other things done, which can benefit the whole family.

Stay the course

Once you set up a system, you may find that your kids push back against it. “Maybe they’ll be moody for the first few days,” Dr. Anderson says. “They’ll ask you a thousand times, they’ll get angry. That’s what’s called an extinction burst.” Dr. Anderson explains that it’s natural for children to test new boundaries to see if they’re firm, but if you can stick to your plan and tolerate their irritation for a few days, pushback will likely fade as kids settle into their new routines. As much as you can, avoid making exceptions to rules for the first week or two after you set them.

Here are some more tips for making new (or reinstated) rules stick:

- **Don’t debate.** When it comes to screen time, reasoned arguments and careful rationales aren’t likely to matter much to kids. “The reality is that parents want to place limits and kids don’t really see a reason why those limits should be there,” says Dr. Anderson. So don’t get bogged down arguing with kids about what the rule should be. Once it’s set, it’s not up for discussion.
- **Skip the guilt trip.** Kids often turn to tried-and-true arguments that tug on your heartstrings: “All my friends get to play this game as much as they want! Do you want me to be left out?” Know that your rules aren’t harming them and that they’ll let these arguments go once they see that you’re not budging.
- **Pick the right time.** Changing the rules at a time when other things are changing may make it easier for kids to accept. For example, try starting fresh the first week after a school vacation — not on a busy Wednesday.

- **Gather data and reevaluate.** To get older kids and teenagers to buy into a new screen time rule, it can be helpful to compromise based on their wishes — with the understanding that you'll start with a trial run. For example, your teenager might swear that using screens after a certain time doesn't affect their sleep, or that homework is easier with a friend on FaceTime. In cases like those, you can give their version a try and track how it goes for a couple of weeks. Do they wake up on time in the morning? Does all the homework get done? See what you learn, and then readjust as necessary. "If they can show you that these goals for their wellness can still be accomplished, even as they engage in these screens, that's great," says Dr. Anderson.

Go easy on yourself — and your kids

As with so many aspects of life during the pandemic, it's impossible for anyone to be the perfect parent right now. If more relaxed rules around screens give you time to work, exercise, or just take time for yourself, accept that that may be the best decision right now.

Dr. Anderson gives the example of wanting to limit your child's TV time, even though one more episode would give you time for a workout. If you tell your child they can't watch the episode, they're cranky *and* you don't get your workout. "In that case," he says, "you can probably be more emotionally available if you give your child that extra screen time, take care of yourself, and then come together afterward." Thinking in terms of everyone's needs and stress levels (especially your own!) can help you set realistic limits that work in practice.

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