

2020
VERSION



Family Digital Wellness Guide

What Parents Need to Know
About Media and Their Child



Boston Children's Hospital

Where the world comes for answers



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References available at <https://cmch.tv/familydigitalwellness>

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Parenting in a Changing World

Parenting is an important and challenging role in our lives—and a task that is more difficult now than ever before. Children today are growing up in a world filled with rapidly changing technology, and many parents want to understand both the advantages and disadvantages of their children using screen media. This has given rise to much advice about the effects of screen media, often offering differing, inconsistent guidance on what is best for children. Many parents feel anxious, doubtful, and even guilty about how they incorporate media and technology into their lives, and this concern has increased during the unexpected coronavirus pandemic.

Pandemic quarantines in affected countries have abruptly confined more than 90% of families to their homes. Parents must now supervise their children's remote learning while also working from home. Like it or not, entire families have been using interactive media for longer and longer and to do tasks that are often better done without technology. Now some of our "Protips" for normal times may have to change: Screen-free dinners may be replaced by sharing meals with distant family members through video chat, transforming screens that would distract from others at the table, to bringing others to the table. Structuring children's days to maintain comforting routines and scheduling clear, consistent start and

(especially) stop times allow what could be problematic behaviors, like online gaming, to become important social-emotional learning opportunities for children who cannot otherwise get together. And this is a chance for children to learn not to turn to screens as a default, but to embrace boredom as an opportunity for creativity to blossom.

Built on research from scientists around the world, this guide provides the direction you need for raising happy, healthy children, toddlers to teenagers, in today's digital environment. Focusing on fundamentals that can inform current as well as future challenges, this guide provides a brief overview of how children's media use at each stage of development is motivated by and influences their growth.

Health-related media topics are addressed in practical, concise "Protips" to help you recognize areas of concern, alleviate fears, and optimize your child's well-being. For each stage of development, The Mediatrixian answers a question that is most relevant to today's parents, such as, "When do I give my child a cell phone?" to "How do I get devices out of their bedrooms?" To help you face tough topics at home, we give you conversation starters to help you avoid conflict, talk through issues, and support your child's success.

Our parenting will never be perfect, but we can use the science and the information in this guide to keep perfecting it. Use its science-based information, advice and tips to be an authoritative, confident and guilt-free parent raising a healthy, happy and kind child.

~Michael Rich, MD, MPH

The Center on Media and Child Health

Dr. Rich is the founder and director of the Center on Media and Child Health at Boston Children's Hospital, where he is known as The Mediatrixian.



Infants & Toddlers

Ages birth to 2

What you need to know about screen media and your young child's health and well-being

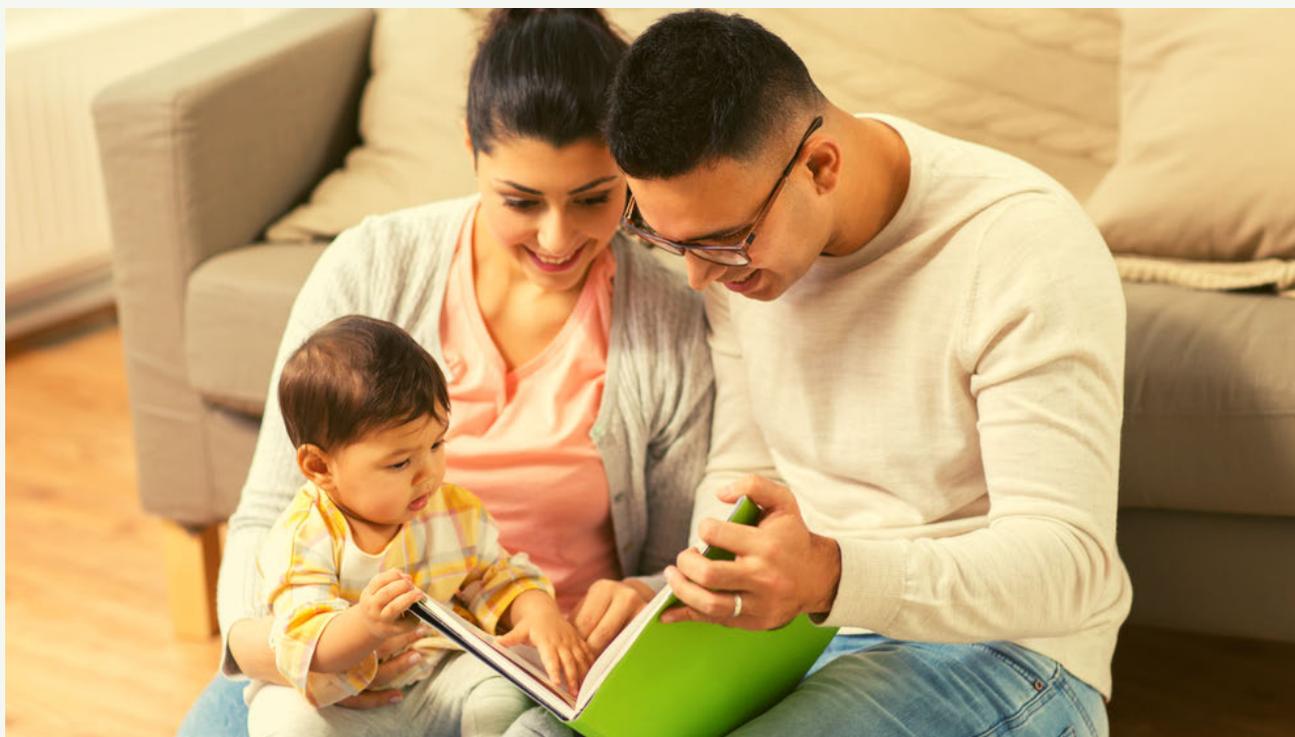
Babies develop rapidly in their first years and continually learn from the people and things around them. It is during this stage of development that children first smile, babble, toddle, take their first steps, and say their first words. With so many brain connections being formed, it is important that parents talk to their babies and provide them with love and an environment that encourages exploration and allows them to learn. While there are many programs and apps marketed for young children, very few are based in science. It is important for parents to choose research-supported media that interests and engages their child in healthy ways.



FYI: The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that children under 18 months avoid using screen media other than video-chatting. They also suggest that parents of toddlers choose educational media programming, and watch it with their child to help them understand what they're seeing.

Science Says...

...from TV to tablets, media are powerful tools, and how children use them affects their health and development



Emotional and physical development, language skills, sleep—these are just a few of the many concerns facing parents of an infant or toddler. But don't worry, we're here to help!

Use this guide to learn about the media-related health issues that are top of mind for parents today. We've included tips that are practical, easy, and based in science, to help you and your baby use media wisely and in ways that promote wellness.

Sleep

Protip: Create a quiet, device-free environment for rest, as this can help your infant or toddler get the quality sleep they need. To minimize sleep disruptions, turn off videos, loud devices, and bright screens before naps or sleep.

Science says: Daily screen viewing, such as using a tablet or smartphone, can cause your toddler to stay up later, delay when they fall asleep, and lose overall sleep time.

Screen Time

Protip: Schedule media use based on your child's internal rhythms and attention span. Use screen media with your baby or toddler, and watch them closely. You will know when their attention wanders—that's when you shift to another, non-screen activity.

Science says: Using screens can take valuable time away from infants and toddlers exploring their world in ways that support their development. Parents who use media with their baby are able to explain what is happening to their child and help them learn from the experience.

Parental Use

Protip: Set aside your cell phone and play with your child at the playground. Make sure you are fully present when supervising your child in these environments, free from media distractions.

Science says: Parents who are distracted by phones or other media while watching their child play may miss important opportunities to play and interact with their child.

Music

Protip: Play soft or soothing music for your infant or toddler. Singing nursery rhymes and lullabies is also a great way to help your child learn to figure out different sounds.

Science says: Listening to music helps promote toddlers' brain development as well as their ability to hear, recognize, and use different sounds. Make sure the music isn't too loud, as this can potentially damage their hearing.



In 2017, American children under the age of two averaged nearly an hour and a half using screen media.

Ed Tech

Protip: Rely on reputable educational organizations and parenting websites for recommendations and reviews on videos, games, and apps that are optimal for your child's age and stage.

Science says: While many videos, apps, and games are labeled as educational for infants and toddlers, few have research to support these claims. While toddlers can learn from some high quality media, babies lack the brain development to make sense of screen content.

Monitoring

Protip: Password protect your devices and familiarize yourself with the apps you show to your toddler.

Science says: Automated ads and videos can play while your child is on a device. Try to use media with your child whenever possible.

Video Chatting

Protip: Use video chat as an opportunity for your toddler to connect with family and friends.

Science says: Toddlers can learn from real-time interactive video chat with adults.

This two-way communication helps to develop and improve children's language skills more so than passive one-way interactions with the screen. When interacting with a person they know in real life, like a grandparent, toddlers can learn to focus their attention, recognizing there is a real live person on the screen. Encourage their chat partner to talk directly to your child, sing songs, or repeat movements (such as hand clapping) to get your toddler to imitate these actions.



According to a 2019 survey, 9% of children under the age of two use a mobile device daily.

Content

Protip: Although it is best not to be distracted by screens while your infant or toddler is present, watch only non-scary, family-friendly shows when they are around. They are very sensitive to your emotions and could become upset or scared with you.

Science says: Babies pick up on your emotional changes and may become upset with you, connecting that feeling with whatever is in their environment at the time. Toddlers may be frightened by storms or animals that parent do not expect them to be scared by. When you watch with your toddler, be aware of their feelings, comforting and reassuring them that they are okay. Turn off the movie or show if your baby continues to be scared or upset by it.

Reading

Protip: Read to your infant or toddler in your lap daily. Point to pictures to match them up with words, make animal sounds, and explain what they are seeing and hearing. If reading from a device, such as a tablet, avoid clickable features, as these can take away from your child's ability to follow what is happening in the story.

Science says: Reading to your child helps them develop their language skills and understanding of the world. Cuddling them while reading will help them associate reading with happiness and strengthen the bonds you are forming with your baby.

Did you know?



Your screen media use counts too!

The time parents spend on screen media (including smartphones and watching videos) can influence their child's screen time, even from an early age. Parents who use a lot of screen media themselves model heavy media use as acceptable behavior, and this sends a message to young children that this type of use is normal, which can lead to problematic use later on.



YOU can create a media use plan!

The American Academy of Pediatrics has a handy tool to help build screen media use into your young child's day. It can help the whole family balance their time on screens and other activities! Make your own Family Media Plan at:

<https://.healthychildren.org/english/media>



Ask the Mediatrician™

What parents ask most about their toddler

When and how should I introduce screens to my toddler?

Research shows that at the age of 24 months, toddlers are on the cusp of being able to learn effectively from screens, so now is a good time to think about introducing them. Here are several tips to help you get started:

Tip 1: Choose content that's designed for toddlers. Read show or app descriptions, reviews, and whenever you can, watch or play with your toddler to make sure it's right for them.

Tip 2: Match your child's attention span. When choosing screen media to share, select a game or segment of a show that lasts for only as much time as your toddler would spend with a book or toy.

Tip 3: Choose a time of day that works. Make sure that screen time works with your toddler's routine. For example, since media right before bed can disrupt sleep, save it for after nap time.

Tip 4: Treat screen time as one experience of many. Introduce it as you would any new experience. Instead of thinking of it as a special treat or a unique risk, treat screen time as a normal part of life—just another activity that may be part of your toddler's day.

Ice Breakers

When you find that you and your partner, or another of your child's caregivers, are not on the same page, here are ways to start the conversation:

If you see that:

Say this:

A grandparent is constantly on the phone while supervising your child's play.



"I noticed you seem to have a lot going on while you watch the baby play. Is there a way I can help, so that you can enjoy playing with them?"

A babysitter is putting your child in front of a tablet or TV in order to calm them down whenever they act out.



"When the baby gets upset, here are some good ways to calm them...."

Your partner watches scary movies or plays intense games while caring for your child.



"Our baby picks up on our emotions really well, let's make sure we watch things that won't upset us or the baby when we're together."



When to talk to your young child

Infants and toddlers are rapidly developing their language skills at this stage. You can help them learn new words by pointing things out and naming them. The more you talk to your child, the more language they will learn and understand.



Preschoolers

Ages 3 to 5

What you need to know about screen media and your child's health and well-being

Preschoolers are very curious about the world around them and are motivated to explore and learn through play. They are becoming more independent and interested in kids and adults outside of their immediate family. The interactions they have with their family, other people, and their environment, will contribute to shaping their personality and how they think about the world. Children this age are quickly developing language, cognitive, and social skills. Media can be a wonderful tool to help preschoolers further develop these skills, provided parents help to balance media use and set expectations that work for each child.



FYI: While there are many educational TV shows and apps that have been well-studied and do, in fact, help preschoolers learn, be mindful of "educational" marketing claims about TV shows, apps, and other media, as these claims are unregulated and frequently not supported by research.

Science Says...

...from TV to tablets, media are powerful tools, and how children use them affects their health and development



Play, setting limits, social skills—these are just a few of the many concerns facing parents of a preschooler. But don't worry, we're here to help!

Use this guide to learn about the media-related health issues that are top of mind for parents today. We've included practical, easy, and science-based tips to help your preschooler use media in ways that promote their health and development.

Motor Skills

Protip: Leave the devices behind and take your child on a walk, visit a playground, or help them ride a bike or tricycle.

Science says: While using a smartphone or tablet can help your child develop fine motor skills, such as writing, using screens usually does not provide opportunities for preschoolers to develop gross motor skills such as running, balance, and coordination.

Attention

Protip: Avoid having TV or videos on in the background while your child is playing. When your preschooler is using media, help them focus on one thing at a time and avoid getting distracted by other things on the device or around them.

Science says: Increased screen time, including background TV, has been associated with more attention problems in preschoolers and a higher risk of being diagnosed with Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) criteria.

Sleep

Protip: Create nap and nighttime routines that help prepare your child for rest. Turn off all screens at least 1 hour before bed. Read a book or tell stories before they fall asleep.

Science says: Using screens before bedtime or naptime can excite kids and keep them from falling asleep. The "blue light" that comes from TVs and other screen devices can disrupt your child's natural sleep cycle, making it harder for them to fall asleep and wake up naturally.

Eating

Protip: Turn off screens while eating meals or snacks. When possible, avoid videos, apps, and games that advertise candy, sugar-sweetened breakfast foods, and other unhealthy foods.

Science says: Using screen media during meals has been associated with poor eating habits, inability to eat without screens, and obesity. Commercials for snacks and processed foods with low nutritional value but high calories influence kids to eat in unhealthy ways.



In 2017, preschoolers between the ages of two and four spent just over two and a half hours with media per day.

Limit Setting

Protip: Set clear, consistent, and realistic expectations for your preschooler's screen media use. Build screen use into a rich and diverse menu of experience. Avoid using media as a consistent way to calm your child down or as a reward for good behavior.

Science says: Rewarding a child with screen use will make screens a treat rather than a tool. Soothing tantrums with screens will teach your child that is what they must do to receive that treat.

Play

Protip: Make time for your child to play both inside and actively outside. Let them choose how to play and join your child when you can.

Science says: Play is an important part of a preschooler's healthy development. Playing with your children, and letting them direct the play can improve their memory.

Parental Controls

Protip: Password protect devices, and limit access to only those apps you have pre-approved to prevent preschoolers from accessing inappropriate content. Turn on safe-search features, and disable ads wherever possible. Put links to your child's websites on your desktop and place all of their apps in one folder on your phone so they can easily find their favorite activities and online content.

Science says: Password-protecting devices and limiting what your preschooler has access to can help make sure that they aren't exposed to content that may frighten or confuse them. Parental controls work best when used openly and honestly. Letting your child know why there are parental controls in place can help build trust and communication with them.



Using media with young children (also known as joint engagement) can help empower parents to make responsible choices about each child's media and technology use.

Joint Engagement

Protip: Use media actively with your preschooler. Point to different objects on the screen. Ask questions about what is happening. Praise and encourage their effective interaction with media, all while cuddling your child.

Science says: Parents provide significant verbal, emotional, and physical support when they join in on their child's media use and interact with them. This mentoring helps them enjoy and learn more from their media use.

Reading

Protip: Make reading a part of your preschooler's daily routine and have them choose stories that interest them, whether by visiting a library or looking online for an ebook.

Science says: Children who like to read tend to read more, which makes them better readers. Preschoolers who read are more ready for school, with better literacy and language skills, like spelling and comprehension.

Social Skills

Protip: Choose TV programs for your child that they enjoy and that will help them learn. Watching TV shows or movies beforehand can help you determine whether they will positively affect your child's development.

Science says: Well-designed programs for preschoolers can improve their social skills, pro-social behavior, language capabilities, and critical thinking.

Did you know?



Your screen media use counts too!

The time parents spend on screen media (including using a smartphone or watching videos) can influence their child's screen time. Parents who use a lot of screen media themselves are more likely to have loose rules for their kids and be less concerned about how much they use screen media.



YOU can create a media use plan!

The American Academy of Pediatrics has a handy tool to help build screen media use into your preschooler's day. It can help the whole family balance their time on screens and other activities! Make your own Family Media Plan at:

<https://healthychildren.org/english/media>



Ask the Mediatrician™

What parents ask most about their preschooler

How can I avoid making media into a “forbidden fruit” for my kids?

Making screen time a reward for good behavior or its removal as a punishment for bad behavior can make media even more desirable for your child, who will view it as something special instead of part of our daily lives. Here is how to avoid making media a forbidden fruit:

Tip 1: Teach your child that media are tools. When you choose a media tool to use, point out the task it is helping them accomplish, whether it is helping them learn, communicate or simply entertaining them.

Tip 2: Help your child learn to self-regulate. Set media use expectations, explain why they are important, and enforce them. Scheduled media use, with clear stopping times, will help kids learn how to plan and balance media use on their own.

Tip 3: Model healthy media use for your child. Lead by example and show your child when best to use media purposefully, and when to put media away and do other things.

Tip 4: Set guidelines and expectations with your child. Review these standards regularly as your child grows, since their lives and needs, and technologies and applications, will change.

Ice Breakers

When you see something concerning, here are ways to get the conversation going:

If:

An episode that you and your child are watching on TV presents an opportunity for discussion and learning...



Say this:

“What just happened was really interesting. How did that make you feel? What would you do in that situation?”

Your child has been glued to a tablet, playing an online game for an extended amount of time...



“That game looks fun, but I know another fun game we can play outside. You can finish this level in the game and then play outside.”

Your child's bedtime is in an hour and they are in front of the TV...



“It's almost bedtime! Let's get to a good place to stop the show so we have time to brush teeth and get ready for bed. You can pick out a book for us to read before lights out.”



When to talk to your preschooler

Start conversations when you and your child are in good moods (not feeling angry or hurt) and when you're both open to listening. Be sure to say exactly what you mean, encourage your child to take turns talking and listening, and give them your full attention. Let them know that you love them and that you value what they say.



School Age

Ages 6 to 10

What you need to know about screen media and your child's health and well-being

Six- to ten-year-olds are learning how they fit into the world through school, hobbies, friends, and family. As kids this age branch out and become more independent, they begin to choose the types of media they like, including video games, devices, TV shows, and books. That said, parents play a key role in helping shape kids' choices, including what they use, watch, play, and connect with and how they do so. While it's important to encourage kids' independence and empower their decision-making, parents need to be there to help them focus on their school work, balance their activities, and monitor what they're doing online.



FYI: While most social media and online gaming services require (by law) users to be 13 or older, younger kids often break this rule by creating accounts and profiles that they use to access social tools and entertainment designed for older users.

Science Says...

...from TV to tablets, media are powerful tools, and how children use them affects their health and development



Learning, sleep, cyberbullying—these are just a few of the many concerns facing parents of a school age child. But don't worry, there are easy things you can do!

Use this guide to learn about the media-related health issues that are top of mind for parents today. We've included tips that are practical, easy, and based in science, to help your school-age child use media wisely and in ways that promote wellness.

Educational Apps

Protip: Ask your child's teachers for recommendations on websites, software, or educational apps that can support your child's learning at home.

Science says: Many kids are able to learn specific skills and topics through well-designed educational video games, apps, and other online programs that they find fun and exciting.

Homework

Protip: Have a “public” space at home, such as the kitchen table, where kids can do their school work while you are nearby to help them stay focused and on task.

Science says: Kids often “media multitask,” or use more than one device at a time, such as watching a video while doing their homework. While kids may think they're getting more done in less time, the reality is that it will take them longer to complete their homework, they will make more mistakes, and they won't retain as much of what they learn.

Engagement

Protip: Choose platforms that are created for your child's age group, and create accounts together. Log into these accounts to see how your child is doing, and talk to them about who they are connecting with, and what they like about each app or account.

Science says: Interactive media can help kids make and maintain friendships, and meet people of different races, religions, and gender identities. Talking to your child about their online interactions keeps communication open and lets your child know you are there for them.

Media-Free Meals

Protip: Make at least one meal a day screen-free—that means no phones or tablets at the table and no TV on in the background. Use this time to talk together as a family and check in on how each of you are doing.

Science says: One family sit-down meal each day is the single most important strategy to protect your family's mental health and physical nourishment. Screens distract children and adults from each other's social and emotional lives and from their body's hunger and satisfaction cues. Eating while paying attention to screens has been linked to obesity and other nutrition-related disorders.



In 2019, 53% of eleven-year-olds in the US had their own smartphone.

Mature Media

Protip: Read reviews, check ratings, and watch previews for video games and shows before you say it's ok for your child to play or watch them. Make sure you feel good about what your child will be learning from these media.

Science says: Kids who watch violent or sexual TV, or play mature video games, may be influenced by the content. This can include thinking that violence is an okay way to solve problems, substance use is fun, or that casual sex is popular and consequence-free.

Scary Media

Protip: Comfort your child if they become scared or confused by what they see online or on TV. Let them know that they'll be ok, and remind them that you're always there for them.

Science says: Scary news stories, movies, and images online can frighten kids and lead them to become overly worried about their safety and the wellbeing of others.

Cyberbullying

Protip: Look for signs that your child may be a victim of cyberbullying, such as hiding their phone when you walk by, losing interest in school, feeling sad, and withdrawing from friends and family. Ask your child about the kinds of things they see online and talk about with friends, and teach them how to act with kindness, both on and offline. Many schools have anti-bullying policies, so talking with your child's school can help.

Science say: Kids who are cyberbullied (bullied online through text, games, and apps) are at greater risk for depression, anxiety, and even suicide. Cyberbullying can lead to school and behavioral problems such as poor grades and acting out. The negative effects of being cyberbullied are more severe than traditional bullying and can last into adulthood.



Children as young as the third grade experience cyberbullying, leading to self-esteem issues and depression.

Sleep

Protip: Make and stick to a bedtime routine that includes having your child stop using all screen media at least one hour before they go to sleep.

Science says: Using screens before bed, such as playing a video game or watching a TV show, can excite kids and make it harder for them to fall asleep. The "blue light" from TVs and other screens can disrupt the body's natural sleep cycle, resulting in your child getting less sleep and struggling to wake up on time.

Advertising

Protip: Explain that the commercials your child sees are designed to get them to want to buy things. When your child asks for the candy and snacks they saw in a fun ad, talk about what they liked in the commercial and explain why those foods should only be "sometimes snacks."

Science says: Advertisers target children with ads for unhealthy foods and snacks high in fat, sugar, and calories. Teaching your child to think critically about what they see will help them understand the purpose of commercials.

Healthy Weight

Protip: Visit a park, organize a sports team, or have an indoor dance party so that your child can actively play.

Science says: Kids who spend a lot of time in front of screens have a higher risk of being overweight or obese.

Did you know?



Your screen media use counts too!

The time parents spend on screen media (including using a smartphone or watching videos) can influence their child's screen time. Parents who use a lot of screen media themselves are more likely to have inconsistent rules that get ignored by kids, which can lead to family conflicts.



YOU can create a media use plan!

The American Academy of Pediatrics has a handy tool to help build screen media use into your child's day. It can help the whole family balance their time on screens and other activities! Make your own Family Media Plan at:

<https://healthychildren.org/english/media>



Ask the Mediatrician™

What parents ask most about their school-age child

What should I do when my child won't stop asking me for a cellphone?

There isn't a magic age to give a child a phone. Instead, consider your child's level of maturity and need for a phone. When your child asks you for a phone, don't say no right away—instead, involve them in the decision. Have a conversation with them in which you:

- Ask, “What do you want to use it for, and how will it fit into your day?,” and then listen to and discuss their answer. This can help you determine whether they are ready for a phone. If they aren't quite there yet, discuss what steps they can take to show you that they can use a phone responsibly in the future.
- Address cost (phones are not cheap!) and the possibility of them saving their own money to buy or help buy a phone and pay for cell service.
- Develop with your child, explicit rules for the phone's use when you believe they need and are ready for one: what to use it for and what not to, when and where to use it, and what the consequence for misusing it should be. When children have ownership in the rules, they are more likely to adhere to them. And consider starting with a flip phone. For children, there are few non-recreational uses for most smartphone capabilities

Ice Breakers

When you see something concerning, here are ways to get the conversation going:

If you see that:

Your child is gleefully playing a video game that looks really violent to you...



"I don't really like violence, what is the game you're playing? It looks like you like it - let's talk about what is happening while you show me how to play."

Your child quickly hides their phone when they see you coming, and acts distant or seems sad....



"You seem a little upset. Why don't you take a break from the phone for a while? Let's talk about it and try to come up with a plan that will help you feel better."

Your child seems really worried after watching a news story about a hurricane destroying people's homes...



"Hurricanes look scary. I will always be here for you, even in a hurricane. Why don't we learn about them and what we can do to stay safe in one."



When to talk to your child

Start conversations when you and your child are in good moods (not feeling angry or hurt), and when each of you are open to listening to the other. Try talking in the car or at the dinner table, and give your full attention to your child. Let them know that you love them and are there for them, and that you value their point of view.



Tweens

Ages 11-13

What you need to know about screen media and your tween's health and well-being

Eleven- to thirteen-year-olds are in the initial stages of puberty; as a result, they begin to think differently about school and learning and place greater importance on their friendships. Tweens are becoming more independent while also caring more about how others see them. Your tween will begin to show preferences for different types of media, including those their friends are into. Despite these changes, however, parents must remain involved in their child's activities, know the media their tweens are using, and continue to talk about and monitor their child's online accounts and devices.



FYI: It is during this stage that children begin to develop logical thinking, reasoning, and judgment. Even though tweens are better able to make logical decisions at this stage, they are often swayed by their emotions and need parental guidance when facing choices about their media use.

Science Says...

...from TV to tablets, media are powerful tools, and how children use them affects their health and development



Sleep, social media, cyberbullying—these are just a few of the many concerns facing parents of a tween. But don't worry, there are easy things you can do!

Use this guide to learn about the media-related health issues that are top of mind for parents today. We've included tips that are practical, easy, and based in science, to help your tween use media wisely and in ways that promote wellness.

Learning

Protip: Get to know the types of online learning courses your child's school offers or that their teacher recommends as a way of supporting your tween's learning at home.

Science says: Some teachers view online learning as a way to help their tween students access information, provide new ways to learn, and increase engagement. Many tweens find online learning fun, enjoyable, and effective.

Parental Modeling

Protip: Think about your own media use and make sure you are modeling for your tween how you want them to behave when it comes to media use. Make time for conversations without device distractions, including mealtimes, and be sure to follow the house rules your family sets for media use yourself.

Science Says: Half of teens and 75% of parents feel the other is distracted when talking with each other.

Although your tween is becoming more independent and may not seem interested in your use of screen media, they are still picking up on your media use habits.

Body Image

Protip: Actively listen and show that you care about how your child is feeling about puberty and how their body is changing. Talk with them about images on social and other media as these often set unrealistic ideals, and help them understand that these images are often digitally altered or filtered so that people look more 'beautiful' than they really are.

Science says: Tweens are often exposed to a lot of information online and through other media, both true and false, about how bodies "should" look and what they can do to "improve" their appearance. Certain body types are often idolized, when in reality bodies are incredibly diverse. There are many online accounts, websites, and influencers that make youth feel inadequate by encouraging them to lose weight or build up muscle, harming both their mental and physical health.



Increased competitive gaming has been associated with lower grades and decreased prosocial behavior in tweens.

Cyberbullying

Protip: Have open, honest conversations with your tween about what they are seeing and doing online. Ask specifically about cyberbullying and if they or a friend has experienced it. Be sure your child knows that you are always there for them.

Science says: Although they fear loss of their online access, many tweens find that telling someone they are being bullied makes them feel safer and lessens the negative psychological impact of cyberbullying.

Independence

Protip: Agree with your teen on realistic goals for their effective, balanced, and responsible media use.

Science says: Tweens are less likely to engage in irresponsible or excessive screen use when their parents are more supportive of their becoming independent and self-regulated. Schedule clear start and stop times for gaming, videos, and social media.

Mental Health

Protip: Help your tween balance the time they spend using screens with other activities. Set up social media accounts with your older tween. Know their passwords, set ground rules for use, and let them that you'll be monitoring their accounts from time to time. Also, check in with them about what they are seeing, who they're interacting with, and how social media makes them feel.

Science says: Greater screen time has been associated with a greater risk of depression. Heavy social media use, in particular, predicts anxiety, depressive, and panic disorder symptoms in tweens; however, kids with moderate social media use have better mental health than those who have none. Tweens whose parents establish and follow-through with rules regarding time spent on social media report better mental health.



According to a 2019 survey, tweens spend almost six hours a day with screen media.

Violent Media

Protip: Limit your tweens' exposure to violent video games and movies. Help them avoid desensitization by placing violence in context with the suffering it causes. Brainstorm non-violent solutions for problems.

Science says: Watching violent movies can desensitize them to violence, that it is normal or acceptable behavior. Violent video game playing has been associated with aggressive thoughts and behaviors, lower grades, less pro-social behavior, increased anxiety and depression.

Sleep

Protip: Help your tween end screen use at least one hour before bedtime. Don't use phones as alarm clocks. Establish charging stations outside of bedrooms so they can avoid FOMO or "fear of missing out." Have tweens tell their friends they are offline overnight.

Science says: Tweens who have phones in their bedrooms sleep less and get poorer quality sleep. Alerts and notifications disrupt sleep cycles critical for moving short-term memories into learning centers of the brain. Stimulating content and taking in the blue light from screens disrupt the body's natural sleep cycle.

Music

Protip: Get to know the music your tween likes and why they like it, strengthening your bond.

Science says: Music is important and meaningful to tweens, particularly for mood management, friendship formation, and identity development.

Did you know?



Your screen media use counts too!

The time parents spend on screen media (including smartphones and watching videos) can influence their tween's screen time, even from an early age. Parents who use a lot of screen media themselves model this as grown-up behavior, and send a message to tweens that this type of use is normal, which can lead to problematic use later on.



YOU can create a media use plan!

The American Academy of Pediatrics has a handy tool to help build screen media use into your tween's day. It can help the whole family balance their time on screens and other activities! Make your own Family Media Plan at:

<https://healthychildren.org/english/media>



Ask the Mediatrician™

What parents ask most about their tween

How do we get the laptops, smartphones and tablets out of our kids' bedrooms?

The key with your tween is not to approach it as a police action or as a punishment (even though they may take it that way), but as a collaborative problem-solving exercise. Sit down with them and let them know what you've learned about how media in the bedroom affect young people's lives—such as contributing to less and poorer quality sleep, which has ripple effects through school work, energy level, physical and mental health—and let them know you'd like to work with them to come up with ways to address those concerns.

There are some ways that you can actively support your children's transition to device-free bedrooms. For example, get them alarm clocks to use instead of using their phones to wake up in the morning, and set up a homework area in a public place (such as the kitchen table) where you can be available to help them.

Although the transition may be difficult at first, remember that your job as a parent is not to make them happy at all costs or to be their best friend, but to love, provide for, guide and protect them within healthful boundaries.

Ice Breakers

When you see something concerning, here are ways to get the conversation going:

If you see that:

Say this:

Your tween has been using screens later into the evening and has been acting overly tired during the day...



"You seem really tired these days. Let's talk about what you're doing before bed, and how we can rearrange your screen use, so you can get the quality sleep you need."

Your child's eating habits have changed dramatically and they seem obsessed with how they look....



"I'm concerned about you getting the nutrition you need. Let's think through what you are eating and make sure it will help you get as healthy and fit as possible"

Your 13-year-old is really interested in getting the same social media accounts their friends use...



"It looks like you're interested in getting a social media account, let's look into it, and when we can agree on some ground rules, we'll set your account up together."



When to talk to your tween

Start conversations when you and your child are in good moods (not feeling angry or hurt), and when each of you are open to listening to the other. Try talking in the car or at the dinner table, and give your full attention to your tween. Let them know that you love them and are there for them, and that you value their point of view.



Teens

Ages 13 to 18

What you need to know about screen media and your teenager's health and well-being

Thirteen- to eighteen-year-olds are changing how they think, feel, and interact with others. Adolescent bodies undergo rapid physical changes, and many teens begin to pay even greater attention to how they look, often comparing themselves to the body "ideals" they see in media. Teens develop closer friendships and romantic relationships, often using media as ways to strengthen these connections. Despite teens' healthy drive to distance themselves from family, parents remain their most important influence and must stay involved, helping them navigate their media use, balance their time, and stay healthy.



FYI: Social media plays a large role in teen life, however many teens feel neutral about how social media affects their peers and themselves. Most (45%) feel that using social media does not affect them, while 31% feel social media affects them positively, and 24% feel it affects people their age negatively.

Science Says...

...from TV to tablets, media are powerful tools, and how children use them affects their health and development



Mental health, social media, sleep, gaming—these are just a few of the many concerns facing parents of a teenagers. But don't worry, there are easy things you can do!

Use this guide to learn about the media-related health issues that are top of mind for parents today. We've included tips that are practical, easy, and based in science, to help your teenager use media wisely and in ways that promote wellness.

Media Multitasking

Protip: Help your teen focus on homework by working in a 'public' area of your home where you will see when they text, watch videos, or shop online, and can gently guide them back to their main task.

Science says: The human brain cannot “multitask” but actually “split-tasks,” switching rapidly from one train of thought to another. Teens who “multitask” with media take longer to complete their work, make more mistakes, and remember less of the material.

Sleep

Protip: Working back from when they must wake up, help your teen set a consistent bedtime and turn off all screens an hour before that. Charge devices outside bedrooms overnight.

Science says: Adolescence is a stage of rapid physical growth and sleep is when growth occurs. Teens need about 9½ hours of sleep. Using screens right before bed can delay their body’s natural sleep cycle, as media can arouse them and the blue light emitted by screens suppresses melatonin, the sleep hormone. Device alerts and notifications disrupt quality of sleep, affecting their learning.

Online Influencers

Protip: Monitor your teen's media use and talk to them about the ads and online influencers they see. Discuss unhealthy and objectifying ideals and behaviors portrayed, listen to how your teen feels about them, and address how these messages might be affecting them.

Science says: Influencer marketing can greatly affect teens’ attitudes and behaviors regarding nutrition and health. Teen programming often embeds marketing messages about appearance ideals, unhealthy nutrition, and exercise habits that can influence negative body image and harmful behaviors.

Parental Modeling

Protip: Develop house rules for media use with your teen and follow them yourself. A sit-down family meal, without screens so conversation and connection can occur, is protective of their nutrition and their mental health.

Science says: Although your teen is becoming more independent and may not seem interested in how you use media, they still are learning from you and your actions—they still rely on you for consistency, safety, and love.



Some youth use gaming, social media, pornography, and online videos to the point where their physical, mental, or social health are impaired. Problematic Interactive Media Use (PIMU) is not an addiction, but it can and should be treated by a health professional.

Sexting

Protip: Have matter-of-fact, non-judgmental conversations about the risks involved with sharing explicit images or content with others online—even if it is with someone your teen trusts and is in a relationship with. Sexting objectifies and dehumanizes. Teach them to respect themselves and others.

Science says: Sexting has been shown to cause teens regrets about oversharing and can lead to cyberbullying, depression and in some cases, legal consequences.

Music

Protip: Get to know the music your teen likes and why they enjoy it. This will help them to think critically about the messages in lyrics

Science says: Listening to music is a great way for teens to regulate moods. Some music is sexist or degrading, some glorifies drug, alcohol, and tobacco use, making them seem risk-free. These lyrics can influence how teens treat each other and themselves.

Violent Media

Protip: Discuss the suffering caused by violence if your teen regularly uses violent media. Also discuss non-violent ways to resolve conflicts.

Science says: Watching violent media can desensitize teens to violence, making them feel that it is normal or acceptable behavior. Playing a lot of violent video games can increase teens' aggression, anxiety, and depressive symptoms.

Co-Viewing

Protip: Ask to watch your teen's favorite movie or show with them as an opportunity to get to know them and their thinking better.

Science says: Teens become more independent in their media and life choices. Sharing respectfully with your teen allows you to discuss complex issues like sex, relationships, and substance abuse in non-judgmental and more effective ways.



Teens who use media after school for 6+ hours per day have higher odds of unhealthy eating behavior and get less sleep than those who use two hours of media or less per day.

Anxiety

Protip: Help your teen balance their time with media and other activities, including getting outdoors and having face-to-face time with friends.

Science says: The more time teens spend on a computer, the greater their risk of experiencing anxiety. Teens who spend more time using computers on the weekend are at higher risk for depression.

Depression and Suicide

Protip: Talk to your teen about their media use and how it makes them feel. Create ground rules together, including how much time to spend on media, what kinds of things are ok to share, and how best to interact with others. Let them know that you will be monitoring their social media accounts from time to time. If you or they are ever disturbed by something online, talk about it directly. If your teen is acting sad or withdrawn, discuss your concerns with a health professional.

Science says: Parents can help teens use media as tools to promote healthy strategies and improve teens' moods. Excessive media use in teens has been associated with depressive symptoms, risk-taking behaviors, and an increase in self-injury and suicidal behavior.

Did you know?



Your screen media use counts too!

Teens look to parents to see how adults behave. As such, parents' screen time can influence their teens' screen time.

Excessive use by parents can influence teens to adopt problematic media use behaviors.



YOU can create a media use plan!

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Ask the Mediatrician™

What parents ask most about their teen

How can I help my teen focus and stop procrastinating with media?

As technologies evolve and digital content spreads, it becomes easier and easier to get lost in the endless stream of information and entertainment in our pockets and on screens all around us. Helping your teen self-regulate their screen media use and focus their attention is a critical part of parenting today and of preparing your teen for college, work and beyond.

Sit down with your teen during a quiet moment and ask them to reflect on how they spend their time each day. Have them consider the tasks and activities they need to accomplish (eating, sleeping, school, homework, etc.), as well as those they want to do (spending time with friends, sports, music, maybe even creating something new). Instead of trying to convince your teen that watching endless videos or playing video games is a waste of time, help them recognize and respect the value of their time and attention.

Teaching your teen to harness and direct their precious time and attention is a culmination of your role as a parent. You have shown them how valuable their time and attention are—**now** it is their turn to take control of how they spend it!

Ice Breakers

When you see something concerning, here are ways to get the conversation going:

If you see that:

Say this:

Your teen is doing their homework, while sending memes to friends and having the TV blaring in the background...



"It must be so hard to concentrate on your homework with all of those distractions. Let's turn off the TV and text later so that you can focus on what you need to."

Your teen seems sad and withdrawn, and is posting images and content that suggest they are feeling down.



"You seem down lately, and I noticed that you're posting some sad stuff. Let's talk about what's going on and what we can do to make it better."

A classmate of your teen's posted a naked picture of them online and your child is visibly upset...



"I'm sure it is hard for you to have that picture out there. Let's talk about what happened and what we can do."



When to talk to your teen

Start conversations when you and your child are in good moods (not feeling angry or hurt), and when each of you are open to listening to the other. Try talking in the car or at the dinner table, and give your full attention to your teen. Let them know that you love them and are there for them, and that you value their point of view.



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