

Your Kids' Screen Time...and Your Own

Ten Percent Weekly

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If you're reading this, it's very likely that you are hoping to become more mindful as a parent or as someone caring for children. You may be particularly concerned about your kids' screen time, especially during vacation from school.

The reason is obvious: today's internet-connected devices pull our attention away more than any other form of entertainment or technology. When children are on devices, they are often cut off from the world around them. For the most part, the research shows that too much screen time has adverse implications for a child's social, emotional, and spiritual health.

Personally, as a meditation teacher working with university students, I know firsthand how emerging young adults—perhaps your kids just a few years from now—assess themselves as being dysregulated with regards to their relationship to the online world. They themselves are aware of how these devices disrupt social interaction and can foster escapism when facing personal difficulties.

What can you do? With mindfulness in mind, here are three suggestions.

1. Start with Yourself

I'll start with the hard news. If you want to reduce your kids' screen time, you need to reduce your own. In fact, a survey of 2000 children in the UK from ages 5 to 12 showed that more than half of those kids wanted their parents to use their phones less! That's 1000 children saying, mom, dad, your screen time is up.

Now, since much of our lives are organized around having smartphones, in particular, we may need to think about a few workarounds. For example, if you use the phone to keep track of time, you might consider buying a watch. If you've been using the phone as a camera, consider using a decommissioned phone as a camera instead. I know one father who puts his phone on a high shelf in a kitchen closet and has a subscription to the print version of the newspaper, so he can keep up with the news without getting sucked into his phone.

Sometimes simply enabling airplane mode—disconnecting our phone from the internet—is enough to restore our attention to the kids, while still allowing us to use the phone as a camera, music player, calendar, and many other offline functions. By bringing some intentionality to how we do screens at home, we can be more present for our families and model the behavior we'd like to see.

2. Set Boundaries

Second, consider some rules that can help both you and your kids find greater balance. For example, in our family, devices aren't allowed in the dining room during meals—not even tucked into a back pocket. We don't do screens after 8 pm. On long car rides, we spend the first hour or two either conversing or enjoying quiet time together before the kids are allowed to listen to music with headphones.

Every family will do this differently, but the overall idea is that we parents can create a home culture that supports our kids in being mindful of how devices intersect with our lives and relationships.

3. Go Outside

A third piece of advice is to help our kids reconnect with their senses by doing something as simple as going for a walk. When we're on our devices, we lose contact with our bodies, often default to a shallow breath, and disconnect with specific senses, such as smell, taste, touch, and hearing sounds beyond the device itself. Heading outside and walking helps the child return to the movement in their body, deepens their breathing, and opens up their visual range, hearing, smell, and sense of touch. In many meditations, we ground mindfulness in the body. As such, going for a walk fosters mindfulness for the child.

During this walk, you can increase mindfulness by articulating what it is you're noticing with your senses and in your body. When my children were very young, I regularly verbalized what I was aware of to give them ideas about what they, too, could notice. I might say, "I'm hearing the crunch of pinecones beneath my feet." Or, "I'm smelling the rain as it hits the hot sidewalk." "I feel the wind blowing my hair across my cheek." "I feel the humid air coming into my lungs."

In my case, over time, my children began narrating what their senses perceived and bodies felt. This is a fantastic way of practicing mindfulness with children as well as counteracting the symptom of disconnection that occurs from device use.

Wait, did I just hear a text message come in? I'd better check that. Just kidding. Good luck to both of us!