

## Why You Should Plan A Low-Screen Summer For Your Kids

*Sixty percent of American parents think their kids are addicted to screens (yet keep supplying the screens). Here's why you should change that this summer... Teens could literally hold down a full-time job if they cut out the video games and YouTube... My parents were screen Nazis when I was a kid. Our movie and Windows 95 "Oregon Trail" time were very limited*

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By [Joy Pullmann](#) APRIL 26, 2019 The Federalist

In the past decade there has been [an explosion in research](#) and anecdotes demonstrating that screen use has some [highly negative effects](#) that are worse for children. In response, a niche market has cropped up among people trying to use technology better, as represented by, for example, Cal Newport's new book, "Digital Minimalism" and James Clear's [writings on productivity](#).

Yet it seems our society at large is **still in the "early adopter" stage** of questioning and limiting our tech addictions. **Public schools continue to amp up screen-led learning** despite myriad [high-profile](#) failures at giving all kids a device and the [increasing amount of research questioning](#) those decisions. While I ran errands last week, the majority of children I saw out with their parents or grandparents were staring at phones or tablets as they sat in their strollers or in restaurants.

[Time use studies](#) still find Americans, including children, gobbling insane amounts of green-glow time. Kids ages 2 to 8 [average 2.5-3 hours of daily screen time](#), or about 20 hours per week. Kids ages 8 to 12 [average 4.5 hours of daily screen time](#), or more than 30 hours per week. Teens average more than six hours per day, or more than 40 hours per week. **Teens could literally hold down a full-time job**

**if they cut out the video games and YouTube.** None of this is for school, either, as school-age kids [average](#) 16 minutes of daily school-related screentime.

**We know deep inside that there's something wrong with all this, and the** proliferation of panicked online articles, including the replete genre of "I dumped my smartphone" articles, recently topped off [by Charlotte Church](#), is evidence of that intuition. **Sixty percent of American parents think their kids are addicted to screens (yet keep supplying the screens).** One-third say they argue *daily* with their kids about screen use. Half of teens [say they feel addicted](#) to their devices. We're definitely conflicted about our relationship with media, but often we just allow that conflict to ebb and flow as it will without taking proactive steps to intentionally direct it.

**There's a way out of this. It requires first getting over our inertia and deciding something must and will be done.** Then once we're convinced a change is necessary, we have to make that change wisely. Summer is the perfect time of year to plan and execute a reset of damaging family screen habits.

Future articles (I'll link here after they're published) will concern how to set yourself and your family up for success in replacing media addictions with more fulfilling and worthwhile pursuits. This one aims to convince you it's necessary.

No Child Needs a Screen. Period.

I'm going to be blunt: **There is no real benefit to your children of using a cell phone, tablet, or computer before about age 12.** They gain absolutely nothing of value that they could not get in a better way from some other activity. *Zero.* (Special-needs kids who use tablets for things like communication are obviously rare exceptions.) That includes entertainment, which we'll talk about later, but right now just consider actual *need*.

Typing, or other computer use skills? Look, insofar as typing will be necessary in the decade or more from now when today's kids presumably will be ready for a career — and we might all very well be using voice commands or even [brain](#)

commands by then, making keyboards obsolete — it is a stupidly easy skill they can pick up in about two weeks of short lessons, tops.

Remember Mavis Beacon? It's free now. If your kids are so typing-challenged at the time they actually need to produce a paper longer than 600 words — and it's not a typical school that requires that until high school now, sad to say — you can help them solve that problem pronto. The same goes for all other pinch, swipe, and search skills, which kids pick up in about 90 seconds flat. Further, it's actually better for their brains to write by hand instead of by computer.

Needing to contact you? **How did parents ever parent before cell phones became ubiquitous in the last decade? They talked and made plans beforehand, that's how. When kids really need their parents** (i.e., medical emergency on the school playground, a spontaneous after-school playdate) another adult can call using his cell phone.

For safety reasons? Get the kid a walkie talkie, an electronic tracker, or a dumbphone if you're anxious. But you really don't need to. Again, ten years ago there were not mass murders of ten-year-olds who didn't have cell phones. The safety concern is an illusion, a cover for our screen compulsions. Kids today are safer than kids have ever been in the history of mankind. They're far more likely to be endangered by being fat because they stare at screens too much than they are to get injured, kidnapped, or any other hypothetical risk of being more active. Kids get antsy in the doctor's waiting room? Bring a book or some crayons and a coloring book, for Pete's sake. It's not that hard to not raise a zombie.

Just try to think of any reason your child truly *needs* a phone or tablet. There isn't one.

## Screens Are For Parents Who Haven't Learned Better Skills

Now that we've established your child does not need a screen, you are freer to consider its true value to your family. Most of them are actually benefits to parents, in the vein of buying a half hour (or, let's be accurate: three to six hours

a day) of kids sitting, glassy-eyed and not bickering or destroying your kitchen cabinets. It's kid [soma](#).

We all have had the days where every kid in the house is vacillating between puking all over you and screaming their feverish little brains out. That is a great day to pop some soma. But in reality, parenting days like those are extremely rare and not the typical reason for handing over the blue rectangle. **We do it because it's easier than genuine parenting, which requires actively cultivating our kids towards excellence.**

Our job is to help our children learn how to be the best adults they can be, and we cannot help them do that if we're not using media intentionally or teaching them how. We must stop being in denial about how addicted we and our kids are, and what we're losing in the process. So it's time to step up, ditch the denial, and prepare to lead.

## Screens Suck Your Family's Growth Potential

Most parents are almost certainly not aware that when we hand our kids the Kindle again, we're damaging our kids and our relationship. We're developing the habit in ourselves and our **children of addictively medicating and separating from each other when bored rather than using boredom as a personal and relational growth opportunity.** It's time to stop that, for the sake of our kids. They deserve much better, and we *are* capable of giving it to them. Dennis Prager wrote recently about the erosion of hobbies, and how the most direct way to create the time for this kind of self-development is by limiting screens: "There is a world of difference between being active and being passive, between creating something and watching something, between doing something and being entertained... what will your child's most important passion be after leaving school—in other words, for the next 70 years of his or her life?"

Prager referenced an article by younger writer Dan Scotti, "[Why Don't Millennials Have Hobbies Anymore?](#)" "None of my friends have hobbies," Scotti writes, and

neither does he. “We’re not looking for the things that interest us or uniquely move us; we’re simply fixated on whatever is prepared for us on a silver platter by media outlets and trending topics.” Is that the kind of person you want to become, and want your children to become? If not, the time to prevent it is now.

**My parents were screen Nazis when I was a kid. Our movie and Windows 95 “Oregon Trail” time were very limited.** At the time it annoyed me, and I nagged them plenty about it, with the inevitable comparisons to all the other kids in town. But now as an adult, I have so many enjoyable modes of being thanks to my parents imposing self-control on me until I could control myself.

I paint (oils, walls, and acrylics), draw, crochet, sew, garden, and have even recently taken up woodworking and bike riding. I cook, bake, decorate, and am learning to landscape. I read like an addict. As a teen, I learned to ride and train horses, and wrote a book with the free time my parents secured by choking off the screens. **Today, I have five kids, and when the babies wean I get bored and want another one.** You can’t tell me another baby isn’t way better than [having watched everything on Netflix](#).

## Not Just Opportunity Cost, But Active Harm to Kids

One of the worst things about screen-watching the equivalent of a part-time or full-time job’s worth of hours in a week is all the potential for creativity, learning, self-care and happiness it sucks out of a person’s life. It’s a major opportunity cost.

It’s also actively harmful to kids. For one, kids’ fitness levels today are at life-endangering low levels. Among kids ages 5 to 10, [three-quarters spend less](#) than one hour per day physically active, as a direct result of their screen use. I have kids in this age range. If they behaved that sedately I’d be sure they were sick. Not incidentally, they are also as fit as a fiddle.

[Recent data](#) from 28 advanced countries shows the kids *are* sick. Compared to kids 50 years ago, kids today “take 90 seconds longer to run a mile” and their

“aerobic fitness has declined by 5 percent.” These are major risk factors for heart disease, a leading indicator of lifelong health problems.

Researcher Jean Twenge and [many researchers](#) have also [exhaustively documented](#) numerous psychological problems linked with increased screen use among children, as well as their higher susceptibility to related problems and an **inability to control their use due to immature brains**. Screen use is correlated with depression, ADHD, [anxiety](#), and a host of other psychological problems.

“There’s many studies that look at MRI scans of the brain of kids who play a lot of video games, 20 hours or more of video games a week. **And when they compare them to people who are addicted to, say, drugs or alcohol, their brains scans are similar,**” Dr. Delaney Ruston told PBS about the documentary “Screenagers.” “So, something is really happening on a physiological level. It’s not just psychological.”

Add to this the negative effects on the life of the mind. In “The Wired Child,” Dr. Richard Freed writes, “research indicates that technologies our kids typically spend so much time with, including video games and social networks, hinder their success in school.” A [recent survey](#) from Common Sense Media found that **kids are reading less than ever**, partly due to staring at glowing boxes instead: *not only do reading rates decline as kids get older, but they’ve also dropped off significantly in the past 30 years. In 1984, 8% of 13-year-olds and 9% of 17-year-olds said they ‘never’ or ‘hardly ever’ read for pleasure. In 2014, that number had almost tripled, to 22% and 27%. Girls also tend to read more than boys, as 18% of boys say they read daily, while 30% of girls do.*

*Parents are also reading to their kids less than ever. In 1999, children ages 2 to 7 were read to for an average of 45 minutes per day. In 2013, that number had dropped to an average of just over 30 minutes per day.*

It’s not merely because screentertainment displaces time kids could spend reading or thinking, although it definitely does that. It’s also because electronic

media are less mentally “sticky”: people understand and remember more of what they read on paper.

One [study found what](#) others have also, that “**students who read texts in print scored significantly better on the reading comprehension test than students who read the texts digitally.**” Children and teens also [prefer to read in print](#) instead of on screens, and they read more when they do so in print.

## All You Have to Lose Are Poor Parenting Habits

Might you and your kids escape from all these terrible possibilities of screen overuse? Certainly. But you aren’t so far, are you? Be honest.

Also, why take all these risks with your kids for something that is not necessary, and when so many better opportunities to use their time exist? Literally playing in the mud with sticks would be better for kids than getting their grubs on a phone. It would help develop their imaginations, creativity, attention spans, curiosity, fine and gross motor skills, and relationships with the natural world and fellow mud-dabblers.

As a parent, my guess of the biggest barrier to change is not knowing how and not wanting to endure your kids’ withdrawal symptoms. I have some strategies for both that I’ll share next time. [Sign up here](#) to make sure you don’t miss this series.

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