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Intentional Screen Time

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Intentional Screen Time and Why Your Family Needs It

By Anika Nield Meyers

In the last several years, screen time for children has been a consistent topic of concern, information, and advice. However, research on screen time is varied and, quite frankly, much more complex than many parents realize. In addition, most sources fail to address the effect that screen time has on adults as well as kids and teens. Technology impacts parents, newlyweds, and other adults, as well as their family relationships.

In a Pew Research Center study, 50% of the teens who were surveyed felt that their parent was distracted by a phone when having an in-person conversation, and more parents than teens reported losing focus in class or work because of their phones. Unsurprisingly, children and teens may have difficulty understanding and accepting screen time regulations when they feel their parents are just as plugged in as they are (if not more).

Screen time can also have an impact on romantic relationships. A New York Times article titled “Married to Their Smartphones (Oh, and to Each Other, Too)” highlights a common tendency in relationships to spend more time with our smartphones than with our partners. Research shows that 51% of adults in committed relationships say their partner is sometimes or often distracted by their phone during a conversation. Another study reports that almost a
quarter of adult internet users say that the internet has a negative impact on their partnership.\textsuperscript{5}

Of course, not all effects from technology are bad. In fact, the global pandemic has shown us just how important technology can be for human connection. Without it, many wouldn’t have been able to work, communicate with family or friends, or even grocery shop during this past year and a half.

However, COVID-19 has also brought new screen time struggles. Many of us are finding adaptation to remote life difficult. This “new normal” of balancing lots of technology with “real” life may seem exhausting. For my husband and I, even after a long day of looking at screens for work or school, our relaxation time seems to be spent checking Instagram or watching the next episode of a show.

So how do we learn balance in a world where technology can be helpful but also distracting and time-consuming?

For both children and adults, the answer to the screen time problem might lie less in the actual time spent on screens and more on how we are using our screens. Harm from technology can be largely eliminated when our screen time is intentional. Being intentional with technology involves noticing what we are engaging in, why we are engaging in it, and what we might be giving up by spending that time on a screen.

Consider the following guidelines to help you and your family apply more intentional screen-time:

**Pay attention to active versus passive technology use.**

One neuroscientist describes the difference between passive and active screen time.\textsuperscript{6} Active screen time involves mental or physical engagement with the content, whereas passive technology use is mindless and sedentary. Although more so for little children, too much passive screen time can be bad for everyone. By paying attention to and identifying the difference between our own passive and active technology use, we can hopefully recognize when screens may be having a negative impact on ourselves or those around us. Next time you find yourself mindlessly scrolling, try taking a break.

**Notice when screens are interfering with basic needs.**

Basic needs include sleep, physical activity, healthy eating, and even in-person social interaction. During this past summer, I found myself lounging in bed and mindlessly scrolling social media much more
than I wanted to. As I pushed myself to join a couple of morning exercise classes at the local recreation center, I saw a difference in my productivity and satisfaction. Similarly, making time for family and friends, getting a good night’s sleep, and giving my body the nutrition it needs are so important to my relationship with myself and those around me. Screens themselves may not be harmful until they begin to take away from our basic needs. While catching up on your TikTok feed at the end of the day might feel relaxing, it might not be worth losing hours of sleep for.

Another basic need considered in an article by Dr. Sarah Coyne, a professor of Human Development at BYU, and Megan Gale, a Master’s student at BYU, is that of healthy emotional regulation. Purposeful technology use and mindfulness of emotions can make a huge difference in the outcomes of media use. Anything we read, listen to, or look at will influence us, but by paying attention to how these different media make us feel, we can avoid some of the harmful effects of screen time. For example, if you notice that after scrolling Instagram you feel insecure or jealous, maybe it’s time to follow some more uplifting accounts or cut down on social media time in general.

Create boundaries around family screen time that reflect your values.

Mike Brooks, a writer for Psychology Today, believes that the real harm of screens is to our values. Many of the values parents want to instill in their kids are effectively taught with a balance between screens and offline activities. As already discussed, technology has many benefits, and a lot of the things we value can be enhanced with technology. However, if we aren’t careful, screen time can easily replace other things that are important to us, especially things that don’t offer an immediate and obvious return like technology often does.

In another article, Brooks stated, “We don’t have to radically change our lifestyles to gain the many benefits of unplugging.” Boundaries around family screen time don’t have to be extreme or drastic, and putting them in place can help you maintain the things that are most important to you. Some ideas might include,

- Putting phones “to bed” in a different place than your bedroom.
- Using apps to monitor, time, or block media use—even for adults. Consider having your
spouse or another family member set your screen time passcode to help you stay accountable.

- Planning active movement into your workday. Do 15 minutes of yoga, stretching, or walking.
- Having one scheduled screen-free night a week to be together without distractions.
- Occasionally replacing TV watching with audiobooks or podcasts.
- No phones during mealtime.

With the end of a pandemic (hopefully) approaching, evaluating our habits with technology use is essential. In a technological age, balance can become really difficult. We may need to ask ourselves, “How much is too much?” As we do so, intentional screen time can help us rely on and enjoy technology in ways that benefit us and our families instead of doing harm.

Endnotes


