



Taming the Gaming **Non-punitive Discipline Tools For Limiting Screen Time** **By Judy Arnall**

Screen time refers to computers, TV, video gaming from consoles and portable game systems, as well as videos, DVDs and Blackberries.

Despite the benefits of gaming, DVDs and TV, parents still are very uncomfortable with the amounts of time spent on the activity especially during the summer months when children have lots of free time.

That's okay. We all have our own comfort levels, and they fluctuate week to week. I realize that not many parents can tolerate their children's unrestricted game playing. A parent might feel perfectly okay with letting their child zone out all day on Sunday playing games, because they've had a week full of chores, sports, and school. Yet, the same parent will want all electronics off when there has been a week of no school and nothing being done around the house. It's hard to have strict rules when life is not consistent! Yet, there are some things parents can do to limit screen time.

Babies

Spend Time Together

Babies don't need technology. Not even those "educational" videos of color and shape. They need your touch, voice, and face. They need to see the real world. Take them outside and expose them to life.

Toddlers and Preschoolers

Stimulation

Toddlers need experiential learning: real touch, taste, hearing, and seeing. Toddlers and preschoolers don't need computers, hand-held games, educational electronics, or video games. They are building hands-on experiences to layer their knowledge of the world for abstract learning later in the pre-teen and teen years. They need to be active and engaged in hands-on, real tangible toys and items. They need to visit parks and see trees in the world rather than on a screen or on flash cards or in a book. Preschoolers need to paint on paper and build real blocks, not onscreen. They both need to develop fine motor and large motor skills actually doing activities.

Redirection

Toddlerhood is a time that children love repetition. Toddlers will want to watch the same video and read the same stories over and over again, up to 12 times a day. That much video viewing is not good for their cognitive and social development! Engage them in another activity even if it's tempting to keep the video on because you get more done around the house!

School-aged children

School-aged children do best with hands-on learning, but it's harder to compete with the appeal of technology when peers are using it.

Stimulation

Have lots of creative supplies around the house, even if they attend school. Books, board games, craft supplies, workshop tools, garden tools, building toys, sewing machines, etc. These are great items to compete with screen time.

Reduce the reasons for rebellion

Never divide games into A) educational games and B) eye candy. Children don't know the difference unless you elevate the status of one and not the other. Then they will always play the ones you don't think are valued. All games teach children. All have some redeeming merits. If you treat games as a game, then they will see no difference and value the "educational" ones too.

Re-evaluate limits

Acknowledge that the minute a new game is played or a console or computer is received, that children are going to spend every waking minute on it. It's new, a novelty, and totally consuming. They will behave like that for the first year of owning a system. It will, guaranteed, wear off. Games are not unlike movies, where there are only about 20 really different plot lines. All movies, books, and games are just minor variations on the same plot. The novelty will wear thin and other events will become more appealing, but not if time is rationed too strictly. Addictions are often the result of forbidden items withheld too long. Studies show that when children are allowed moderate amounts of candies and sweets, their incidence of eating disorders and overweight goes down rather than up. It's the same with gaming. Moderation is the key.

Plan ahead

Plan outings and activities to compete with screen time. Spend time together. Play board games with your children. Communicate with text messaging and email. Create a family website together.

The key to this is, when the gaming has to stop, to get ready for an activity, dinner, chores, or family outing, be reasonable and don't insist on immediate cessation. Often, the games are designed so that players can't just stop; they have to get to another level or lose all their progress or go to a safe place, etc., which may take a few more minutes.

Say, "At the next saving place, could you quit and come to dinner please?" With that kind of consideration for their needs, you will find they will be more considerate for your needs.

Never just go and turn off the screen or tower button. It's very disrespectful and you wouldn't do it to an adult.

Model

Show, discuss, and live a balanced lifestyle over a week.

Everyone in the family should have some time in seven areas for health:

- Social time with others outside the family. This could include gaming time.
- Family time with siblings and parents.
- Spiritual time in organized church, meditation, prayer, study, reflection, or volunteering.
- Physical time, such as sports, exercise, or heavy activity.
- Mental exercise time learning, doing puzzles, games reading, and homework.
- Financial time earning money.
- Hobby time, and leisure pursuits.

Look at time over the week. A one-hour a day rule doesn't work if on Monday, a child has heavy homework commitments and no time for gaming, but has lots of free time on Sunday and can play for five hours straight. Rather than make a one-size-fits-all rule, be flexible.

Change environment

If you know that you may have a gaming addict in the house, delay getting a system as long as possible. Avoid satellite and cable TV that is going to present a problem. Limit the computer to one per house (which naturally limits screen time per person) or get several computers and a LAN (local area network) connection to encourage group play. Avoid placing screens in bedrooms to encourage social activity in the main family areas. Also, it's easier for children to ask parents questions if they are in close proximity.

Schedule daily downtime

Encourage children to wrap up gaming at least an hour before bed, so they can wind down before sleep.

Family conferences

When the screen time is really starting to get to you, gather everyone together and talk. Make sure the children are heard first. Try to come up with some solutions that work for everyone.

Problem-solving

Decide how each child can schedule screen time based on that child's commitments for the week and availability of screens between siblings. This teaches children self-discipline by educating them on planning their activities and commitments (to job, school, social events, volunteer) and planning their gaming time around them. A blanket rule of time doesn't work for everybody all the time.

Contracts

If you have a gaming addict in your house, this tool helps. Sit down, talk, and agree on some time limits that you both could live with and write up a contract. Helps the child with limits that he set when in the moment and he doesn't want to stop.

Teenagers

One time consultation

When you feel the child has not enough balance in their lives, have a talk. See what their values are and educate on the health aspects of not enough balance. The key is to have one talk and leave the decisions up to the teen. More than one talk is really nagging!

Family conferences

Again, very valuable in including the teen in finding solutions.

Problem-solving

Once again, decide how each child can schedule screen time based on that child's commitments for the week and availability of screens between siblings. This teaches children self-discipline by educating them on planning their activities and commitments (to job, school, social events, volunteer) and planning their gaming time around them. A blanket rule of time doesn't work for everybody all the time.

Contracts

This tool really works for teens. Sit down, talk, and agree on some time limits that you both could live with and write up a contract. Both parties need to sign it. It teaches children that when you sign your name to an agreement, you are bound to it.

Respect privacy

Journals, and word documents are private. Trust them. On the other hand, anything online is NOT private and is fair game for reading.

Decide on problem ownership

Educate them on a healthy lifestyle and hope they choose best decisions for themselves. You can't control them forever.

Model

Model and include them in your leisure choices.

Decide what you will do

When their computer breaks down and they have no money, don't offer to fix or finance new equipment. Let them figure out a way to do it.

Keep communication lines open

“The surest way to cut off your parent-child communication lines is to cut off their peer communication line.”

We often push teens to their peer group by spending less time with them as they grow older and then pull their peer connection out from them (no text messaging and grounding them) when we want to punish. It’s hard to build communication with children, when we take away theirs.

Change is new and frightening for parents. The huge impact of technology will affect all of us, and no one is sure how to handle it. However, you can’t go wrong keeping the communication open between you and your child. Do you have to know everything about what your child is into on the Internet? No! If you have trust and communication and as long as your child knows that anytime he needs help, he will have it from you, and he can communicate to you without the fear of punishment or his technology being taken away, then he will be safe.

Lose the guilt. It’s okay to admit that your children play games. With a billion dollar industry, games are here to stay. They will grow beyond the living room and will probably be a major influence in the classroom in the next twenty years when our children become teachers, curriculum developers and educational administrators! Until we have conclusive, long-term, large sample studies of the effects on children, no one can tell you if and how much is good for your children. Just strive for a balanced life!

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