

The Western CT Coalition Drug Free Schools Committee consists of social workers, counselors and school-based health staff in the 43 towns of Western CT. The committee assesses school-based needs related to substance use and mental health and provides education and awareness through publications and programs for students, families, and school staff.



To learn more, visit [wctcoalition.org](http://wctcoalition.org).

**DFS EDUCATOR**

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## Parents, Teens, and Screens

### *Screen time? Touch grass? Brain Rot? Doom Scroll?*

If you've ever heard a child belt out garbled "Italian brain-rot" lyrics and thought, what timeline is this? We're with you. Meanwhile we've got empty nested parents sending "perfect" 5-ingredient mug cake recipes to their college kids like it's a love language. Why do rates of anxiety, depressions, and loneliness seem to be higher than ever? Tech connects us AND can hollow out real connection if we let it. With auto-deliveries, on-demand lattes, and tele-*everything*, we have fewer reasons to say howdy to a neighbor, solve inherent interpersonal friction, and build the trust that makes communities thrive.

## Understanding the Impact

### *what the data actually says*

Children and adolescents spend a lot of time watching screens, including smartphones, tablets, gaming consoles, TVs, and computers. On average, half of U.S. teens (12-17) report 4+ hours of **leisure** screen time on a typical weekday. Including schoolwork, the hours go up to 7 hours daily.

The CDC & American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

## More Screens, More Problems

### **YOUTH SCREEN EXPOSURE**

- Sleep problems
- Lower grades in school
- Reading fewer books
- Less time with family and friends
- Not enough outdoor or physical activity
- Weight problems
- Mood problems
- Poor self-image and body image issues
- Fear of missing out
- Less time learning other ways to relax and have fun

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

### **ADULT SCREEN EXPOSURE**

Increased screen use has become an important public health concern across the **lifespan**. Excessive screen time exposure has been linked to **poor health outcomes for adults just as they are linked to our youth**. Meta-analyses consistently associate greater sedentary time with substantially higher risk of type 2 diabetes. ~5-6 hours/day of screen time and ~10-11 hours/day total sedentary time are associated with notably higher cardiovascular disease risks.

Jingjie, W., Yang, L., Jing, Y., Ran, L., Yiqing, X., & Zhou, N. (2022).

Setting a digital reset routine as standard practice can be a step to normalizing screen free activities. Setting realistic goals, starting small, and planning tech free activities are a basis for success.

And the truth is, there are tech free moments happening, everywhere; we just need to find them, name them, and actively grow them.

## CHANGE STARTS WITH US

Reducing screen time indicates a high-yield, evidence-consistent change. A recent study by Peih, et al. indicates mental health improvements through smartphone screen time reduction. Namely, three weeks of screen time reduction showed improvement on depressive symptoms, stress, sleep quality, and well-being.

Peih, C., Humer, E., Hoenigl, A. et al. Smartphone screen time reduction improves mental health: a randomized controlled trial. BMC Med 23, 107 (2025)

When was the last time a flat “don’t” actually changed your behavior? “Don’t eat chips.” “Don’t be on your phone.” Avoidance goals are vague and annoying; approach goals are specific and doable. If we want our kids off screens, the move is to model the behavior. Remember, it is a hard sell to tell our teens to limit screens and read a book if we are actively on our phones.

### How about this, rather than that

- Instead of: “Don’t be on your phone.”
  - Try: “Let’s take a phone free walk with the dog for 20 minutes.”
- Instead of: “Stop scrolling.”
  - Try: “Music challenge during dinner, but it can only be music related to tacos.”
- Instead of: “No games tonight.”
  - Try: “card game at 7. Winner chooses Saturday’s dinner.”

### FAMILY AGREEMENTS: MAKE THE PLAN TOGETHER

*Set goals that are realistic and stick to them*

**Standard routine:** these are your set family agreements.

- Turn off all non-urgent notifications.
- Create time limits on apps.
- Non-screen zones & times.
- Device docking routine.
- Check-in times.

**Rotating plans:** decide the activities and goals for the week, these can be adjusted based on the week’s schedule. Review as a family what worked or didn’t last week.

### TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- *Name the agreements:* what are we achieving this week, does this help?
- *Model the agreement:* if we ask for a book, we open one. If we ask for a walk, shoes on.
- *Make it easy:* dock phones by the door, playing cards out.
- *Stack habits:* Expand something you already do (after school snack + 10 minutes of word games).
- *Repair fast:* if mistakes are made on either end own it and move on “That was sharp. Can we reset?”

### Do it for you too!

**Make a new tradition:** a regularly scheduled screen-free activity (craft night, monthly cards, pickup basketball).

**Swap out the app:** do something the old fashioned way, instead of using an app, order your coffee at the counter, use the lane with a person on the register, and intentionally connect while you are there.

**Practice tiny repair:** when friction pops up, talk it through in person.

*Practice, practice, practice.*