

## **Screen-time for Young Children: How Soon is too Soon; How Much is too Much? Navigating the Jungle of Technology with Kids**

Becky Callaway, Lower School Principal

This past summer, as my husband and I were vacationing with our youngest daughter, her husband, and their two small children, their six-month-old began to get fussy in our restaurant one evening while we were awaiting the arrival of our meal. Though they follow a very restrictive policy on television viewing, iPad interactions, and phone “watching” with both their boys, our daughter pulled a video meant for infants and toddlers up, propped the cell phone up on the table where the baby could see it, and pressed “play.” What I witnessed next was shocking. Immediately, Wilson stopped fretting and squirming. His eyes became glued to the phone screen, and though he may have blinked once or twice over the next 10 or 15 minutes, I missed seeing it. To say that the program playing over the YouTube app was spelling-binding to this six-month-old baby is not at all an exaggeration.

If an infant can become transfixed in a moment by something as innocent as “Baby Einstein,” or “Thomas the Train,” what, I pondered, is taking place mentally and emotionally in the minds of older children for whom electronic devices are used as babysitters or pacifiers, more frequently and for longer stretches of time?

These same questions have been circulating through the tech community for several years. Recognizing the validity of such concerns, before 2020, a substantial portion of the Silicon Valley parents who were employed by big tech giants such as Microsoft, Intel, Apple, and others implemented extremely strict protocols with their own children regarding technology exposure. One family, interviewed by Jamie Yuccas of CBS News, revealed that their home was technology-free of devices used for entertainment. Their children did not play video games or even watch TV, and they were not scheduled to receive cell phones... (wait for it) ...until they were teenagers. The couple, Pierre and Monica Laurent, along with their children, stated that the only thing they really missed about technology is the convenience of listening to music or an audio book. The Laurent children’s school, the Silicon Valley Waldorf School, stresses physical activity and art over technology. In fact, computers are not assigned to the students at Waldorf until eighth grade. This is in a school district where 75% of the parents are employed by the tech industry. ([www.cbsnews.com/news/silicon-valley-parents-are-raising-their-kids-tech-free](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/silicon-valley-parents-are-raising-their-kids-tech-free))



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What do the parents of children growing up in the shadow of technology's "Mecca" know from which the average parent in Anytown, USA could benefit? According to Laurent, "the tech industry designs products to hook users" without parents suspecting it because warnings are not issued for otherwise benign products or sights. According to Caroline Knorr, senior parenting editor for Common Sense Media, many computer programs are designed to capture and change user behavior (hence the term "hook") at younger and younger ages. Additionally, children are easily drawn into the proverbial technology maze through the incessant use of ads that interrupt the content's flow. One can resist clicking on commercials between segments of a show or a game for only so long, right? The bombardment of clever marketing along with the constant dopamine hits that come from "scoring" on the game are very effective "one-two-punches" that hook the user quickly and strongly.

So, where is the true harm in all of this? According to the Mayo Clinic, too much screen time, in the form of television viewing and iPad/smartphone/computer gaming, is linked, over time, to the following:

- Obesity due to physical inactivity and excessive snacking that frequently accompanies screen time activities.
- Sleep deprivation and/or irregular sleep schedules from over-exposure to screens or stimulation from screens at times of day when the brain naturally seeks to "ramp down" in preparation for rest, rebuilding, and growth.
- Increased emotional, social, and attentional problems. This is due to exposure to rapidly changing images paraded across the monitor or screen, and the passive nature of screen entertainment. While in a passive state of mind, a child is sensory-deprived, which impedes brain development compared to the brain of a child who is being socialized in a "real-time" environment at the same stage of life. The child receives stimuli, but since there is no real person on the other end, the ability to develop social communication skills is non-existent. ([mindd.org/screen-time/](http://mindd.org/screen-time/))
- Desensitization to violence at the expense of learning more appropriate ways of solving problems, disagreements, and conflicts.
- Consequential impaired academic performance due to the accumulative effect of all the above indicators.



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Other studies reveal that in infants and toddlers, excessive screen time is linked to impaired cognitive development which manifests in attention deficits and latency in the achievement of standard developmental milestones, which, in turn, impact a child's readiness for school.

The older children become, the worse the impact of overindulgent screen time is. As far back as 2018, half a group of parents surveyed said that they were concerned that their child's mobile device use was negatively affecting their mental health, and nearly half stated that their child was addicted to their device. ([Is Screen Time Toxic for Teenagers? \(berkeley.edu\)](#)) Health impairments associated with screentime "addiction," particularly within the social media realm, include surges in depression, anxiety, and even suicide among this age group dating back to and steadily increasing since 2012. This whole concept has given rise to what will eventually be officially considered a new mental health condition: FOMO, or "fear of missing out." It is human nature to feel hurt, mad, or disappointed when you see a picture on social media where it looks like your friends are doing something fun together...without you because you were not invited. Couple that feeling of rejection with the baseline emotional instability that accompanies pubescence and adolescence, and you have a recipe for emotional despondency.

So, what is to be done? If you sense you have allowed your child too much freedom with technology, it is time to implement a “technology detoxification” intervention or initiative not only with your child, but for the whole family. This is not rocket science, and with time and consistency, you should see sustained benefits that will open the door to improved quality of family time and life in general, for everyone connected to the situation. Some sensible steps to take include:

1. You, the parent, must lead by example.
2. Ensure that your child has plenty of rich interaction with the real world (other family members in a technology-free environment). Make family rules governing technology interaction and exposure that you honor consistently.
3. Eliminate background TV. When you finish watching a show you have planned to watch, turn the TV off. This should apply to your vehicle's video player, as well. Promote the use of books, rather than "shows" as entertainment at least 50% of the time you are traveling in your vehicle.
4. In keeping with other measures you implement, ensure that your family's interaction with "devices" is discontinued at least two hours before bedtime. This enables the brain to wind down naturally, increasing its chances of falling asleep quickly and soundly once the lights are out.



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5. At least 30 minutes before “lights out,” engage in reading a relaxing book (rather than watching TV).
6. Keep TVs, smartphones, and computers out of your child’s bedroom completely.

The above guidelines and suggestions, accompanied by a generous portion of common sense, can assist parents in navigating this electronic jungle safely and successfully. Hopefully, the types of issues described here have not begun to impact your family, but make no mistake, they eventually can and will without effective safeguards. While you still have time, develop a plan to keep your children and family safe. Ask preemptive questions such as:

- What do I expect to accomplish by permitting my child to interact with an electronic device?
- Can my expectation(s) be achieved in non-electronic ways?
- How will I reliably monitor my child’s screen-time?
- What will be the consequence for not abiding by our family’s predetermined guidelines?
- Am I prepared to inconvenience myself should it become necessary to dial back my child’s screentime?

Finally, rely on tried-and-true support networks as you journey through this phase of parenting. You and other parents can encourage one another and hold one another accountable. And seek guidance and answers in scripture. One of my most relied upon references in times of uncertainty is a promise found in Isaiah. He states: *“Although the Lord gives you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, your teachers will be hidden no more; with your own eyes you will see them. Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it.’”* (Isaiah 30: 20-21) Do all that you can do. Listen for that faithful voice. Act upon its direction and trust the outcomes to Him.

