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Perspective | How do I reinstate screen limits for my teen?

She's been at a screen-free camp for almost seven weeks, and I want to keep it going.

By Meghan Leahy

Q: My almost-14-year-old has been away at summer camp without her phone for almost seven weeks. I want to capitalize on this device-free time and set up/reinstate limits this fall, so she can enter high school without phone time 24/7. It has been a slippery slope during remote middle school. What do you suggest?

A: If you had written to me in 2019 (pre-pandemic), I might have given you an answer that sounded more like: "You're off to a good start with your daughter being off tech. Continue it right into the fall!" These days, having limited tech and screens for a 14-year-old is wonderful for creativity, imagination, sleep habits and friendships.

But this is 2021, and we're still in the midst of a pandemic, with no signs of it going away. It simply doesn't seem feasible to expect 14-year-olds to begin high school without their phones.

The tech landscape has been changing under our noses, and the pandemic has brought this into focus. The past year-plus has taught us that the screens are here, they're becoming a bigger part of our children's lives and, aside from extreme cases, we need to teach our teens how to use technology.

Most importantly, you have to ask yourself how much of a power struggle you are willing to take on to have your teen stay off her phone.

What are your options here? First, let's remember that your daughter didn't ask to stay home from school for (depending on where you live) more than a year. To stay in school and complete her work, connect with her teachers and see her friends, she needed to be on a screen for around 10 hours a day. That's a shocking number, but almost every teen faced similar screen challenges during remote school, and it's important to remember that your family is not unique.

You have given the gift of almost seven tech-free weeks of camp to your daughter, and even though she will return to a screen (and she *will* return to a screen), the benefits are not lost on her. The fresh air, friendships, play, hard work, some boredom and relaxation were a balm to her stressed nervous system. (If only we all could have gone to an unplugged sleepaway camp.)

Call a meeting with your daughter (after she sleeps and does her laundry), and make a list of the best parts of camp. Hiking? Horses? The food? Swimming? What made your daughter the happiest, and how can you bring in even one of those elements at home? I

am not suggesting that you re-create camp. Instead, look for ways to keep her mind and body active, beyond the screens.

In another meeting, compliment your daughter on how well she handled the end of eighth grade. (You don't want to throw too much at her at once, because teens quickly become allergic to being controlled.) Acknowledge that there was no choice but for her to be on her technology, and no matter how your daughter finished middle school, find the silver lining. Next, ask for her to create a plan with you for the fall. There will certainly be less screen time simply by her being in school, so what would a reasonable afternoon and evening look like in this new normal?

There will be compromise, which means both of you lose something you want, but you are far better off working together, rather than trying to lay down the law (zero screens) or hoping it will all work out (no rules regarding screens). Your best bet is to write down what you and your teen agree to, and don't be afraid to revisit your list.

Remember: We haven't parented through a pandemic before. Everyone in your family is doing the best they can, so paying attention to the good will begin the year with hope, compassion, and lots of room for mistakes.

Screens are going to be a part of your daughter's life; keep the conversation going, keep your sense of humor and keep going. Good luck.