

# 7 Strategies For Creating A Successfully Low-Screen Summer For Your Family

*With its carefree field of possibilities, summer is an excellent time to detox your family life of screen overuse. Here's how to start.*

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On average, American kids spend the equivalent of a part-time to full-time job entertaining themselves on screens, **as I noted recently**. That's a huge loss of the far more useful, fun, and interesting things they could be doing with all that time instead. It doesn't just hurt the kids (and adults) by making them **more anxious, cruel, addicted, depressed, and stupid**, but it also deprives us of needed development towards our full potential, and hurts our neighbors and country. When we use our leisure time well, we often use it to help others, in ways big and small. Joining Cub Scouts, for example, will ensure a troop exists near more people, and needier kids will benefit more from the availability of that kind of social infrastructure. The same for attending church. Merely being outside playing increases the likelihood that kids passing by will join in. It can jumpstart a lifestyle habit that leads to better health, possibly for a lifetime, and more friendships, which helps sustain them during the hard times we all face sooner or later. Most of all, it is **COSTING THEM RELATIONSHIPS!**

The more people get together in person, the stronger their relationships are, and the more those relationships can fill people's needs privately and locally, and thus reduce the demand for a big government. In short, the antidote to big government is personal relationships, and our society's screen addictions are a relationship killer.

So if we want to be doing our part to govern ourselves and our families, and thereby reduce the pretexts for government to micromanage us and our neighbors, part of that involves not allowing screens to substitute for personal relationships. It means managing them as part of our time diets, rather than

letting them control us. Addiction is the antithesis of self-control, and only self-controlled people can preserve America's unique culture of self-government.

## You Can Make Good Behaviors More Likely

As I mentioned in [the first essay](#) of this series, which provided reasons we need to cut down our kids' (and our) use of screens for entertainment, screens can be useful. But their true use is limited, and we need to recognize those limits for our own and our kids' good. And most of us could get better at that, if we're being honest.

While certainly a large part of the disconnect between what we know and do is based on the fact that people have poor impulse control and often refuse to acknowledge we're not doing the best thing we could, I think we also don't know *how* to change bad habits. We may try, but we fail. Then we get discouraged and sometimes cynical and proclaim that we didn't need to try at all and anyone who tells you otherwise is a Judgy McJudgerson or a Supermom with impossible-to-reach parenting perfection.

Some of that is just being human. It is impossible to control oneself in every way one needs controlling. But we can set up our lives to make better decisions more likely. Any psychologist or wise person can tell you that.

This brings me to the purpose of this article, which is to suggest some ways you can plan ahead to beat the temptations to make the easy but [relationship-](#) and brain-damaging choice. With its carefree field of possibilities, summer is an excellent time to detox your family life of screen overuse. Here are some strategies to use to help make that happen. Get a piece of paper and a pen, and keep reading.

### **1. Put Your Parenting Pants On**

Now, to develop a family culture detached from obsessive-compulsive screen disorders, mom and dad have to want that to happen. They have to do the hard work of family cultivation.

It's not the kids' job to decide what the family is doing and why. It's the parents'. Our homes and children are the way we are because we allow them to be that way. We do have the power to expect better and to help our kids reach those expectations. That may, in fact, summarize the whole responsibility of being a parent.

You are the parent. So decide you're going to act like it. Mental toughness is the first step towards any successful change.

## **2. Imagine What Their Childhood Could Be**

Imagine what other things your child could be doing with three more hours per day (or 21 more hours every week, or 84 hours every month): Reading about 20 picture books. Painting or drawing several great pictures. Poking sticks into anthills. Singing **nursery rhymes** or **math facts** or **geography songs**. Developing a hobby, like Lego Robotics, bike riding, dog training, **geocaching**, whittling, baking—you name it.

Learning how to do the laundry, wash the walls of their own fingerprints, and mop the floor so mom and dad don't have to. The possibilities are endless, and thanks to Amazon and YouTube, practical self-development has never been easier.

What are some aptitudes and interests your kids have, and how could they be fed and watered? Take a few minutes to jot down some features of the childhood you want your kids to be able to look back on when they're grown. Then use the list to make a plan for it to actually happen.

## **3. Address Chokepoints**

People tend to use screens as a crutch. Toddler awake today too early and you were up last night seven times with the baby? Screen. Long time between the babysitter's and home? Screen. Kid getting too antsy while you wait in the ridiculously long weekend grocery store line? Screen.

At this point, however, you've got to know your pressure points, or you should be able to come up with them if you think about it for 30 seconds. If you have a baby, it's a given that you're going to be tired numerous mornings. If you have a commute with kids, you know that ahead of time. If your kids are hellions in the grocery store, you are well aware of this.

So stop letting your life control you, and start controlling your life. Take two minutes to write a list of the most likely screen-crutch moments in your family life: While you're making dinner and the kids are crazy. When that gamer kid comes over and picks up a controller. When your kid threatens a tantrum as a manipulation tactic to get his iPad. Whatever, write it down.

Then take another two minutes to write a list of things your children could do instead of taking the screen way out at these specific trouble spots. If you have older children (ages seven and up, perhaps), you can save this step for a 10-minute family meeting after dinner tonight or tomorrow, and they can brainstorm with you.

Then after you've got these lists, pick two or three of the most appealing ideas and prepare them. Pull some picture books out of the attic the kids haven't read in a while, or **buy some special ones**, and put them in a cloth grocery bag near the door to grab before you run a long errand. Look up some audiobooks from your library and download them onto your phone. Stick the game system in the attic so gamer kid doesn't see it when he shows up.

Get some pen and pencil activity books, or a box of sparkly markers to pull out when everything's going haywire and you need ten minutes, and hide them in the kitchen for time of need. Put together a box of special breakfast food for your kids to have only on Saturday mornings so long as they Do. Not. Bother. You. Before. Eight. Etc.

This mother has a wonderful, highly type-A set of **free summer planning printables** to get you in gear if you want to take a half hour to do this step. If

you're brain-dead on activity ideas, browse Pinterest, or [sign up to get](#) the next article in this series in your inbox, because it will give a plethora of other ideas.

#### 4. Take Different Approaches for Different Ages

Recently [the Wall Street Journal featured](#) a pro-con on kids and screen time. Now, I disagree with the pro-screen writer, Alexandra Samuel's, premise that "abstinence is not the way to teach healthy behavior." I think it's both helpful and morally right to hold both myself and my children to absolute standards, such as that temper tantrums or time-wasting are *never* okay. That doesn't mean any of us never do these things. Absolutes teach norms and goals, even if we never manage or even expect to achieve them perfectly. You can't get to the goal if you won't set or acknowledge it.

[Do what you can, and do the \*best\* you can.](#)

Yet Samuels correctly notes there are more and less effective ways to orient ourselves towards absolutes. Just banning behavior is far less effective than acting as your child's personal trainer to *transform* behavior. "My own [survey](#) of 10,000 North American parents," she says, "found that parents who strictly limit tech access are more likely to have children who get into trouble once they're finally allowed to get online, whereas parents who actively mentor their kids' screen time from a young age are able to set their children on a path toward positive, moderate tech usage."

It's no wonder that teens respond to lockdowns with rebellion when on the cusp of what should be them fully managing their own lives. You will need to do more negotiation with and put up with more whining from a screen-addicted teen than you would with a three-year-old. The teen might need to do his chores before getting the Xbox for an hour, while the three-year-old wouldn't get a screen at all.

The ideal would be molding your child's habits starting at birth and gradually letting go of the steering wheel as your child grows, as you should with not just screens but everything. But of course life is about never ideal, and it's better late and less than never and nothing. Do what you can, and do the *best* you can.

So keep your child's age and your shared history in mind as you decide what parameters your family should adopt now. Any improvement, even if small, is better than none. But also in some instances switching cold turkey is going to be best. That's up to you. Remember also that the goal is *self*-government, which requires trusting kids as they grow with increasing amounts of freedom, negotiation, and, yes, allowing them to make and learn from their mistakes.

## 5. Talk It Over With Your Kids

Children are born persons, says the 19th-century educator Charlotte Mason. That seems obvious, but it means they are not automatons. Their minds and wills need to be engaged as you parent. That doesn't mean they get their way—parents are and need to be seen as the clear authorities of their homes—but it does mean you teach them how to make good decisions by talking through yours with them after they have proven their ability to respect your authority by doing what you say. The older they get, the less you can demand and the more you must teach and persuade.

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I'd say to begin the persuasive, discussion kind of parenting, and slowly increase its use over time, when your child is about age seven, which **Rousseau** and **the Catholic Church** say is the "age of reason." Rousseau was a perfect idiot about many things, and I disagree with Catholic theology, but this is pretty accurate in my experience as a parenting rule of thumb. Young kids get told what to do, adults decide what they're going to do, and parenting is about *gradually* moving kids successfully from the first to the second.

First parents must *together* decide what you would like to happen in your home—say, a max of one hour of free-time screen usage per day for a teen, or a max of two hours per week of parent-chosen content for preschoolers. If you have younger kids, make the rules, tell the kids in advance, then enforce them: "We're going to limit screen time to finger drawing on the iPad only at doctor's appointments and two half-hour 'Paw Patrol' episodes per week from now on."

If you make rules and enforce them consistently, it cuts way down on arguments because everyone knows what's going to happen so there's no use arguing. It also gives you boundaries to stick to, because typically kids do precisely what their parents allow them to do.

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If you have older kids, talk with them about what you want for the family and why. Here are [good resources for helping explain](#). Invite them to help brainstorm potential limits and substitutes for screen time. Then establish the new rules: “Mom and I think three hours per week of ‘Fortnight’ is plenty for a young man of 12. You can decide when to use the three hours, but your homework and chores must always be done before you begin, and you need to be in bed by 9:30.”

The folks at the Wait Until 8th campaign have other good ideas for [talking to your kids](#). Many parents use a cell phone contract with their teens—[here's an example](#), and you can Google to find more. My parents in law had their kids earn TV time by getting fake money for doing chores that they could “spend” for computer time or to get dad to turn on the TV for a specified length per “dollar.” My husband says it was a great idea and we're going to try it when our kids are older.

Then, of course, as your kids age, revise your family rules as needed.

## **6. When You Fail, Get Back In the Game**

If you gorged yourself on pie one day, it would be foolish to say, “Oh, I guess there's no point in eating another vegetable ever again.” Good things are good even when we can't make ourselves live up to them. They're worth pursuing even though we know we will pursue them imperfectly. The ideal is to grow as a person over time. It's a journey.

The same is true of your new desire to replace screen addictions with more fruitful personal and family activities. When you binge your brains out one night,

or let the kids do it, acknowledge it, get over it, and do better next time. When you fall off the horse, get right back up.

## 7. Replace, Don't Just Erase

It's always much more effective for me to replace bad habits with a better substitute rather than just trying to keep myself from my cravings indefinitely. Tea instead of coffee. An apple instead of cookies.

To quit smoking, my grandpa replaced his cigarettes with hard candies. Rather than just saying, "I won't watch Netflix before bed," you can say, "Instead I will try to read for 20 minutes some book I *really* enjoy." Then set yourself up for success by putting the book right where you usually park with your tablet before bed, and tucking the tablet's docking station clear at the other side of the house. There's neurological research demonstrating the effectiveness of this trick, plus plain old experience. Try James Clear's book, "[Atomic Habits](#)," and [email list](#) to help you brainstorm dozens more strategies for replacing bad habits with good ones. The book includes a link to a free download that applies his habit-training strategies to parenting.

The next article in this series about transforming your family life by reducing screen addictions will give more ideas about what to replace screen time with—because the goal is transforming a screen-centered life into a *relationship-centered* life that brings much more happiness and fulfillment. [Sign up here](#) to make sure you don't miss it.

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