

Detox Your Kids from Screen Addiction

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Raising kids today seems to come with screens attached; multi-media screens that is. From a very early age, the world of TV, computers and cell phones have become cultural norms. Toddlers get hooked on PBS, can manipulate a mouse like breathing air, and can work the 'aps' on an iPhone better than we can. By elementary school, they are getting homework links online and know how to search the internet to spell a word, instead of using the dictionary. They use a screen for everything!



Image courtesy of Shutterstock

While TV addiction is still a concern to me as a parent- it is the multitude of screen related activities that kids utilize in their free time that has got my parental panties in a wad. Here's an example of a typical afternoon for a tween or teen: watch a few stupid shows on Disney channel, go online to check emails and hang out of Facebook, IM a few friends online, join a chat, listen to tunes and scan a few websites. After that, their cell phone chimes a text, so they attend to that, grab a snack, then head back to the TV to play a few rounds of Wii.

According to a new study by the [Kaiser Family Foundation](#), kids today spend nearly every waking moment-- except for the time in school -- using a smart phone, computer, television or other electronic device. In fact, kids ages 8-18 spend an average of seven and-a-half hours a day with various devices. That is over 53 hours per week! Many kids send and receive hundreds of texts per week, with no end in sight. In fact, their ability to multi-task simultaneously with multiple media truly boggles the mind.

I am recognizing this trend first hand at home. My four kids constantly fight over the computer in our living room. The 14 year old wants to check out guitar rifts on YouTube, the 11 year old has discovered emails and is obsessed with sending stupid notes, and the seven year old twins want to play online games. The amount of time they actually used the computer for school stuff was miniscule compared to the time they used it for everything else.

I realized how much time and energy I was spending breaking up fights, setting timers, and vainly trying to monitor their time on all these various screens, and I finally hit the wall. In one fell swoop, I made one of those parental directives that spew out of some primal place of desperation- a threat so outlandish that even I knew it was absurd. *"That's IT!"* I declared with a force like Moses admonishing the naughty Israelites for worshipping cows, *"No screens of any kind for a full week."*

The silence was deafening. What had I done? Who cares about their moaning and groaning, what in the heck was I going to DO with them for an entire week without our habitual distractions? Making a mental note to pick up a case of chardonnay, I decided to stick to my guns with this unplugged and recharge experiment; and see what happens.

Are your kids "screen addicted?" Overall, I don't think my kids were all that bad, as we are fundamentally cheap and hence a fairly low tech family. Yet, watching their ability to manage their time without having some sort of computer, television or cell phone on hand was quite an enlightening experience.

Kids who constantly have a ready-made distraction on hand lose the ability to come up with something to do, be creative, and relax their bodies and minds at the same time. The first 24 hours were completely brutal. I must have heard, "I'm bored!" a thousand times. My daughter actually got in my face and contended, "I NEED to go on Facebook MOM!" My son said he was the joke of junior high and had to translate messages to his friends to post for him during his hiatus.

To be fair, I limited my time on the computer and the phone from 3pm-bedtime as well. It was interesting to notice my internal urges to saunter over to the computer and dump the email box were pretty darn powerful! Clearly, I was screen addicted too.

Yet, inevitably, a funny thing happened. Once the kids realized there was no caving in - they gave up the fight and found other things to do. Thank God I did not try this in the dead of winter. With warm weather beckoning, the bicycles and roller blades were taken out of the garage, old crafts dug out of the closet, and the older ones played school with the younger ones -- it was pretty creepy. Our house was sort of a nice, "Mayberry-esque" place to be.

By the end of the week, the decibel level in the house had decreased dramatically. The kids seemed calmer, fought less often, slept better, and once the initial detox had passed; they did not miss it as much as they thought they would.

Change is not easy, for adults or children, and changing a habit takes at least seven days. If you are brave enough, I recommend taking on a "no-screen week" as a powerful tool to help children reset their biological batteries. The process allows kids the opportunity to find a little quiet, self-reflection, imagination and connection with others that goes far deeper than their screens will ever touch.

Parents may think they do not have control over our modern media insanity, yet we have more influence than we realize. Even though our kids' brains are capable of this level of multi-tasking, their growing bodies do not flourish in cyberspace. The body needs time to rest, be in sunlight, run around and even be bored.

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