

IS YOUR CHILD HOOKED TO Screens?



Sanjay Balasundaram is Founder and Chief Story Teller at www.keenowl.com. Award-winning KeenOwl Books have helped parents and caregivers teach life skills, share family values and traditions, and build character in young children through personalised life-lesson stories. Their books were awarded the prestigious USA-based 'Parenting Choice' Award.



Aparna Samuel Balasundaram is a psychotherapist, and Parent and Child Expert with 10 years of experience in the USA. She is the Founder of www.LifeSkillsExperts.com and www.AFlourishing.Me. They help you raise happy and confident kids, offer parent coaching, and life skills and teacher training workshops for schools.



Could you have done something different? Frankly, yes. Is it too late? No. Are you alone in this? Definitely not. Countless parents have spoken to us about their frustrations and their sense of helplessness in dealing with their child's constant need for screens.

The goal of this article is to put you on a path to more peace in your home with a practical plan to manage the use (or should we say, abuse!) of screens and inculcate a higher level of responsibility in your child regarding screen time. It's a straightforward and proven plan, but it will require patience, understanding and consistency in order to see meaningful results.

A quick disclaimer: As people who use technology frequently, we are not saying that all screens are necessarily bad for our children, rather, we believe there needs to be a clear limit on the type of age-appropriate content consumed, how much time is given and its balance with other activities.

If you are reading this article, chances are that a child you love has an unhealthy affinity to screens - where a and potentially harmful mixture of TV, Tablet, Computer, Phones and a Video Game Device - takes up a major part of his attention, energy and time. And taking away those screens, or severely limiting the time spent on them, only leads to outbursts and frayed emotions on all sides.

And in the aftermath, as you stew in your frustration, the severity of the problem slowly dawns on you. How could this happen? Do you experience a gnawing sense of guilt, perhaps? Or do you look for someone to blame? Your spouse? In-laws?

Why is screen time so important to children?

Most parents have told us that they use screens with their children for two main reasons – as responsible and aware parents, they feel screen time can be educational and makes their children digitally savvy and prepares them for their future.

Many parents also use screens as a more practical tool – where it serves as a distraction while their child is eating, or as a digital baby sitter to calm the child – so they can grab a few minutes of peace and rest. We understand, we've been there ourselves.

For most children, however, the heart condition that hooks them to television or games is being in control, a sense of achievement or their imagination being fired.

We need to first understand the psychology and physiology that drives and fuels this insatiable appetite for screens and entertainment in our children.

At their core, games and television satisfy an innate desire for control, exemplified by the remote control - "I don't like a channel – change". Games go a step further in conferring this sense of control by creating environments and experiences that the gamer (your child) – controls.

Another reason for this pull of television and games is the excitement of multi-sensory stimulation. An immersive game is designed to attack as many of your senses that it can to pull you in and keep you engaged. At a physiological level, research into brain chemistry shows that a focused amount of screen time can cause a sensory overload accompanied by the release of dopamine – which gives a pleasing high like an addiction to sugar!

A heightened sense of accomplishment is another reason for our kids getting hooked. Regardless of what the real world experiences might be, our children can always find ways to be winners in the virtual world. The drive is to better a score, or to get to the next level. We wanted to end this list with an important reason for attraction to screens, and that is tapping



of the child's imagination. By creating avatars and engaging in role-playing games, our children feed their fertile imaginations.

The Approach to managing screen time

Let us break it down into three steps: A – C – E. ‘A’ stands for Assess; ‘C’ for Connect and ‘E’ for Encourage. This is a heart-centred parenting model that has been in use for close to a decade. We believe it works because it emphasises the heart-to-heart connection between a parent and child, and focuses on enhancing your relationship, while helping you correct behaviour.

Step 1 ASSESS

The first step in developing a solution for your family is get a sense as to how big of a problem this might be for you.

Complete the assessment for your child by checking the cell that best represents your experience. Total your scores to determine if your child is hooked on screens:

		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Does your child		1	2	3	4	5
1	Use a screen (tablet/phone/video game device/TV) every day (for more than 1.5 hours)?					
2	Attempt to hide his use of screens from you?					
3	Become pre-occupied about when he can play next on the tablet, or watch on TV?					
4	Get restless, angry or moody if his use of screens is restricted?					
5	Give up social and sporting activities in exchange for screens?					
6	Lie to you about how much he is using screens?					
7	Avoid homework, hobbies and other school work because he got lost in screens?					
8	Require screens to ‘calm’ down?					
9	Try to convince you to increase his time on screens?					
10	Show signs of mental fatigue, tired eyes, poor body posture?					
Column Totals		# of cells checked in column x 1	# of cells checked in column x 2	# of cells checked in column x 3	# of cells checked in column x 4	# of cells checked in column x 5
Total of all columns						

Here is what your Score means:

Total Score	Interpretation
10-23	Safe

Your child is still in the safe zone and that is a good place to be! In all probability, your child uses screens to as a way to relax. Socialising, playing, homework and other important activities are not negatively impacted. There may be times [like holidays] that your child tends to overdo screen time, but as long as that is an exception, the rules you have already set are working. We would encourage you to talk to your child about the ways he can 'create' too. (We talk more about this 'Consume Vs. Create' strategy later in this article.) A word of caution, for neurological and psychological reasons, it is very easy for children to get hooked to screens, so continue to be attentive to your child in this area.

24-37	Under Observation
-------	-------------------

Your child may be on his way to becoming hooked. Be conscious of how much time he is spending on screens and do set some rules. He can still 'consume' screens every day; but not more than 30 minutes a day. Let him choose which screen he wants. In addition to these 30 minutes, he can spend another 30 minutes on screens to 'create' [we talk more about this 'Consume Vs. Create' strategy later].

Also, encourage him to play outdoors, read or pursue other interests and hobbies.

38-50	On the Road to being Hooked
-------	-----------------------------

It sounds like your child is hooked! This may also negatively impact his behaviour, his grades and he will be prone to get restless when screens are not available to him.

You have to be very firm, in setting limits and rules. Be warned, it will not be easy and your child will fight it! Stay strong for his sake.

Be aware of how much time he's spending on the screens. For starters, he should not be playing games every day; limit it to three times a week during school week and one day on the weekend. Ensure that total screen time to 'consume' is not more than an hour a day. Grant him 30 minutes to 'create'.



Everyday Parenting

Step 1 CONNECT

In this step, we focus on balancing instruction and love, which will build a stronger relationship between you and your child.

There are three ways in which we have seen success in increasing a child's self-control and responsibility in managing screen time:

Consume & Create

The first approach we have shared with thousands of parents is the 'Consume & Create' approach. This approach uses a Screen-Time Contract to document the rules for consuming content on screens, but balances it with a requirement to do something creative as well. So the deal is simple: if children consume content...they also have to create content. By 'creating' content we mean encouraging your child to use screen-based apps to child to draw, write, sing, compose, paint, write code, design - anything that helps them tap into their fertile imaginations and express their creativity.

The Screen Time Contract works because it gives your child a sense of ownership and responsibility. It also allows for a respectful sharing of concerns and needs on both sides and clear consequences of breaking the contract, either by you, or your child.

Do not use this Screen Time Contract as a way of punishing your child, but rather position it as a way of that you both can get what you want without fighting and screaming.

Find a peaceful moment to work this through with your child. In our experience, when positioned properly, your child will sign the contract. Feel free to build on this Screen Time contract and develop one personalised to your child and home.





NAME OF CHILD _____ AGE _____ YEARS CONTRACT DATE ____/____/____

I am allowed to use the following: Computer Tablet SmartPhone Internet Social Media
 Video game systems Personal media devices (e.g. Kindle) TV Other: _____



(I WILL...)



(I WILL NOT..)

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use Screens to <u>consume</u> content for ___ hours on weekdays and ___ hours on weekends (across all screens) 2. Use these screens only in public areas or my bedroom [not in private areas like the bathroom] 3. I will <u>create</u> content for _____ hours in a week. 4. Remember that not everything I see, read or hear online is true. If I am confused, I will speak to my parents about it and not get in trouble for it 5. Give my passwords to my parents and know that they can sign in anytime. 6. Stay away from cyber bullying- teasing others online | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Not argue with my parents once my set time is up. 2. Share any personal information online [like my address, phone number, pictures] 3. Not create new accounts or download things without my parents knowledge. 4. Connect with strangers online. |
|---|--|

(IN EXCHANGE MY PARENTS WILL...)

- Not question me about why I am using a screen or tell me to stop, during the agreed upon time.
- Talk to me about what worries them, instead of just saying NO to some video games/shows
- Understand that screens are important to me and will help me find some media/games/shows that are fun and they are okay with them too



(IF I MESS UP..)

[CHILD] I know that the use of screens is a privilege, not a right. So, if I break the contract then...

[PARENT] I know that my child needs some screen time as entertainment. So, if I break the contract then...

(CHILD signature _____) { PARENT signature _____
PARENT signature _____ }

Everyday Parenting

Content Watch

A second approach is to frequently check the content your child consumes – games, apps, shows on TV or on the internet. One way to do that is to check the TV listings and browser logs ahead of time, and choose shows that are age-appropriate and align with your family's values. You could also choose shows that foster their interest in learning and curiosity such as Discovery Channel, National Geographic, History channel and the like. Your child might make a fuss, so you will need to invest in helping him discover his area of interest in these educational shows. Perhaps you could also find a balance between these shows and others that children pick on their own.

Family Fun Time Warp

A third approach is to create a Family Fun Time Warp – where you make time stand still by purposefully create fun alternatives to screens – through a shared family activity. You can play a board game, start a game of hide and seek, play outside, cook a meal together, work on crafts or hobbies, and dance to music. The possibilities for fun without screens are endless — so put them away and build memories that will last a lifetime.

Step 3 ENCOURAGE

The E in our A-C-E approach is for Encouragement. This step is designed to see you being successful in applying these heart-centred parenting strategies on a consistent basis.

To increase your chances of success with the Screen Time Contract:

- Stick it in a place where it will be noticed...on a fridge, or a pin board in the child's room.
- Be consistent in applying the contract and its consequences.
- Be fair – rules apply equally to parents and children.
- Be a good role model in the responsible use of screens. Let's face it...it's difficult to get a child to obey your rules on screen time, if you yourself are parked in front of the screen for a good part of your day. You too will need to find a balance, and give the "I'm working... so that does not count" argument a rest.
- Lastly, be patient. On average, it will take at least 4 weeks to see the benefits of new behaviours - your and your child's - take effect.

Screen time battles are one of the most common sources of conflict in our homes. So if your child is not old enough yet, get ready for it! For the rest of you, we encourage you to patiently and consistently apply the ACE model for screens. We know they work.

– Sanjay Balasundaram
& Aparna Samuel Balasundaram