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SUMMERTIME OFTEN LEADS TO EXCESS SCREEN TIME FOR CHILDREN

Expert offers tips to help find balance between the time kids spend online and outside

Orlando, Fla - One of the joys of summer for kids is having less to do and more time to do it. For parents, however, that can be nightmare. "There is much less structure to a child's day this time of year, and for millions of children, summertime means overindulging in screen time," said [Jean Moorjani, MD](#), a pediatrician at [Arnold Palmer Hospital for Children](#) in Orlando, Florida. "Between social media, apps, video games and chatting with friends, kids often spend hours more each day looking at screens in the summer, and they are starting much earlier in life."

In fact, according to a recent [survey](#), more than half of all children get their first cell phone by age 6, just as they're starting first grade. Three out of four children now own tablets and nearly as many have video game consoles. "There is so much vying for a child's attention, it doesn't take much for kids to get preoccupied during the summer months and spend a lot more time online than they do outside."

To help families find a healthy balance, Moorjani has some tips.

Do more than set time limits - The current [recommendations](#) from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) puts a 2 hour time limit of screen time per day for children over the age of 2. But Moorjani says screens are so pervasive these days, merely setting time limits may not be enough. "It's not just how much time your child spends on their devices, it's the content they're consuming. Parents need to know exactly what their children can see and control that content as much as possible."

Consider this: the current recommendations based on setting time limits for children published in 2011 and only addressed things like television and video games. However, because the first generation of tablets had just come out at that time, the guidelines don't mention the use of tablets or smartphones by children. "We can't watch our kids 24 hours a day to make sure they honor time limits, but we can control what kinds of content they have access to, and parents should take an active role in doing just that," said Moorjani.

Remember, not all screen time is bad - There is a difference between a child simply watching something on a device and actually interacting with it. "It's the difference between consumption and creation," said Moorjani. "If a child is passively consuming media, it's not doing them any good, but there are some 80,000 apps considered educational that may actually help them." During the summer months, in fact, many parents use educational apps to help their children retain and even sharpen things like language and math skills.

A word of caution from the [AAP](#), however: there are apps that claim to be educational, but to date,

there has been little research to validate their educational value. To learn more about age-appropriate content, go to www.common sense media.org.

Set up media-free zones in your house - One way to balance social media with personal interaction is to establish media-free zones in your house. “Make a rule that in certain places, or at certain times, there are to be no devices whatsoever,” said Moorjani. “The family table is a perfect place to start. No matter if we’re eating breakfast, lunch or dinner, the table is the one place where we communicate face-to-face and can really put the focus back on the family.”

Bedrooms are another important media-free zone. [Research](#) has shown that the presence of screens in a child’s room - from televisions to smartphones - leads to later bedtimes and often serious disruptions in sleep patterns. Without rigid schedules during the summer months, kids may be more tempted to use screens in their bedrooms late into the night.

To prevent the misuse of screens, make a family charging station so that all devices can be accounted for and monitored when they are not to be in use.

Don’t leave kids to their own devices - The reason kids may not use their electronic devices as much during the school year is because they simply don’t have the time. Phones and tablets are forbidden in many classrooms, and if your child takes part in extracurricular activities, they may not have access to their devices until later in the evening.

“If a busy schedule works during the school year, there is no reason it can’t work during the summer months, too,” said Moorjani. “With a little pre-planning, you can sign your kids up to play sports, go to camps, do volunteer work and a myriad of other activities that will limit their screen time opportunities.”

Parents can also assign chores to children that require them to spend time outdoors and may want to consider creating physical challenges for kids to complete. “Set a goal for a certain number of miles they ride their bike each week, for example, or help them organize neighborhood basketball or softball tournaments,” said Moorjani. “If you don’t want your child staring at a screen this summer, give them something else to do. You may be surprised how much they like it.”

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