

Parents Struggle With Screen Time Limits For Kids

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“Is it true that Silicon Valley tech executives don’t let their kids use screens?” I was on the East Coast speaking with parents and once again was asked the question I can’t seem to escape.

I’ve observed with curiosity the ongoing buzz about how Silicon Valley parents – particularly those who are technology executives and investors – keep their children off screens. These stories tend to create low-grade anxiety as well as a parentshaming aimed at those who let their kids use screens.

Over the past 15 years, I’ve worked as an educational consultant focused on executive functioning issues with tweens and teens in an office about 10 km from Google’s, Facebook’s and Apple’s main campuses. More than a thousand middle school and high school students have walked into my office over the years – including those whose parents are technology CEOs, executives, venture capitalists and other investors – to discuss their work habits, distractions and the effects of everyday technology in their lives.

It’s no secret that social media and technology use have become a hot topic – especially because there has been little research into the relationship between teens’ technology and social media use and long-term brain development and mental wellness.

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) recently announced the launch of the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) study, which will track more than 11,000 teens to investigate factors that influence young people, including the impact of screen use on brain development. Research has linked digital media use to poorer sleep quality and duration, which, as sleep researcher Matthew Walker notes in his book *Why We Sleep*, can easily affect focus, concentration, mood and mental well-being.

After spending the past year traveling to more than 35 cities consulting with schools on social media, technology and student wellness issues, as well as visiting many of the schools in Silicon Valley, I’ve found it’s a fallacy that most parents working in technology want their kids to live completely screenfree lives. It certainly may be easier to keep younger children from using screens, but all the Silicon Valley parents I interviewed agreed it isn’t realistic once children are school-aged. Instead, they are focused on finding ways to make sure their kids have healthy experiences online and in real life - and in some ways are further along than other parents in doing so.

Take, for example, Loren Cheng, director of product management for Facebook Messenger Kids and father of a preschooler, a second-grader and a fifth-grader. He lets his children use technology to promote creation, collaboration or communication. His second-grader loves

Minecraft and recently used online video tutorials to build an elaborate castle with underground traps. His fifth-grader messages him in the afternoon when he is still at work, conversations he's not sure they would have otherwise.

These activities point to an important and often overlooked distinction in how and when technology is used. For instance, a child passively staring at a screen is different from one who is actively communicating with a grandparent via FaceTime or using online tools to develop creative projects, say, to create animation or to edit videos.

For younger kids, strict guidelines can be critical. But as children get older, it's important for parents to have conversations with them and to establish times for them to be offline. Monitoring apps such as Bark or OurPact work best in concert with conversations around use, not in lieu of them. Of course, what works for one family might not work for another. But as a rule, it is often more effective to put rules in place proactively rather than to try to cut back on screen time once a child has already developed screen habits. Another good option is to provide natural steps for incremental usage - say, starting with a flip phone and then moving to a smartphone, or creating an environment in which access to a smartphone or screen is the exception rather than the default.

"The only thing that works [for us] is very rigid rules," says Mike Popek, who worked at Google for nearly 14 years in different management roles - and went to junior high and high school with me. He and his wife have three children, ages nine, seven and three, and live in Palo Alto.

His older children are each allowed an hour of screen time per night at the computer in the living room - but only after homework is done and dinner has been served.

The family makes no distinction between educational videos and interactive experiences and scrolling through information online during that hour. So even though his kids use screens on a regular basis, he admits that "we're probably stricter than most."

"There's no way you can just say no to screens. It's not possible," says Popek. "They'll be at a huge disadvantage in their lives if they have no experience with this type of technology." Some area parents may disagree with him, such as those whose children attend the Waldorf School of the Peninsula, which is often cited as the screen-free zone where technology executives send their kids. The Waldorf community is tiny, though, serving fewer than 400 kids in an area with more than 15,000 students. And even Waldorf uses computers as teaching tools in high school classrooms.

Melanie Wendt, a school therapist at a public middle school in Silicon Valley, deals with these issues both at work and at home. The students she sees - some of whom have parents in tech - spend much of their time on their phones and playing video games. She and her husband established boundaries for their own boys, ages eight and 10. Her older son has an iPad, which he uses one to two hours a week, and the boys have an Xbox. But they are not allowed to play shooting video games, instead spending time on FIFA and other sports games.

She feels the single most important strategy to promote healthy online and real-life experiences is to be consistent.

Wendt has found that her sons are more aware of their own screen use and the use of others. They'll notice when they are out eating dinner and everyone at a table near them is engrossed in their phones. "I feel like I've raised awareness," she says. She thinks it doesn't make sense to take a draconian approach to limiting technology use. "By cutting something out of their life, it makes it more interesting. That's why we decided not to completely take it away."

Dan Zigmond, director of analytics at Instagram, has two daughters, ages 16 and 18, both of whom have smartphones and regularly spend time online and using different apps. For him, "it's less about having strict rules and more about just having lots of conversations about it." His children will call him out if they think he is on his phone too much, and as a family they don't have screens at mealtimes. They will "sometimes take vacations where we're completely off the grid."

Helping children and teens create consistent, compartmentalized time offline is key, though what that looks like can differ depending on children's ages and their susceptibility to overusing technology. Keeping phones out of the bedroom at night and tracking, monitoring and shutting down usage with tools such as Apple's Screen Time or Google's Family Link can create consistent structure and conversations around awareness.

I occasionally meet parents who try to shield their kids from technology, and that can quickly become counterproductive, given that so many kids communicate using devices. A few years ago, a ninth-grade girl and her mother came into my office because the daughter was miserable at her new school and wanted to transfer. Within a few minutes, I discovered that the mother refused to give her daughter a phone, reasoning that her daughter's new classmates "could call our house if they wanted to make plans." But most of her daughter's classmates were texting or messaging - and her daughter felt alone and ostracized.

That ninth-grader's experience relates to a recent Pew Research Center report, *Teens' Social Media Habits and Experiences*, which found that 81 percent of teens feel more connected to their friends using social media and that 69 percent feel as though social media helps them interact with a more diverse set of people. At the same time, teens still struggle with information overload and what I call the all-about-the-likes personal values development, in which likes, loves, comments and followers have become the new barometers of popularity.

Katy Roybal is director of education technology at a Silicon Valley independent school with an iPad program. She is also the mother of three boys (a college freshman, a high school junior and a second-grader). She stresses that kids should recognize the importance of controlling their own device and what they put online.

To help tweens and teens become more aware, I recommend parents require kids to do a little research before downloading any new apps or opening new online accounts. Who founded and created the app? Have there been any recent related scandals in the news? Can they find out anything about the app's data privacy and cybersecurity issues? This process of investigation can

help kids actively reflect on how and where they should spend time online. And, I should add, it's no less applicable for apps that are marketed as educational, as the FBI recently warned.

In the end, as Instagram's Zigmond puts it, "the basic issues around parenting and helping to set boundaries and helping kids make healthy choices around all kinds of things are kind of the same, no matter what." Parents around the country are more in line with Silicon Valley parents than they might believe: We're all trying to figure it out in an ever-changing digital world. It's a good idea to keep up the pressure on companies to protect children. And less shaming and more proactive solutions will go a long way in creating a safer, happier, healthier world for kids online and in real life.

Ana Homayoun is an author of three books, including *Social Media Wellness: Helping Tweens and Teens Thrive in an Unbalanced Digital World*.