



WATCH OUT FOR THESE 6 SCREEN-TIME TRAPS

12 OCTOBER, 2016 BY ALAN RALPH

Increasingly, screen-time is taking up so much of our time, and **our kids' time**, that alarm bells are ringing.

From TVs to tablets to smart phones and public screens, it's possible to spend a large portion of our lives in intimate contact with this technology. And it's often very seductive, keeping us informed and up-to-date with what's going on all around us; becoming a seemingly natural part of every moment of every day.

But of course there is a downside – several, in fact! Here are 6 screen traps to watch out for (especially in relation to adolescents):

1. **The more screen time, the less physical activity.** This is part of what's feeding (pun intended) the growing obesity epidemic in children and adolescents.
2. **A decline in the ability to decode voice tone, facial expression and body language.** Emerging research appears to show a connection between personal interactions based on texting, and becoming less skilled at face-to-face interaction.
3. **Fewer opportunities for positive, social family activities** where daily events can be discussed, social skills developed and relationships strengthened.
4. **Making it easier to bully and intimidate others.** Online communication seems to remove some of the limits imposed on saying certain things aloud, and face-to-face.
5. **Blurring of the line between reliable and unreliable information.** Given the vast amount of content being displayed 24/7, many adults, let alone teenagers, find themselves believing (and sharing) things like fake news items, health hoaxes, and opinions masquerading as facts.
6. **Later sleep onset and poorer sleep quality.** Exposure to screens prior to going to bed has been shown to disrupt our natural sleep rhythms — not great, given that adolescents are already likely to suffer from night-owl tendencies.

So what are parents to do? As with most issues, there are some simple and effective strategies available, some of which I'll cover in an upcoming blog. However, implementing them will take some effort, so seek help if you're struggling to get on top of the issues.



6 SCREEN-TIME SOLUTIONS FOR YOUR TEENAGER (AND YOU)

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A few weeks ago, I wrote about some of the problems associated with too much screen time. These include the ones many of us know about, such as sleep disturbance and lack of physical activity, and less obvious ones such as a potential decline in critical thinking skills. And it's worth noting these problems can be just as significant for adults as for children and teenagers.

Happily, there are some simple things you can do, starting tonight, to help mitigate the onslaught of screen-o-mania. Be aware that as well as setting boundaries for your teenagers, you need self-discipline too. But don't be too hard on yourself and give up if you can't achieve an ideal balance straight away. It's about keeping long-term goals in mind and working as a team.

1. **Set limits and create screen-free zones (yes, even the TV).** It's best if you have a rule like this right from when kids are young, but if not, agree on when you're all committed to switching off. This is particularly important when allowing screens would mean lack of communication, such as during family meals and driving short distances.
2. **Get everyone to understand the importance of no screen light within a couple of hours before sleeping.** Reduce opportunities for screen time in bedrooms by having a rule that devices are not kept in those areas, especially at night. This is tricky when you have a teenager who needs to use their computer to do homework and assignments, but at least you can keep phones and gaming devices out of bedrooms. Rather than leaving everyone to their own devices – literally – pop in now and then to make sure they're haven't gone from Physics to Facebook. If kids say they can't sleep or study without music, you could try going old school with a radio, CD or MP3 player.
3. **Negotiate access to screen time** in return for doing chores, homework and other activities that may not be so appealing.
4. **Teach discretion and evaluation as part of your regular family conversations.** Encourage open discussion rather than laying down unrealistic limits. This is also a way of checking what information and content your teenagers are looking at and helping to sift and sort the useful from the useless. Teach kids and teenagers to learn to identify sites and posts or content that are illegal, pornographic, dubious, bullying (or even all of the above) and agree on what actions will be taken, when and by whom. And lead by example – if you're downloading pirated copies of music and movies for them, you'll have a hard time convincing them to stick to the rules in other areas.
5. **Be enthusiastic about the positives to keep the conversation open.** While some parents are struggling with their own screen addictions, others have the opposite problem. If you feel (or appear to be) completely anti-technology, you'll find it hard to have respectful communication about the issues. Ask your kids to educate you about what's new and have them show you how to download new apps, get updates and other cyber-goodies.
6. **Look for opportunities to increase physical activity.** It doesn't have to be a gym subscription or an ultra-marathon. Just going for a morning or evening walk is a good start. Have you been to the local park since your kids were little? What about trying something new like rock-climbing, sailing, barefoot bowls, or flying a kite? Have some interesting real-life experiences that go beyond what's offered by a screen.