



Tackling Technology: Guidance from Dr. Mom

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Electronic entertainment (television, computer games, the Internet) is a reality of contemporary life, and few parents would dispute that educational programming and computers can enhance our children's learning and inform them about world news, sports, nature, music, other cultures, and much more.

But we also know that the media has the potential to convey harmful messages and that *excess TV and internet exposure can have negative effects on children's health, including diminished social skills, increased violent behavior, decreased physical activity, and increased childhood obesity.* As parents, we are obligated to limit the total daily "screen time" our children spend watching television, surfing the Internet, sending instant messages, or playing computer games. It also goes without saying that we must monitor the quality of the TV programming our children view and the web sites they visit.

Parents have a lot to teach their children to prepare them to be responsible adults. We impart information about nutrition, safety, hygiene, values, spirituality, self-discipline, interpersonal relationships, time management, sexuality, and countless other important issues. It may sound simplistic, but our best tool to convey our wisdom and positively shape our children's behavior is a quality parent-child relationship.

Here are some basic things you can do to strengthen your relationship with your child and convince him or her that you are on the same team for life.

- **Create a Warm, Loving Parent-Child Bond.** A warm, affectionate bond and a positive emotional tone in the home promote a spirit of cooperation and understanding.
 - Stop struggling with your child and channel more energy into building closeness, trust, positive communication, and caring.
 - Make time each day to give each of your children your undivided attention—even 20 minutes will make a difference. Ways to communicate your love and acceptance include playing a game, preparing a meal together, taking a walk, or talking about your child's school day.

- **Be a Good Role Model.** From the time children are very young, they take their cues for how to speak and act from their parents.
 - Let your own positive example of self-discipline, integrity, cooperation, handling disagreements, and showing respect for others motivate and instruct your child.
 - Because children also imitate the behavior of other role models, monitor your child's media exposure and help him/her choose friends whose character will be a positive influence.
- **Promote Your Child's Self-Esteem.** One of the most important parenting responsibilities is giving each child a healthy sense of individuality, self-worth, and self-confidence. Children who feel good about themselves are more likely to experience positive relationships, academic success, healthy risk-taking, resiliency, and the desire for self-improvement.
 - Express your love and affection frequently and spend time with your child to help convince them that they are cherished and valued.
 - Encourage your children's unique interests, acknowledge their efforts and emerging independence, and help them learn from their mistakes to build their sense of competence to handle life's challenges.
- **Give Your Child an Appropriate Sense of Power and Control.** Children who are given a healthy sense of their personal power are less likely to provoke power struggles with their parents.
 - Provide daily structure and routines and establish family rules to reduce uncertainty and give children a comforting sense of predictability by clarifying the expectations on them.
 - Foster your children's unique identity by spending individual time with them. Acknowledge and accept their feelings and opinions, respect their likes and dislikes, and avoid making comparisons among siblings.
 - Give your children age-appropriate choices, and help them appreciate the consequences of the decisions they make. For example, when disciplining your child, a parent might offer, "You can apologize for that remark or go to your room. You choose."
- **Acknowledge and Accept Tough Feelings.** Discerning, accepting, and affirming children's vulnerable emotions convince them that their feelings do count. Openly sharing your feelings will help your child become more comfortable talking about his or her own emotions.

- Practice *active listening* by reflecting what your child has said, without judging, "You wish we didn't have to limit your time on the computer. You really love playing those games."
- Make an effort to acknowledge and accept your child's feelings, especially difficult ones like anger and sadness, as you impose a necessary limit. You don't have to actually change your discipline decision; just let your child know that you recognize their feelings and that they are legitimate, "I know you really like this show, and I'm afraid you've watched enough TV today." It takes only a few extra seconds to acknowledge children's feelings and make them feel understood as we calmly keep repeating the limit.
- Use the connecting word "**and**" instead of "**but**" because "and" allows two ideas to co-exist and doesn't negate the thought that comes before it the way "but" does: "I know it will be hard to cut back on your TV time, *and* I think our family is making the right decision about this."

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1) How can parents determine whether their children are spending too much time with technology in the home?

If you believe that your child's TV viewing habits, electronic game playing, or computer use is linked to any of the following problems, they are probably spending too much time on electronic entertainment. Since such behaviors also can be a sign of childhood depression or other emotional problems, you should discuss your concerns with your pediatrician.

- Declining school performance or failure to complete homework
- Decreased time spent socializing with friends
- Decreased physical activity or outdoor play
- Frequent arguments over time spent on electronic entertainment
- Sleep deprivation due to late night computer use or TV viewing
- Preferring electronic entertainment over family activities
- Increase in aggressive behavior, including fighting or bullying

- Increase in backtalk, put downs, and sarcasm commonly used in TV sitcoms and talk shows
- Weight gain due to sedentary lifestyle and increased snacking

2) **As a pediatrician and the mother of five adult children, how do you counsel parents about limiting electronic entertainment in their home?**

There are many things parents can do to monitor and limit their children's exposure to television, the Internet, and other electronic entertainment. The following recommendations will help you better control the impact of the media on your child.

Recommendations for Children's Television Viewing:

- The AAP recommends that children not have televisions or video games in their bedrooms, as this decreases parents' ability to monitor what is being watched and increases children's total viewing time.
- Until more research is available, the AAP does not recommend television for children two years of age or younger. Children over two years should be limited to 1 to 2 hours a day of educational, non-violent programming.
- Use the TV Parental Guide rating system to avoid programs that contain sexual or violent content. Better yet, parents can use a v-chip computer device to block such programs from their televisions. All new televisions since the year 2000, with at least 13 inch screens, now have the v-chip.
- When possible, parents should watch TV with their children, so they can talk about what they are viewing. By discussing both the programs and commercial advertising, parents can help "filter" the media messages their children receive and teach them to think critically about all media messages.
- Parents should not allow "channel surfing," turning on the TV to "see what's on," or having the TV constantly on in the background. Instead, have children use a program guide to pre-select what programs will be watched each week.
- Parents should become acquainted with the many quality children's videos that often will be preferable to regular television programming.
- Parents need to be positive role models for their children by limiting their own TV viewing.

- It is good for families to periodically get away from the TV/computer habit, for example, by designating a weekly “turn off the TV” family night, or unplugging all electronic entertainment for a weekend, or living without electronic entertainment while on a family vacation.
- Many families will appreciate the option of choosing the EyeTimer monitoring system to set limits on their children's use of electronic entertainment and instill practical time-management skills.

Recommendations for Children’s Use of the Computer/Internet:

- Set firm limits on the amount of time your child can spend online or playing computer games each week and the web sites they can visit.
- Keep the computer in plain view in your home, for example in the family room, where you can periodically look in on what your child is doing.
- Explore site blocking and other parental control software and services that can filter or block inappropriate Web sites and materials. Realize, however, that blocking programs are not failsafe and cannot replace your direct supervision.
- Children are vulnerable to exploitation while online. Make sure your child knows to NEVER provide any personal identification information over the Internet, such as their name; address; phone number; age; information about their parents, family, or friends; school name or location; credit card numbers; or passwords.

3) What is the best approach to begin a dialogue with your children/family about the time they spend with electronic entertainment devices?

The best practice is for parents to hold regular family meetings to discuss issues big and small. If you don't have regular family meetings, plan a time when everyone can get together without distractions. You might prepare a special treat to create a positive atmosphere.

- **Use “I-Messages” Instead of “You-Messages.”** Parents often begin talking about problem behavior by telling children what they are doing wrong, “You watch too much TV” or “You’re always playing computer games.”
 - “You-messages” come across as critical, nagging, judgmental, and blaming.

- Try phrasing your concern using an “*I-message*,” such as “I don’t like the way we argue over how much time is spent on TV.”
 - “I-messages” are less emotionally charged because, instead of focusing on your child, they communicate the effect of your child’s behavior on you, “I’m concerned and don’t like to feel as if I’m nagging you all the time.”
- **Allow Your Child to Express Her Feelings.** Expect to hear some grumbling when you talk about limiting electronic entertainment, “No fair!” “I don’t want to watch less TV.” “I’m not on the computer that much.”
 - Try not to over-react to this type of normal venting. Unless your child is disrespectful, think of these comments as harmless background noise and simply ignore them.
 - Let your child know that her feelings are legitimate by saying something like, “I can tell you’re not happy about decreasing the number of hours you’re online.”
 - Remember to use the connecting word “and” instead of “but” to give proper emphasis to the first part of your message, “I’m really pleased that you’ve kept your grades up, and we’re still going to cut back your TV hours on week nights.”
- **Outline the Division of Responsibility in Electronic Entertainment.** Explain that parents are responsible for deciding *how much* time their children spend on electronic entertainment, while children get to choose *what and when* (within acceptable choices) they tune in or log on.
 - It’s important for your child to appreciate the personal power she has in choosing how to budget her time.
 - Emphasize your child’s flexibility in distributing time for various electronic entertainment activities over an entire week.
- **Solicit Your Child’s Input in Implementing the Plan.** Your child may legitimately feel misunderstood when you announce your intention to cut back on your family’s electronic entertainment. It’s important that you convey that the two of you are not

adversaries and that you genuinely care about their interests and concerns.

- Ask open-ended questions to get your child talking about her TV and computer habits and avoid making judgments about her responses. Inquire, “How much TV do you think you should watch each week?” or “What are some of your favorite programs? If you had to rank them, which shows would you choose first, and which ones are less important to you?”
- Inquire about how your child might enjoy spending their extra hours each week once their electronic entertainment is cut back. Would they like to spend more time with their friends, start a hobby, begin music lessons, volunteer to help others, or play a sport? Share your own plans for using your extra time.
- If possible, try to implement one or more of your child's suggestions about setting time limits or dealing with infractions. Children are more likely to cooperate in solving a family problem when they feel they have been given some input in setting limits and establishing consequences for breaking the rules.
- Instead of giving the impression that you are trying to micromanage your child's life, convey your confidence in their ability to make good decisions and learn from their choices. You can say something like, “I'm sure you will figure out a way to budget your time that's right for you.”

4) **How can parents motivate their kids to accept an electronic monitoring tool?**

It's important that parents present the electronic monitoring system, not as a punishment, but as a way to help the whole family develop better time management skills. Focus on the value of effective time management in allowing children to fit their many valued activities into a week. While children will automatically focus on what is being lost (electronic entertainment hours), you can help them see that they are opening a space in their weekly schedule that can be filled with even more desirable activities.

- Be a positive role model for your kids by establishing your own computer and television allowances and by talking about the new choices you are making about how to spend your time.

- Children crave one-on-one time with their parents and will feel rewarded by the chance to spend more time with you. Take your child to a restaurant once a week and give her your undivided attention. Go on walks, jointly prepare a meal, or watch a favorite program together.
- Set children on a trajectory of discovery outside of the home with weekly trips to the library, children's museum, zoo, or park.
- Create weekly incentives for children by rewarding them with additional electronic minutes when schoolwork or household chores are completed.
- Recognize and encourage your child's sincere efforts and improvement, rather than focusing on the fact that they can do better. Your child is likely to put forth even more effort if you acknowledge their "baby steps" in the right direction.
- Empathize with your child when they are frustrated about running out of electronic entertainment time, "I'm sorry your allotted time is gone already." "That's a big disappointment." "Would it help if I sat down with you and we looked at how you might revise your budget to make your hours last longer?"

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