



## Screen Time: Principles for Parents of Teenagers

**Susan Swick, MD, MPH**

*Chief, Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*

*Director, The Resilience Project*

Newton-Wellesley Hospital

(617) 243-6490

The average teenager spends 9 hours on a screen every day. While some of this time is homework on computers, relaxing with videogames and staying connected to friends and family, many parents are reasonably worried that their teenagers are spending excessive time caught in the glow of their smartphone. There is disagreement among experts about the optimal balance between the potential developmental risks and benefits of screen time. Although there is no one-size-fits-all approach, there are principles that can guide us as we consider the potential risks and benefits for our teenage children. Parents are, of course, the experts on their own child – their talents, interests, challenges, vulnerabilities and developmental progress. Equipped with these guiding principles, parents can set individualized ground rules, and adjust them as their children grow into young adults.

### **First: Use Adolescent Development as your Guide**

Consider the following areas that are **essential to healthy development in adolescence** as guideposts to help you in setting reasonable ground rules: building independence, cultivating healthy social relationships, learning about their identity, managing their strong emotions and developing the skills of self-care. If screen time supports these developmental areas, then it's probably healthy. If it interferes with them, then not. And remember, you can discuss these principles with your children as well.

### **Independence**

*Key Questions:*

- Does their use of a device enable them to function more independently, i.e. to arrange for rides, manage their schedules, homework, shifts, etc., on their own? Could it be done with a “dumb” device (text/call only)?

### **Social Relationships**

*Key Questions:*

- Are they engaged in two-way communication with their devices?
- Are they staying connected to friends with whom they have a genuine, substantial relationship?

One-way viewing (Instagram, Facebook) with superficial acquaintances may promote anxiety and depression, does not facilitate deepened relationships, and may be using up time that they could be investing in genuine social connections. But if they are using them to stay connected to good friends who live far away or just have different schedules, they can promote genuine, satisfying, bilateral social connections.

### **Investigating and Experimenting with Interests (Identity)**

*Key Questions:*

- Is their use of devices facilitating this genuine exploration (setting up internships, practicing programming or exploring interests that must be virtual)?

- Or is their device use just diverting or distracting, consuming precious time they could be using to genuinely explore potential interests?

Teenagers are supposed to be learning in deep and nuanced ways about their own interests and abilities during these years. This requires a lot of time invested in exploration and experimentation and a considerable amount of failure. Any activity that consumes a lot of their time without deepening their meaningful knowledge of their interests and abilities (that is, activity that is only an escape or distraction), will interfere with their discovering their authentic identity.

## Managing Anxiety or Distress

### *Key Questions:*

- Do they turn to their devices first when sad or stressed?
- Are they also able to use other strategies, such as talking with friends/family, exercising or engaging in a meaningful pursuit to help them manage stress?
- Do they feel better after a little time spent on their device, or like they will only feel good if they can stay on the device?

Exploring their identity and building social connections will involve a lot of stress, failure, disappointment and even heartbreak. Learning to manage these uncomfortable feelings is an important part of adolescence. Distraction with a diverting entertainment can be one of several strategies for managing stress and distress. But if it becomes the only strategy, it can keep teens from getting “back in the game” and experiencing the fun, success, meaning and joy that are also a big part of this exploration.

## Self-Care

### *Key Questions:*

- How many hours of sleep do they usually get on a school night? Is their phone (or other screen) in their bedroom during sleep?
- How do they relax? Do they have several strategies that do not require screens?
- Do they exercise regularly (3-5 times weekly)? Do they complain that they do not have enough time for exercise?

Getting adequate, restful sleep (8-10 hours/night), finding regular time for exercise, cultivating healthy eating habits and discovering what healthy strategies help them to unwind or relax is critical to a teenager’s healthiest development, and to healthy adult life. Some screens may help with motivating and tracking exercise, but screens in the bedroom interfere with going to bed, and with falling and staying asleep. Most teenagers are very busy and managing a lot of (normal) stress; the senseless fun or relaxation that are part of video games or surfing the web are quick, practical and effective ways to unwind. Don’t discourage your teenager from enjoying them. Instead, focus on ALSO helping them to find other healthy ways to relax: hot baths, exercise, time with pets, crafts, reading and listening to music are just a few examples. As they are building their identity, they should also be discovering how they best slow and calm down.

## Second: *Be Mindful of What You Model*

Many of these principles can apply to our own use of smartphones, computers, etc. Your teenager will ultimately consider and follow your example much more than your commands. And don’t be afraid to talk about how you are thinking about the rules and expectations that you set, and why you decided on them. You are modeling thoughtful and flexible decision-making, also. Acknowledge that escaping into screen time use can be hard to resist, and why it is important to practice resisting some temptations. Consider following the same rules you set for your teenager, or making them “family rules.” It’s important for your teenager to learn about how to set these limits, as eventually they will be setting their own!

