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Screen Time: Principles for Parents

The average teenager spends 9 hours on a screen every day. While that is more than a full-time job, there is disagreement among “experts” about the optimal balance of the potential developmental risks and benefits of extensive screen time. Happily, parents are experts on their own children, so we hope to offer a few guiding principles to help you approach setting rules and expectations around screen time with your teenager.

First: 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. It's important for your teenager to learn about how to set these limits, as eventually they will be setting their own!

Second: Use Adolescent Development as your Guideposts

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.

Managing Anxiety or Distress

Key Questions:

- Do they turn to their devices first when sad or stressed?
- Or 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?

This is connected to Identity. 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. If a teenager has learned that playing a video game or watching YouTube videos helps them unwind, that should not prevent them from also finding ways to unwind that are not electronic and will not interfere with sleep.

