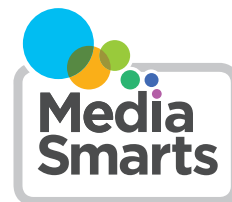


Building Better Tech Habits: A Guide to Digital Well-being



BUILDING BETTER TECH HABITS: A GUIDE TO DIGITAL WELL-BEING

“Media are powerful tools – it is how we use media, the content we choose, and the contexts in which we use those media that can help or harm us.”
– Dr. Michael Rich, Digital Wellness Lab

Screen time is one of parents’ top tech-related concerns, according to MediaSmarts’ research, and it’s the most common source of tech-related conflict between parents and young people in Canada. Kids are worried about their screen use too: almost half say they spend too much time on their phones.

Why do we talk about tech “habits” instead of “addiction”?

First, there’s very little evidence that any of the devices or apps we use are addictive in the way that substances like tobacco or even activities like gambling are. Talking about addiction can also backfire, giving us an excuse to not do anything to change the role that screens play in our lives. Teens will often readily admit to being “addicted” to their phones or to social media, but our research found that the kids who were worried about screen time didn’t change their behavior and spend any less time online.

Thinking in terms of addiction can also suggest that the only solution is abstinence – which is unrealistic when we consider that students need to go online for schoolwork, and most will eventually use devices at work. Not only that, research shows most parents don’t want to take their kids’ phones away: in fact, two-thirds of kids say they were given their first

phone not because they asked for it, but because their parents wanted to be able to keep in touch with them.

“The label of addiction isn’t helpful when it skews our response and fails to provide the young person with the means of righting a pattern of media use that has gone awry... When addiction is invoked, not only is the young person’s strength of character questioned but the label can give them permission to plead helplessness and succumb to its draw.” – Dr. Michael Rich, Digital Wellness Lab

As well, unlike genuinely addictive substances, **phones and social media also provide kids with lots of benefits**, from social connection to education to self-expression – and research also suggests that those youth who are most vulnerable to the harms also get the most benefit.

Different activities may have different effects than others. One study found that young users of social media typically felt worse after browsing other people's posts, but felt better after posting content themselves or after sending their own messages.

*"How you spend your time on screens, and not how much time you spend online, is the best predictor of loneliness and well-being. Using social media to actively connect with friends and family and find support – instead of just scrolling endlessly through Instagram and comparing oneself to others and feeling excluded – can have a positive impact on well-being."
– Dr. Luca Magis-Weinberg*

Thinking in terms of addiction can also be harmful because it is not just the time we spend on screens, or what we do with them, that determines how they affect us: **we're also influenced by how we think about our tech habits.** If we feel we are addicted to our phones or apps, and therefore have no control over our behaviour, we are likely to feel worse after using it. If we feel that we are, ultimately, in control, it is likely to make us feel better.

With the exception of the very youngest kids, therefore, **our goal is not to focus exclusively on how to reduce screen time as much as possible, but rather to help them develop habits that will let them**

be in control of their apps and devices. To do that, we need to have open ongoing conversations with our kids about what they're doing online and how they feel about it.

*"The impact digital technology has on us isn't just a product of how we use it, but comes in part as a result of the effects that we assume it has on us."
– Pete Etchells, Unlocked*

Sticky design

Social media aren't neutral, of course. They have been carefully designed to make us spend more time on them and to come back often – what app makers call **sticky design.**

Unfortunately, just because an app gives you what you want or enjoy doesn't mean it's good for you. As well, the things that make an app sticky are also some of the biggest benefits we get from them: exploring our identities, being entertained and distracted, and self-expression.

The good news is that **teaching kids about the design tricks** that apps use to get us to keep checking them – from Snapchat "streaks" to TikTok's ForYou page – helps them take control of their online experience.

In fact, a lot of research shows that most kids don't like the ways that apps manipulate them, so we can also teach them ways to advocate for more healthful design.

Taking breaks

It's useful to take breaks from using devices, but a short break can be just as valuable as “digital detox.” One study found that reducing time spent with devices had the same positive effect on depression and anxiety symptoms, life satisfaction and physical activity as not using devices at all, and the group who had reduced their time were more likely to show positive effects four weeks later than those who had abstained totally.

Another found that the most effective approach was to try to **reduce time spent on specific online activities at particular times** – like not viewing videos from the “Up Next” bar on YouTube, or not using Instagram while in the library. The same study found that youth actually felt better if they planned to spend more time doing things they enjoyed online.

Instead of trying to reduce “screen time,” it may be more effective to develop better tech habits by **planning tech-free times for ourselves and our kids and having tech-free parts of our homes**. (See MediaSmarts' tip sheet [Co-Viewing With Your Kids](#) for tips on how to do this.)

Building better habits

Here are some more specific tips for building better tech habits.

Remember that what we do sends as strong a message as what we say, so you can think about how these might help you manage your own phone use, too.

Have you ever gotten caught in the “phone loop”

– opened your phone to do one thing, then done half a dozen things before you realized what was happening?

You can avoid that by **being more intentional about your phone use**. Don't think of your phone as “one stop shopping” but as a tool you use for a *single* purpose each time you turn it on:

- Before you open it, **say what you're going to do**: “Check the weather,” for example. (You can say it out loud at first, then just think it later.)
- **Set ahead of time how you'll know you're finished** – “When I know whether or not it's likely to rain,” for instance.
- **Then say what you'll do right after you've finished**, like “Either get an umbrella or the sunscreen.” This helps you avoid that in-between moment when your thumb might tap another app without you thinking about it.

Another way of avoiding that is to **add friction to your phone experience**, by doing things like regularly changing your unlock method or moving the most tempting apps off your home screen. When you're first getting started, changing your colour scheme to greyscale can also help.

For activities with no obvious endpoint, like scrolling social media, **set a timer**. Even if you don't stop when the timer goes off, timing what you're doing can be illuminating: you may think a game you occasionally play to relax takes five minutes to play and find that it actually takes fifteen.

It's important, though, not to be too hard on our kids – or ourselves – if they don't improve their habits right



away. Habits take time to build, especially when we're trying to *reverse* bad habits, and feeling guilty actually reduces self-control in the future.

Notifications

Notifications make us feel more stressed, but also more connected with others. We also spend less time responding to them than we may think: just one in ten interactions with our phones are prompted by notifications. So instead of turning notifications off completely, which may actually be *more* stressful – or muting them, which can make us check them more often – **help kids set a schedule for when they'll check them**, which can make them easier to resist.

You can also teach kids the **“ten minutes later”** method: tell them that when they feel the desire to check their notifications, they can – in ten minutes. This delay **reduces the number of times** they check their phones, which may be more important than the total time you spend on it. It's also likely that something else will happen in that ten minutes to distract them from checking their phone.

You can also **set a schedule for when devices, and specific activities, are and aren't allowed**. That can

cover both times and places: for instance, we strongly recommend that you keep phones out of your kids' bedrooms and establish times and places where screens aren't allowed, such as during mealtimes.

Recent research has shown that one reason kids find it hard to unplug – especially overnight – is that they worry about not being there when their friends need them, so make sure they've told their friends that their *mean parent/guardian* won't let them check their apps or notifications at night. (They may not thank you, but odds are good that they'll be secretly grateful for it.)

Displacement

When we talk about the possible harm from too much screen time, what we're mostly worried about is **displacement** – that screen activities will take up time that would otherwise be spent with friends or family or doing important things like exercising or getting enough sleep.

This is why it is important to keep screen time as close to zero as possible for kids under two, because they need as much of all those things as possible.

For older kids, think about whether or not a screen activity is providing something that you don't want displaced:

- Is it helping them get **exercise**, like a dance game or Pokémon Go?
- Is it helping them **learn something**, whether that's school-related, one of your child's interests like history or dinosaurs, or something practical like cooking or playing guitar?
- Are they **making or creating something**, like writing a story or making a video game?

- Are they **socializing** in a meaningful way with friends or family members? Research has found that kids who mostly play video games alone are likely to become lonelier over time, while those who play with others become less so.

Comparison

While social media can lead to experiences like cyberbullying and exposure to extreme content, what is much more common is **comparing ourselves to other people**. When we compare other people's lives as we see them in social media – carefully filtered and chosen to make them look good – we may end up thinking they're better looking and happier than we are. Some research suggests that it's comparison, more than anything else, that makes the difference in whether social media has a positive or negative effect.

“Social media is not simply another context that mirrors social dynamics. Rather, its very affordances transform the landscape of adolescents' experiences.” – Emily Weinstein and Carrie James, Behind Their Screens

We can help our kids avoid the **“comparison trap”** by curating their social feeds by muting or unfollowing people who make us feel bad about ourselves. We can also take active steps to have their algorithms show us more of the content that make us feel good, and less of what doesn't.

Different apps let you do this in different ways, but in general “Liking” something or watching it all the way to the end will show that you want more of something. Swiping away or giving a thumbs-down does the opposite. Some apps, like TikTok, let you clear what

they know about you and start fresh. Starting from there, it takes only about fifteen minutes to train it to show you nothing but cat videos (or whatever you'd rather see.) Making it forget is also a good way to get out of an algorithmic rabbit hole of unhealthy or unwanted content.

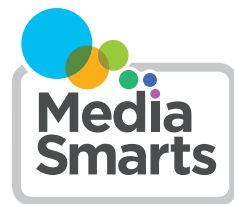
We also want kids to understand that everyone else is under the same pressures, too – to always be available and to present an ideal picture of ourselves. If we post honestly about our lives, the highs *and* the lows, we make it easier for other people to do the same. All of us, adults and kids, are dealing with these issues, and we often underestimate how our tech habits affect the *other* people in our lives.

We need to commit and take steps to develop better habits, but we also need to have compassion for ourselves if we don't get things right immediately. While it's important for parents to establish limits and routines, that works best when we position ourselves as our kids' coaches and supporters rather than as enforcers.

Because social media is an important part of how teens stay in touch with friends and family, and can be a valuable way of socializing, psychologist Dr. Tara Porter suggests having kids reflect on this question: “Are you using your phone to connect to people, or to compare to people?”



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