

Parents and screen time: Are you a 'contract maker' or an 'access denier' with your child?

August 24 2022, by Xinyu (Andy) Zhao and Sarah Healy



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Screen time was a battle for parents before COVID and it continues to be a battle, long after lockdowns have ended.

The Royal Children's Hospital March 2021 [child health poll](#) found too much [screen time](#) was [parents'](#) number-one health concern about their kids, with more than 90% of surveyed parents saying it's a problem.

We are researchers in digital childhoods. Our new research identified four main ways parents try to deal with their children's use of screens. And all have their benefits and drawbacks.

Our research

For our [latest study](#), we interviewed 140 parents in seven different countries—Australia, China, United Kingdom, United States, South Korea, Canada and Colombia—with children ranging from ages four to 11. Twenty interviewees were from Australia.

We wanted to find out how children's screen media routines changed during COVID and how parents dealt with this. Unsurprisingly, "[screen time](#)" came up a lot in our conversations with parents.

Underpinning this was parents' desire for more control of their children's everyday use of screen media and devices.

How do parents control their children's screen time?

1. Denying access

Many parents tried denying access to certain screen-related activities with varying degrees of success. They limited children's access to tablets, computers and phones, TVs and gaming consoles, disconnected them from WiFi when not required for school, or deleted certain apps.

This reduced children's time on screens, yet often at the expense of family relationships as screen time became a battleground.

Dana used to block WiFi to the PlayStation at home until 2.30pm every day during the pandemic. It did help her son complete all his [school](#)

[work](#), but "[...] he was really disgruntled and you know, saying to his friend, 'it's not fair' or whatever."

Children also miss out on opportunities to learn critical digital literacy when simply denied access to certain types of screen activities. Not only do they miss out on learning how to identify credible online sources of information and services but they also miss out on [parental support](#) when faced with unknown situations.

2. Real-time monitoring

Other parents allowed access to screen media under supervision.

This took various forms, including requiring children to use screen media only in "public" home spaces, setting up password-controlled accounts for children using parents' contact information, and using parental control apps or settings.

All these measures helped calm parental worries over children's safety online and gave some sense of control about their use of screens during the pandemic. However, this required a lot more time and energy. As Joanne said: "I couldn't possibly just police it, it was too much [...] I just couldn't be sitting there watching her do work. It would send me around the bend."

And while parents felt calmer, it didn't mean they were successful. Children have a knack, believe it or not, of working around parental controls. So it may create a false sense of security.

3. Contract making

Parents in our study found making contracts with [young children](#)

remarkably successful in the short-term. They set up verbal or written rules with their children about who, how, when and why different devices could be used.

Some families agreed on a "one for one rule" (for example, an hour of non-screen activity for every hour "on screens"), others allocated certain devices for certain activities at certain times of day (for example, gaming on a computer after school until dinner then only TV until the bedtime routine).

While effective in the beginning, parents experienced a slow creep away from the terms of agreement—as long-term habits were not being set up. The creep started with small "negotiations" and sometimes escalated to arguments. Kathy (a mother of two in Melbourne) told us her son "pushed the boundaries so much. And sometimes you were busy. And you didn't notice that he pushed that boundary. So then it became quite a battle."

The solution? A screen-free day (or days) to reset the contract.

4. Teaching self-regulation and digital literacy

Self-regulation, as we saw in the study, involves children learning strategies to moderate how and how much they use screens.

While many parents did not start out with this approach, as lockdowns and the pandemic drew on, the demands of work and family life meant they ended up here—almost out of necessity. As Dana told us: "I kind of feel like the bar shifted massively in lockdown."

Teaching a child [self-regulation](#) and digital literacy is a long game, and requires patience and trust on the part of parents. With parental support, children learn to connect how they feel and behave with the type and

duration of technology they just used. They also learn how to regulate feelings and behaviors by modifying their technology use.

Parents can offer simple strategies to help children self-regulate. These may be similar to the ones used when making a contract but here, the child is in control. For example, the child chooses to set a timer to remind them it's time to change activities. Or the child pre-plans their digital technology use, in conversation with a parent. The child's plans should include what they intend to do afterwards too—mealtimes can be used to support a calm transition from one activity to another.

If children come across something online they don't understand or don't like, they know they can ask their parents.

In the meantime, parents can teach children how to be safe online, largely by letting their kids see how they navigate the online world. One Melbourne mother Maree, involved her eight-year-old in everyday online tasks, such as shopping. This allowed her to talk about spotting scams, verifying seller information and comparing products.

What next?

No matter which approach you choose, it won't be a perfect one. It is likely you will find a combination of strategies most effective.

Perhaps the most useful question is not about how to stop "screen time," but how to find ways to talk with your children about using screens safely and in a way that is good for them—that helps their learning and leisure. In a world where screens are all around us, this is going to be an ongoing and constantly changing conversation.

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