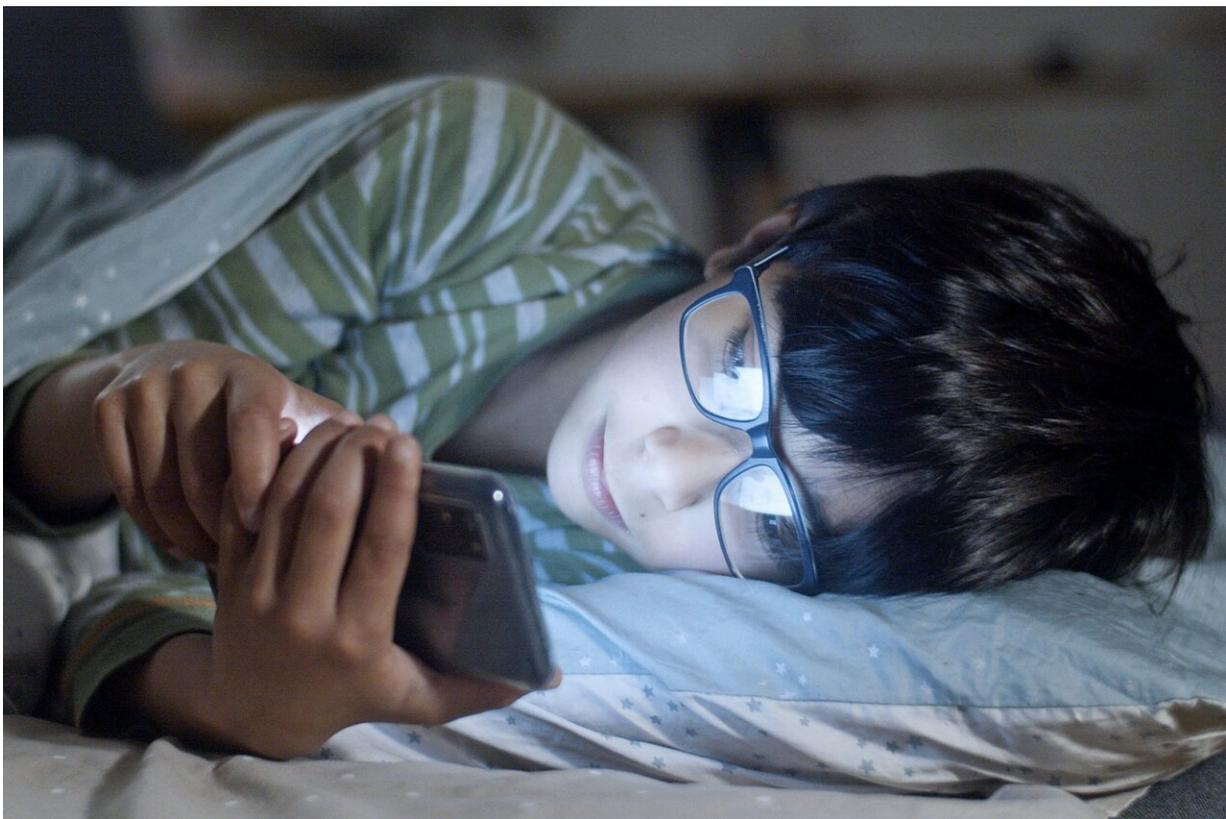


Pediatrician offers advice on how to manage screen time and temper tantrums

April 22 2024, by Jenny Radesky, MD, FAAP, American Academy of Pediatrics



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Are you concerned about the time your child spends on digital devices? If so, you're hardly alone. Many parents and caregivers worry that screen

time is taking over their child's day (and night), crowding out other activities they need for good health.

It helps to create a family media plan to set healthy digital habits. You may decide you want to cut back on the amount of time kids spend gaming, surfing the net or watching videos. But that doesn't fully address the temper tantrums that often result when it's time to stop.

Children may scream, cry or even fight back physically when they're asked to turn off their devices. (We've all witnessed the battles that happen when parents try to take a tablet away from a preschooler or engage [older children](#) in conversation when they're still immersed in an online game.)

These meltdowns can disrupt everyone's day, eventually turning into power struggles that move you further from your goal of balanced, healthy tech use.

Temper tantrums reveal that your child is finding it impossible in the moment to cope with these emotions. Even teens can become angry, sullen and defiant when they're asked to step away from digital media.

Here are suggestions for preventing conflict by working out agreements that all [family members](#) can follow.

All that said, no two children are alike. If you've found warnings are useful for your child, consider using a timer they set themselves. This models the idea of self-regulation and helps kids feel more in control.

Kids can benefit from having a spot where they can go to calm down. This might be a quiet corner in the family room, a bedroom nook or any other place where they feel safe.

If your child starts to rage when [screen time](#) ends, ask them to go to their quiet spot until they feel better. If necessary, gently pick up a younger child or lead them by the hand. Tell them you'll be glad to see them again when they're ready to reconnect.

If your child is acting out physically, don't keep the tantrum going by suggesting they punch a pillow (or anything else). Studies show it's more effective to guide your child toward something that burns physical energy, but has a simple focus. For example, researchers found that tossing a pillow in the air and challenging kids to bat it in a new direction helped work off momentary tension.

At times, older kids may resist tech limits even more fiercely than younger ones. This might call for different strategies that track closely with your child's personality and interests. You could offer to join them for a quick run, a few minutes shooting baskets or a frisbee session in the park. If they love music, let your teen take over the smart speaker with a 5-minute blast of their favorite track (dancing optional).

These are all examples of a technique called "trading up," which moves people from one favorite activity to another they like even more. Try it with younger kids, too: offer a beloved book, cuddle time with the family pet or a small chore that makes them feel part of the group.

When children (and adults) are immersed in virtual activities, they're literally in a different world. You can help build a bridge back to reality by entering the room or sitting down near your child, quietly observing what they're doing. When you see signs that they're willing to engage, offer a warm smile of encouragement. This helps them move from the virtual space they're in to the here-and-now of being with you.

Difficulty switching gears does not automatically mean your child is hopelessly hooked on tech. Still, it's important to maintain a steady sense

of your child's screen time and how it affects their behavior. Consult your child's pediatrician if you're concerned about meltdowns that happen nearly every time your child is asked to stop scrolling, watching or playing—no matter how thoughtfully you manage the situation.

Watch for changes in a child's sleep, hygiene, eating habits or [social activities](#) that seem related to excessive screen time. Call your pediatrician if you observe difficulty handling frustration or boredom without screens. (For example, they can't tolerate a short car trip or a few minutes waiting for a restaurant meal without demanding a tablet or phone.) Also be alert for signs your child is withdrawing and isolating themselves from friends and family to spend more time online.

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