Managing Screen Time

- **Start by taking a pulse on your family's media use.**
  You shouldn't be afraid to make — and modify — rules that make sense for your family, but it's helpful to start by getting a realistic picture of what your kids' media use looks like. Lessening screen time effectively starts with becoming aware of when and how your kids are actually engaged with their screens. Take a 24-hour period and track kids' media use (feel free to use to our **media log** to help). What kinds of media are they engaging with? How does media use differ on weeknights versus weekends?

- **Not all screen time is created equal.**
  There's a huge difference between an hour spent shooting zombies and an hour spent learning vocabulary from a smartphone app or composing music online. Think about what kids are doing, in addition to *how long* they're doing it for. And, although there's nothing wrong with a little mindless entertainment, you can maximize your kid's screen time if you consider the 4 C's:

  - **Connection.** It's really important that kids connect on a personal level with what they're watching, playing, or reading. Are they engaged? Engrossed? Maybe even enlightened? Getting into a story line or identifying with characters primes kids for more learning.

  - **Critical thinking.** Look for media that takes a deep dive into a topic, subject, or skill. Maybe it's games in which kids wrestle with ethical dilemmas or strategize about bypassing obstacles. Rote quizzing and simple Q&A-style games may be fun and seem educational, but they may not help kids find deep or long-lasting meaning.

  - **Creativity.** An important feature of many great learning products is the ability for kids to create new content — a new level for a video game or a song, for instance. Kids can feel more ownership of their learning when they get to put their own spins on the experience.

  - **Context.** Help your kids understand how their media fits into the larger world. For younger kids in particular, the discussions and activities surrounding games or movies are key. Being with kids while they play or watch, asking questions about what they're taking away, and doing related offline activities can extend learning.

  Keep in mind that regular breaks from technology are also important — they not only make a difference in the amount of screen time, but also help kids get comfortable disengaging and putting devices away.

- **Get to the root of the problem.**
  If the issue you're most worried about is technology displacing other activities, consider not only limiting screen time, but also encouraging more active play during tech-free time. If you're concerned that social skills suffer when all of kids' interactions are digital, make a point to connect offline as a family (no technology during dinner is one way to practice this regularly). If the issue is that kids aren't getting enough sleep at night, consider keeping devices out of their bedrooms altogether or, at a minimum, at night when they're heading for bed. Whether it's because kids become engrossed in binge-watching YouTube videos or a TV show, or because the glow of the screen or the influx of text messages keeps their brains too stimulated to really relax, technology interferes with sleep for many, many kids.

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Digital Dilemmas are brief hypothetical situations and corresponding questions designed to foster cross-generational conversations about different aspects of adolescents' digital lives. Use this fictitious scenario, based on real-life stories, to spark a conversation at home with your children and open up the discussion about these very important topics.

"Put away your phone," "close the laptop," and "turn off the television" — Liana felt like she was constantly policing her kids' screen time. But her kids felt like they were constantly having to explain themselves: "I'm doing homework," "I'm trying to figure out my plans," "This is the first minute I've spent relaxing all day," or "My friend needs me." Everyone in the family was exhausted by negotiating tech time. Liana wanted to make sure she was doing her part to raise kids who could actually have a conversation and weren't totally addicted to their devices. Her kids kept telling her she was overreacting and that their screen time wasn't just fun and games; they needed technology for all their responsibilities.

? What seems realistic (or unrealistic) about this story?

? Do you think Liana is right to be wary about her kids' screen time, or is she just out of touch?

? How much screen time do you think is too much? Does the reason for using a device (homework, fun, social media, gaming) make a difference?

? What advice would you give to this family to try to make everyone feel more comfortable with how the kids use technology? Is this an inevitable source of conflict, or are there ways to alleviate some of the frustrations?

Are there any times of day when you think it's a good idea to unplug (before bed, first thing in the morning, during meals, after school)? Why, or why not?