



Public Health
Prevent. Promote. Protect.
Greene County



Greene County Public Health

Melissa Howell MS, MBA, MPH, RN, RS, Health Commissioner
Kevin L. Sharrett, MD, Medical Director

Press Release

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Contact: Laurie Fox, Public Information Officer
937-374-5669 office / 937-283-5178 cell
lfox@gcph.info

“DISCONNECT TO CONNECT” Addresses The Mental Health Challenges of Children and Youth in a Digital World *This Final Article in the 6-Part Series Addresses Parents, Educators & the Community*

GREENE COUNTY, OH -- Screen time is rapidly reducing our attention span and increasing our expectation for instant gratification. We want more and we want it more often! At the same time, screen time is changing our ability to “stick-to-it” making it harder to wait. Developing our ability to “stick-to-it” is essential for school, work, and life success, and is something learned over time. The instant gratification of having a smartphone in your hand and scrolling through attention-grabbing digital media primes our brains to crave more and more to feel satisfied. However, this is not how real-life works. And it can make the slower pace, quiet time or a classroom or workplace feel hard to handle and unsatisfying.

Our brains need protection from too much screen time. Researchers are studying the long-term effects of digital media on children’s brains. So far, the findings are not good. Rapid and rewarding content from apps like TikTok, Snap Chat, and Instagram work like sugar does -- a little bit makes you crave more and more. As our brains get better at processing lots of rewarding and stimulating content, we get worse at paying attention in the slower, regular pace of the real world. The difference between “sugary” stimulating screen time, and regular real-time experiences, is making school, work, and family expectations harder for us to handle. A brain study found that during the pandemic, higher screen time in teens was linked with poorer mental health and greater perceived stress. The good news is that when screen time was lower, teens experienced more social support and healthy coping behaviors.

What can parents, educators and the community do?

Be intentional: Put thought into **why and when** you use screen time when you are on the job, at home, or in the classroom. Avoid using it as a reward. If you are an educator, avoid putting on a video or showing a movie during class time. Kids get enough screen time. Find other ways to offer positive reinforcement. If you are a parent or caregiver, avoid using screen time as a babysitter or a way to withdraw from healthy activities. A few ways to be intentional:

- Link screen time to learning through conversations and pre-planning together
- Link screen time to connecting with friends and family
- Look for other ways to have fun – play a game offline, do a puzzle, get outdoors

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360 Wilson Drive ● Xenia, Ohio 45385
(937) 374-5600 ● toll free (866) 858-3588 ● Fax (937) 374-5675
www.gcph.info



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Get enough sleep: Studies show sleep “cleans” your brain. Adults who don't get enough sleep leave themselves at risk for adverse health conditions. And kids who slept less than what is recommended at young ages may develop physiological brain differences and cognitive delays in subsequent years. In teens, screen time is linked with symptoms of insomnia. Delaying the brain's release of the hormone melatonin pushes back bedtime and may cause restless sleep. When the body makes less melatonin, it disrupts our natural sleep-wake cycle. The more time we spend on smartphones, tablets, computers, some e-readers, and TV screens, the greater the consequences for our sleep. Avoid screen time during bedtime routines. And sleep like your brain depends on it... because it does.

Make time for conversations: Due to the constant lure of screen time on phones and computers, we are losing time for real-life conversations. In-person interactions are how we connect and learn about each other and the world around us. We bond and develop over time. Take breaks from tech. Leave your phone in your pocket or on your desk when there are opportunities to connect with co-workers, students, or family. Hallways, bus or car rides, and meals are great times for screen-free conversations!

Unplug: Try choosing a day or setting a chunk of time aside to go entirely screen-free. If you can carve out this time, try to make it sacred and special. In-person activities could be hanging out with friends, nurturing a talent, exercising, or attending church.

Add screen-free time: Try changing daily screen time usage in your classroom or home by increasing fun “free” time in the daily schedule. By doing so, the focus is less on taking away or limiting tech, but more on adding other options that are fun, safe, and engaging. Brainstorm with the kids to get a list of fun activities so you have choices ready. Take turns selecting what activities you will do together.

Set screen-free zones: Choose areas that are screen-free zones. These may be bathrooms, kitchens, reading area, dining area, bedrooms, patios, and porches. Start with one area and expand.

Sort out good screen time habits from bad, unhealthy habits: There are times when screen time use can move beyond a bad habit to become toxic and debilitating. Consider how much time you and your child are spending online. Ask yourself, what kind of content is it and how are we viewing it? Be aware and know how and when to seek help. For some children and adults, stressful or emotional content may be riskier than for others. Remember that for the most part, healthy screen time is a good thing. It has the potential for incredible personal benefit when good habits are formed and maintained. When screen time is used to develop new skills and deepen the learning experience, research shows it has a lasting positive impact on one's overall sense of well-being.

Be kind and understanding: Acknowledge that the last few years have been stressful, scary, confusing, and difficult for many. For many, screen time has been a constant comfort or companion. Increasing our awareness is the first step. Habits and behavior patterns develop over time, so paying attention to when, why, and how we're engaging with screens will help us figure out what we need to do differently. Encourage those around you

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to try to get out there and play in nature and connect with others in tech-free ways. Try setting up a “walk and talk” meeting rather than logging onto another zoom or try encouraging meeting at a park rather than playing video games with friends.

References and Resources

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<https://www.screenlifebalance.com/>

About this series:

Greene County Public Health officials, along with the Mental Health Recovery Board of Clark, Greene and Madison Counties, the Greene County Public Library, Greene County Children Services, Greene County Family & Children First Council, and the Greene County Educational Service Center are working collaboratively to raise community awareness of the problem along with providing resources and practical information to help children, youth, educators, parents, families, and community organizations make impactful changes toward improving mental health and wellbeing of Greene County’s future: our young people!

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