



INTRODUCTION

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!

-ARTICLE 1-Introduction to the Series

The series “**DISCONNECT TO CONNECT**” is a movement Greene County community partners are implementing to raise awareness about the mental health crisis facing our children and youth. This awareness campaign is not designed to attach any causal relationship between technology use and mental well-being. Instead, it is an effort to uncover how children, youth and families make use of technology and how to find the balance between productive use and avoiding or minimizing any harmful aspects. We all have a role to play.

Although mental health challenges in this age group were already a growing concern, rates of psychological distress among young people have increased even more since the COVID-19 pandemic began. A recent advisory by the U.S. Surgeon General, Vivek H. Murthy, M.D., M.B.A, details the situation. Below are some alarming statistics highlighted in the advisory.

- 80,000 youth globally found that depressive and anxiety symptoms doubled during the pandemic
- 25% of those 80,000 youth experienced depressive symptoms and 20% experienced anxiety symptoms
- impulsivity and irritability—associated with conditions such as ADHD— appear to have moderately increased
- emergency department visits in the United States for suspected suicide attempts were 51% higher for adolescent girls and 4% higher for adolescent boys compared to the same time in early 2019
- **Half of all mental health issues begin by age 14 and three-quarters emerge by the mid-20s.**
- **70% of teens with mental health needs do not receive appropriate care**

The advisory also cited various hypotheses proposed by scientists to explain these trends in reporting of mental health challenges with one of those being the growing use of digital media.

There are environmental factors outside of our control (positive and negative life experiences), personality and coping styles, and biological factors (genes and brain chemistry) that impact the mental health and wellbeing of our children and youth. However, there are external factors that

we collectively have the power to adjust such as quantity and quality of our digital use. While computers, smart phones, and tablets play an important role in education and enhance our lives in many ways, excessive or inappropriate use are cause for concern.

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!

Over the next few months, a six-part series, beginning with this article will focus on a specific age group and things we all can do to support mental health and resilience in our youngest residents:

- Infants to preschoolers – April
- Elementary and middle school students – May
- High School students – June
- College students – July
- Educators, parents, community at large – August

These articles will be featured in the Greene County Dailies during the third week of each month. In addition to the articles, these community partners will also be producing materials to be distributed via local schools and community libraries that will highlight helpful tips, information, and community resources. Supportive information and infographics will be shared countywide throughout this series and beyond.

“DISCONNECT TO CONNECT”...finding balance in a digital world to improve the mental health and well-being of our children, youth and families. There is something each of us can do!

See the full advisory from U.S. Surgeon General here:

<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>

-ARTICLE 2-Infants & Preschoolers

We live in world full of technology. The presence of cell phones, iPads, and computers in everyday life is a reality. The impact of technology on a young child's brain development is not widely understood. Recent research indicates that adults should create boundaries and balance for their children around screens. We must understand that with these devices, there can be a negative impact on child development and mental health.

During the past two years of the pandemic, families connected to loved ones with devices. ZOOM is now a familiar word to most. Further, some parents/caregivers had to navigate working from home while caring for children. Technology can offer a quick and convenient way to keep young children occupied while adults focus on work and other priorities.

Determining the best uses of tech for young children can be difficult for parents. Children gravitate toward screens, and it is not easy for adults to compete. Screens often disrupt interactions between adults and children. Real-life learning opportunities are key to building social/emotional skills. Without meaningful interactions, children do not learn to talk about their feelings.

Children should have many types of experiences to learn social skills and learn to handle stress. Children are not born resilient. They become resilient over time. Too much screen time can get in the way of critical growth.

Does the benefit of screen time outweigh the risk?

Technology use can disrupt the normal developmental process. The risk for children under six is magnified because of this period of rapid brain growth.

From the experts...

According to researchers at the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/brain-architecture/>). . .

“a child’s capacity to regulate emotions develops in a complex interaction with his or her environment and ongoing mental, physical, and social development. **Brains are built over time, from the bottom up.**”

Because young children’s minds are just developing, they cannot learn as well from technology as they can from trusted adults. Excessive and/or unmonitored screen time can be detrimental to a child’s brain development and emotional/social growth. Some issues that can arise include:

- unseen damage to brain development = cognitive delays, psychosocial delays
- less physical activity and movement = physical or motor delays, obesity, trouble sleeping
- fewer words spoken in home = language delays, speech/articulation delays
- fewer and less developed personal interactions = social/emotional delays, difficulty forming relationships

Too much screen time is like too much sugar. A little bit can make life sweeter, but too much can rot your teeth and ruin your health. Finding the healthy balance is key.

Background Television

A child’s ability to learn new things, self-calm, pay attention, remember details, learn to talk, and transition from one activity to another is hindered by background television. Having the television on in the background is even worse for young children when the show content is at a level that is too high for them. The shocking fact is that children under three are being exposed to an average of 5.5 hours of background television per day. **That’s 40% of a child’s waking life.**

How Much Is Too Much?

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends the following:

- Infants/Toddlers, ages 0-2 years: NO screen time exposure for infants and toddlers. The only exception --being connecting with loved ones on a screen.
- Children ages 2-5 years: Up to one hour per day of high-quality screen time.

The APA also recommends that adults not use technology to help care for or supervise a young child. Adults should view television alongside young children to support their understanding. However, this set of recommendations does not reflect current home practices. In 2016, researchers found that babies (0-2 years) spend 42 minutes per day on screens, and children (3-4 years) spend two hours 40 minutes per day on screens. Most parents teach their child how to use a touchscreen by age two. Screen time usage per day was too high *before* the pandemic. It is even higher, now.

What Can We Do?

Technology is a part of modern life. Recognizing the benefits and risks is important. Parents can promote healthier living and manage technology use by following these simple strategies to

Disconnect 2 Connect:

- **Maintain daily screen-free times** – Set sacred times. Try disconnecting for mealtime, bath time and bedtime.
- **Play together** – Set aside time each day to actively play, interact and communicate. Get outside to run, play, swing, and climb.
- **Use hands-on/manipulative toys and games** – This helps with gross and fine motor skill development.
- **Avoid background television** – Turn off the TV to avoid noisy distractions. Too quiet? Try music instead.
- **Be consistent with limits** – Set limits together and stick to it. For example, 30 minutes of screen time in the morning, another 30 minutes in the evening. Use a timer so your child is clear on the time. Keep screen time away from bedtime to avoid negotiation and meltdowns that can interfere with important sleep schedules.
- **Read daily to your child** – Make sure they have hard copies of books available to them. You can join the *Dolly Parton Imagination Library* and your child will receive a free book each month through age five. Visit www.imaginationlibrary.com to sign up today!
- **Find artistic avenues for your child to explore** – Painting, drawing, and playing music are great activities for brain development.
- **Be intentional** – Know what shows and games are educational and on your child’s level. Be clear about what shows, and games are “bad for your brain” and unhealthy.
- **Set limits** – Setting the tone for screen time limits early in your child’s life will enable you to keep a structure in place as your child gets older.

Interested in doing more? Try creating a Family Media Plan:

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/media/Pages/default.aspx>

Resources for this article: *Zero to Three, American Academy of Pediatrics, Common Sense, Center on the Developing Child Harvard University*

-ARTICLE 3-Elementary & Middle School Children

May is Children's Mental Health Awareness Month. As discussed in the two previous articles, too much screen time can have a lasting impact on the health of children. Children at the elementary level are exposed to even more types of technology, apps, and gaming than ever. More and more children have their own phones, and there is pressure on parents to buy for the ones who don't.

Kids have become even more dependent on technology. They use it to do schoolwork, interact with friends, and play games. Devices offer big entertainment. Education and recreation usage of tech increased during the pandemic. According to a recent survey by *Common Sense*, technology use grew by 17% for kids ages 8-18. Over the past six years, tweens and teens who have their own digital device increased by almost 20%.

Awareness is key. Devices can disrupt natural interactions between adults and children. Real life learning opportunities are key to social skill development and emotional regulation. Without meaningful interactions, many children do not learn how to speak interactively, discuss feelings, and find healthy ways to cope with stress. We want children to be able to deal with the real world. This is very important as they grow into teenagers.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

Accepting screen time as a part of our modern life and recognizing the benefits and the risks is a necessary part of finding a balance. Screen time allows us to connect with loved ones, learn new things, access help, and be entertained, providing kids with additional ways to be creative and share with others. Also, during the COVID shutdowns, students were able to continue to learn remotely since they could not be at school in-person. We have learned ways to use tech more resourcefully.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

While devices can provide creative outlets, research tells us that is not where children are spending most of their time. Much of their time is spent on apps for videos, gaming, social media, or watching shows. The impact of this can appear in a variety of ways:

- May impact language skills
- May impact school readiness
- May lower creativity
- Affects brain structure
- Creates issues around behavior and time-on-tasks in school
- May inhibit ability to create social relationships and affect emotional development

Many of the games and apps for children can be addictive. Adults need to be proactive by setting healthy limits and finding a balance between real life activities and tech experiences. While technology can have a positive impact on our children, we know that excessive, unmonitored use can negatively impact children's development and growth.

HOW MUCH SCREEN TIME IS TOO MUCH?

In the U.S., youth ages 8 to 12 now use devices for entertainment for an average of 4 hours, 44 minutes a day. This screen usage, combined with the average of seven hours children are in school and nine hours of sleep, doesn't leave much extra time for connecting with friends and family, schoolwork, home chores, sports, arts, or outdoor time. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends families create their own *family media plan* to strive for a balance in social time, physical activity, sleep, and healthy nutrition.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

What stops us as parents, teachers, and caregivers from limiting screen time? We're busy, tired, and stressed. Sometimes it is easier to give in due to the conflicts that can arise. Being proactive can help both you and your child(ren).

We can be intentional in our use of technology, so the risks are offset. Parents can promote healthier living and manage their child's screen time by following these simple strategies to *disconnect 2 connect*:

- **Maintain daily screen-free times.** Set sacred times - try disconnecting for mealtime, bath time and bedtime.
- **Have rules about loading apps on phones.** Know the apps before your child loads them on the phone. As part of your plan, make it a requirement that they ask permission before loading any app onto a device.
- **Play together.** Set aside time each day to actively play, interact, and communicate.
- **Avoid background TV.** Turn off the TV to avoid noisy distractions.
- **Follow the school's rules around cell phones.** If children are to turn in their phones during the school day, support that rule in the home. If you know your child cannot handle having a cell phone at school, then do not allow it to go with him/her.
- **Be consistent with limits.** Set limits together and stick to it. For example, half an hour of screen time in the morning, and then another half an hour in the evening.
- **Be intentional.** Know what apps and games are educational and on your child's level. And be clear about what is "bad for your brain". Teach children about how the brain can become addicted to the tech and allow them to be a part of the solution.
- **Model limits.** Set limits for your own screen usage and model putting your device away. Put your phone away when playing or talking with your child.
- **Cell Phones for Safety.** If your elementary student needs a cell phone for safety reasons or practice pick-ups, consider getting a flip phone or a phone that has only the bare necessities. As the child gets older, they can "graduate" to other phones as they show responsibility.
- **Create a Family Media Plan.** We know today's children are growing up in a media-saturated environment. A Family Media Plan (www.HealthyChildren.org/MediaUsePlan) helps families prioritize daily activities. Health, academic, and social goals are planned first, and then recreational screen time is added. These plans help families make sure healthy practices are followed daily as part of their routine, including at least one hour of active play or exercise, and

8 to 12 hours of sleep (depending on age). Children should not sleep with any screen devices in their rooms and should avoid any screen time for at least an hour before bed. The plan also suggests designating screen-free locations at home, such as the bedroom, as well as media-free times, such as family dinnertime, or while driving. Families are guided to prioritize these practices, to consider other responsibilities such as homework, sports, and time with friends, and then to determine how much time is “left over” that may be considered for device use. For more information, check out this link:

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/media/Pages/default.aspx>

Resources: American Academy of Pediatrics

National Center for Child Traumatic Stress:

https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/simple_activities_for_children_and_adolescents_4.pdf

-ARTICLE 4-High School Students/Teens

How do we manage teens and screens? This can be quite the challenge. As discussed in the last three articles, too much screen time can have a lasting impact on the health of children. By the time youth are in their teens, they often believe that they have it all “under control” and they do not need guidance or rules around technology. Unfortunately, that is not the case as adolescent brain development continues into the late twenties. Parents/caregivers still need to have a sound understanding of what is going inside the technology their teens are using so they can offer structure, guidance, and suggestions in managing the world of social media.

While devices can provide creative outlets, research tells us that is not where teens are spending most of their time. Much of it is spent on apps for videos, gaming, social media or watching shows/movies. Many games and apps for young people could become addictive. When use is extreme, like tobacco, alcohol, and other substances, teens may have difficulty reducing their usage of technology which can have an adverse impact on their mental health and their relationships with others.

Adults need to be proactive. Parents can help set healthy limits and find a balance between real life activities and tech experiences. While technology can have positive impacts, we also know that excessive, unmonitored use can negatively impact social development and growth. Know about the popular teen apps such as *TikTok*, *SnapChat*, *YouTube*, *KiK*, *Omegle*, *Doublicat* and the pros and cons of each before you allow your teen to load them. All of these can have a fun factor but can also have a serious downside to them.

Parents should also be aware of dating apps that teens sometimes load. *Tinder* is one that teens are not old enough to use but often try. Others like *MyLOL*, *Skout*, *YuBo*, *MeetMe*, and *Hot or Not* are some of the more popular apps for meeting/dating.

This may be a surprise to some. . . According to JAMA Pediatrics (www.jamanetwork.com), sexting (sending sexually explicit messages, photos, or videos to others) is a common practice among our youth today. About 25% of teens are receiving sexually explicit messages and at least 1 in 7 are sending them. The key here is for parents to be aware and take the opportunities to have ongoing discussions about appropriate online behavior and about the unintended consequences of sexting. Using current events around this topic can be helpful in starting the conversation. An excellent article

to read on this topic is found at www.psych.com called *Teen Sexting: What Parents Need to Know* by Katie Hurley, LCSW.

Ask your teens the following questions and involve them in the process. Youth tend to resent adults “taking over” and “doing it for them”. They also don’t want to get their friends or peers into trouble so they will want to know that they can discuss with you in confidence. Encourage and support them to be a part of the solution by helping them teach you about what they are viewing and using online. Questions to have teens ask themselves and then discuss with you:

- How much time are you spending online?
- Are you involved in “offline” activities?
- What kinds of social media apps are you using? Dating apps? Video games?
- Do you feel like you must be online? Do you think you will miss out on something?
- How do these apps make you feel?
- Have you ever been bullied online?
- Have you ever been coerced or pressured into “sexting”? Have you ever been pressured to share photos of your body with others via texting or social media?
- Do you believe that you are able to say NO if someone pressures you? Why or why not?
- Are you aware of issues that have arisen from the sharing of photos or sexual messaging?
- Have you ever felt “not good enough” because of what you see online? Your life, your clothing, your face or body image, your personality?
- Do you believe that you have a good balance between tech use and offline activities?
- How much time are you spending doing the following?
 - Exercising
 - Interacting with friends/peers
 - Reading
 - Sleeping
 - Doing schoolwork/school activities

(General information/ideas taken from *Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory 2021*)

According to *Pew Research* and other research organizations, the pandemic has created more online usage amongst teens. One report says that pre-pandemic, online usage by teens was about four hours a day. It has now **doubled** to about **eight** hours a day.

The next thing to ask is if your teen would like your help in supporting them in reducing their online time. You can also talk to your teen about brain development and the prefrontal cortex. If teens understand the lasting impact using technology in excess can have on their own brains, they are more likely to want to protect their own development and growth.

Parents/caregivers and their teens can work together to encourage the technology companies to take the necessary steps to create digital tools, resources, as well as media that are healthy for our young people.

Awareness is key. Devices can disrupt natural interactions between adults and their teens. Real life interactions are key to social skill development and positive mental health. This is true for young children, but also necessary for our teen population.

WHAT CAN TEENS DO OFFLINE?

Try something new. Be creative. Get outside.

- Yoga
- Meditation
- Art Activities
- Music Activities
- Volunteer/Community Service
- Walk the dog
- Ride horses or a bike
- Play a round or two of putt-putt golf
- Take a hike
- Help a grandparent or neighbor with yardwork or housework
- Play board games
- Do a puzzle
- Read by the pool
- Climb a tree
- Write in a journal
- Create a short story
- Take up knitting, painting, weaving
- Talk to your friends and think of new things you can do outside of technology

Ask your teen to add to this list with his or her own ideas.

WHAT CAN THE ADULTS DO? *Encourage DISCONNECT 2 CONNECT!*

Maintain daily screen-free times - Set sacred times - try disconnecting for mealtime, homework time, and bedtime. Have teens turn in phones before bedtime for Sunday through Thursday, and keep limits on weekend usage, too.

Help your teen create BALANCE—Encourage teens to develop their own plan for offline activities that promote positive mental health and outlets beyond online activities.

Keep an open line of communication with your teen—Your teen is likely more cell phone and app-savvy than you are. Talk to your teen about the apps on the phone. Ask how they are used and

why they like them. Try not to judge or criticize. You want him or her to want to talk openly. Give your teen the opportunity to share with you.

Have rules about loading apps on phones. Know the apps before your teen loads them onto the phone. As part of the plan, make it a requirement that they ask permission before loading.

Talk together - Set aside time each day to interact and communicate.

Follow the school's rules around cell phones- If students are to turn in their phones during the school day, support that rule in the home. If you know your teen cannot handle having a cell phone at school, then do not allow it to go with him/her.

Be consistent with limits - Set limits together and stick to it.

Watch movies and shows together—While screen time should be limited, it does not mean ZERO screen time. Watch a movie together, and then plan to see the sequel. Make a “date” to spend time watching an age-appropriate TV show or series together. Make the popcorn or get the ice cream and make it a fun event that you do together.

Be intentional - Know what apps and games are educational and on your child's level. And be clear about what is “bad for your brain”. Teach children about how the brain can become addicted to the tech and allow them to be a part of the solution.

Model limits- Set limits for your own screen usage and model putting your device away. Put your phone away when you are with your teen. Continue to do this as your children and teens grow into adulthood. You will always want to model this behavior for them.

Cell Phones for Safety—Load apps like *Life360* on your family phones. You can track whereabouts of your teen using this app and others like it.

Create a Family Media Plan -- A Family Media Plan (www.HealthyChildren.org/MediaUsePlan), can help all families. Health, academic and social goals are planned first, and then recreational screen time is added. Plans help families make sure healthy practices are followed as part of their daily routine. This includes at least one hour of exercise/activity and **8 to 12 hours of sleep**. Teens should not sleep with any screen devices in their rooms. Families are guided to prioritize these practices, to consider other responsibilities such as homework, sports and time with friends, and then to determine how much time is “left over” that may be considered for device use. For more information, check out this link: <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/media/Pages/default.aspx>

Parents/Caregivers and Teens: Do you need more help and support around this topic? It is not an easy one to navigate, so asking for help is okay! Teens or parents may reach out to a High School Counselor, or a parent may contact a local therapist who may be able to help. If you believe your situation warrants more family support, you may contact a private therapy provider or a local therapy agency.

Other Resources:

- American Academy of Pediatrics
- National Center for Child Traumatic Stress
https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/simple_activities_for_children_and_adolescents_4.pdf
- Pew Research Center: www.pewresearch.com
- Parentology: Parenting in the Digital Age www.parentology.com

- PSYCOM: www.psycom.net

-ARTICLE 5-Digital Well-being and Adulting for ages 18-25

Adulting is hard. Just ask any college student who is trying to navigate their way through classes, fees, part time jobs, and career plans. Or ask the young adult who just graduated from high school and dove right into their chosen career, along with balancing home life, bills, transportation woes, and so much more! Not to mention the young parent who may be raising small children while balancing career goals and childcare. It's not easy! Finally, add in a global pandemic to their already busy lives, and it's a recipe for certain mental health issues to rear their ugly heads.

This article, the fifth in the Disconnect to Connect series, raises awareness about the increase of depression and anxiety symptoms in young adults before, during, and after the pandemic. For example, symptoms grew from one in 10 in 2019 to four in 10 by early 2021 (Forbes, 2022). This rise in depression and anxiety is true during childhood and for those growing from teens into adults. The pandemic's impact exacerbated isolation and loneliness which contribute to risk of symptoms. The term 'adulting' captures those characteristic actions and behavior that are considered typical adult responsibilities, rather than those tied to children and younger people, according to the Cambridge Dictionary.

Establishing an adult identity involves more than developing new responsibilities, complex thinking, and mature relationships. It's a rite of passage and one that is both unique to individuals and a continuous process. It's a time of becoming separated from family life and living on one's own, working, going to school, and social interaction. There are biological, physical, emotional, spiritual, and cultural dimensions of early adulthood that interact with a range of environments and experiences. However, one dimension that may be overlooked is digital well-being in young adults.

Several articles link the surge in digital technology as changing the rhythm of life by spending more time alone and less social time in-person with others. It's also impacting quality and amount of daily sleep, exercise, and outdoor activities. Plus, there is more risk of poor posture and damaging eyesight through strain, poor lighting. Thirty-one percent of adults in the US report they go online almost constantly, according a 2021 survey conducted by Pew Research Center. Personal, internet-connected devices like smartphones, tablets, and wearable technology are common. In fact, 18–29-year-olds make up the largest percentage of adults going online almost constantly at 48%. Those with some college or college graduates+ had higher online use than individuals with a High School degree or less. And people of color in particular report going online almost constantly to a greater degree, for example, Black (non-Hispanic) 37%, and Hispanic 36%, had higher online use, compared to their White counterparts 28%.

While work or school may be less flexible areas of life to limit screen time, there are ways to moderate one's personal online time. Overall, it could be helpful to set a limit of three hours per day of personal screen time outside of work or school obligations. For example, one episode of a streaming service could be enjoyed unwinding from a stressful day, rather than consuming an unlimited amount of news or entertainment. There may be physical ways to reduce strain in the

eyes. Research recommends using the 20-20-20 rule to protect and heal your eyes from potentially damaging screen time: look 20 feet in the distance for 20 seconds every 20 minutes of time spent on the screen. These are a just a few ways to manage digital well-being.

Learning about how to increase health and reduce unhealthy thoughts, actions, and feelings across all dimensions of wellness is more urgent than ever before. Suicide is the second-leading cause of death among people ages 10-34 and 50% of all lifetime mental illness begins by age 14 and 75% by age 24 (NAMI, 2022). The following strategies are familiar practical ways to promote well-being and pinpoint areas to adjust:

- Sleep well. Young adults need at least 7 hours of quality sleep every night. Avoid keeping digital devices like phones, television, or tablets in the bedroom. Stop using devices at least an hour before bedtime.
- Exercise regularly. Physical activity is an essential stress reliever for people of all ages and can alleviate some of the physical symptoms of stress.
- Talk or write about feelings and experiences. Telling a trusted friend about a stressful situation can help put things in perspective and find solutions. Similarly, expressing feelings in writing has been shown to alleviate symptoms of anxiety and depression.
- Limit mood-altering substances. Avoid tobacco, regular alcohol use, and do not use prescription medications that are not prescribed for you. Seek alternatives to prescriptions that may pose risk for addiction if you have a history of addiction or family history
- Take care of your spirit. Pray, meditate, or learn mindfulness or stress-busting breathing exercises. Having tool ready to use in stressful situations – like in the middle of a test – can help address stress before it becomes overwhelming.
- Eat well. Consider increasing water, fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and reducing sugar and processed foods. Turn off screens during meals.
- Get outside in nature to feel energized, enjoyment, and find peace. Clean and safe inside and outside environments contribute to feelings of stability and security.

Building upon these strategies could become a new way of adulting as teens move into early adulthood. They'll have greater autonomy, awareness of well-being, and an ability find a balance from disconnecting to connecting.

-ARTICLE 6-Parents, Educators & The Community

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

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 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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