



Public Health
Prevent. Promote. Protect.
Greene County



Greene County Public Health

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Press Release

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3rd Article in 6-Part Series “DISCONNECT TO CONNECT” Addresses Risks for Elementary, Middle School Students

GREENE COUNTY, OH -- 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

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- 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 to 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.

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- **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>

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! Watch for our June article that will focus on high school students.

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

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