

The following 10 strategies were adapted from an article on PsychologyToday, which was adapted from *Reset Your Child's Brain: A Four Week Plan to End Meltdowns, Raise Grades, and Boost Social Skills by Reversing the Effects of Electronic Screen-Time*.

The following offers evidence-based practices to help “unplug” after a day of virtual learning. These ideas are not only great for kids, but can be helpful for parents too! While we certainly can’t get away from screens entirely, incorporating these practices on a daily basis—along with taking systematic breaks from screens altogether—can go a long way for “unplugging.”

Here are 10 strategies to counteract the effects of daily screen time:

1. **Increase exposure to greenery, nature, and sunlight.** A growing body of research suggests that green spaces enhance mental health and learning capacity both immediately and over time, by lowering stress levels and restoring attention. Greenery restores attention by drawing the eye while calming the nervous system simultaneously, creating a state of “calm alertness” –a state considered ideal for learning. (This is in contrast to stress-based alertness associated with screen activities, which deplete attention.) Similarly, studies show exposure to sunlight can reduce attention deficit symptoms, while abundant bright light first thing in the morning can help restore disrupted circadian rhythms, improve mood, and enhance restorative sleep.
2. **Incorporate more movement, exercise and free play.** While stress and screen-time break down brain connectivity, exercise does the reverse—it builds connections and actually makes the brain bigger. Exercise fights depression, poor focus, insomnia, addiction, and anxiety by raising and balancing the very brain chemicals and hormones that may become imbalanced from using electronics. In addition, varied and regular movement throughout the day helps develop core muscle strength, stimulates the vestibular system, and discharges pent-up energy—all things that foster learning and mood regulation. And free play is not just for fun—it encourages brain integration, mastering of new skills, grasping others’ mental states, cause-and-effect thinking, and managing conflict.
3. **Practice sleep hygiene and create a “sleep sanctuary.”** Some studies have shown that higher amounts of daily screen-time and particularly screen-time in the evenings can disrupt sleep. Changes include suppressed REM, less time spent in the deeper stages of sleep, and a blunted drop in core body temperature. Conversely, restorative sleep is reparative—it helps the brain “clean house”, reduces inflammation, and consolidates learning. You can facilitate more restorative sleep and boost melatonin (the “sleep hormone”) by establishing a consistent sleep-wake routine (including on the weekends), keeping *all* screens out of the bedroom, using a sleep mask and blackout curtains to make the sleep environment as close to pitch-black as possible, avoiding heavy meals close to bedtime, and keeping the temperature of the room cool. Research suggests that parent-set bedtimes are associated with better sleep and improved functioning. To visually send the brain the message that it’s time to sleep, the bedroom should be uncluttered, void of reminders of tasks to be done, and cozy-feeling.

4. **Engage in creative play and activities.** Creative activities stimulate the right brain, the hemisphere that is often underactive in our information-overloaded world. But the creative process also activates areas throughout the entire brain, facilitating whole-brain and brain-body integration. Moreover, flexing our creative muscle helps build problem-solving skills. Meanwhile, studies show screen-time can hinder imaginary play. When the brain is fed a constant stream of stimulating entertainment (video games) that saturates the senses, it can impact the creative drive, as does viewing a 2-D screen with flat, unnatural light. In contrast, reduced levels of stimulation enhance creativity, and varying depth of field and the interplay of depth and shadow found in the natural world stimulate the mind to wonder and imagine.
5. **Practice mindfulness.** Mindfulness includes activities like yoga, meditation, or breathe work. While it can be tricky to get children to meditate, most will enjoy kids' yoga once they get started, and the benefits of such practices cannot be overstated. When children start practicing a mindfulness activity, invariably they are calmer, less easily frustrated, and better rested. How? Meditation and yoga quiet the brain, reduce stress and stimulation, improve blood flow, and even balance our hormones. Research suggests that meditation is associated with increased thickness of the cortex—the exact opposite of an effect found in tech addiction. Another study showed that second and third-graders who were taught mindfulness techniques showed an improvement in executive functioning, particularly in those with pre-existing attention problems.
6. **Bring on the bonding: human touch, empathy, and love.** It is well-documented that children who are held, rocked, soothed and attended to by an “in tune” parent have larger brains than children who are touched less or who are outright neglected. Eye contact, in particular, fosters bonding and stimulates brain development, and children these days receive less eye contact than ever because of both kids and parents being locked onto screens. Eye contact, face to face interaction, touch, and observing body language all help children learn to regulate emotion and arousal, develop a sense of self, and build capacity for intimacy. Further, healthy attachment to caregivers actually protects against addictions of all kinds, including tech addiction. Other research has shown that expressing and feeling love and compassion helps stimulate the frontal lobe and facilitates executive functioning and self-regulation.
7. **Incorporate daily chores for the entire family—even the little ones.** The Learning Habit Study showed that kids with the highest GPA's did more chores, had less than 30 minutes of daily screen-time, and spent more time with their parents. Another study showed that children who started doing chores at age 3 or 4 were more likely to have successful relationships and careers and were more self-sufficient. For adults, daily chores have been shown to boost mood and productivity and to decrease risk of heart disease—a condition closely tied to chronic stress.

8. **Mimic nature's day/night light cycles as closely as possible.** Artificial light-at-night, from lighting our homes but especially from screens, throws off the body clock as well as hormone and brain chemistry regulation. To best counteract this, avoid screen activities (especially interactive ones) after sundown. And, as mentioned earlier, increase exposure to natural sunlight during the day. Also, energy-efficient bulbs (both CFLs and LEDs) emit poor light quality and have been shown to raise stress levels and negatively impact mood. Switch to incandescent bulbs (halogens are closest to the old-style incandescents) to create a more soothing and natural environment.
9. **Tone down the brightness levels on *all* screens.** For televisions, choose the “natural” setting and lower the brightness and contrast controls to more closely match the surrounding environment. For computers, laptops, tablets, and phones, download software such as f.lux on all your devices, to warm and darken the screen as it gets later in the day. This will help block some of the melatonin-suppressing blue light—but know that melatonin can still be suppressed from screens *even when blue light is blocked*—just not as much.
10. **Go wired and give WiFi the boot.** Using wired-only Internet access helps us be more efficient with device use, while increasing productivity when you do use it. If you can't commit to that, at least turn off the WiFi at night to the given device, which will further help following the day/night light cycle!