

2021
VERSION



Family Digital Wellness Guide

What Parents Need to Know
About Media and Their Child



Boston Children's Hospital
Digital Wellness Lab

Where the world comes for answers



**Boston
Children's
Hospital**

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Wellness Lab

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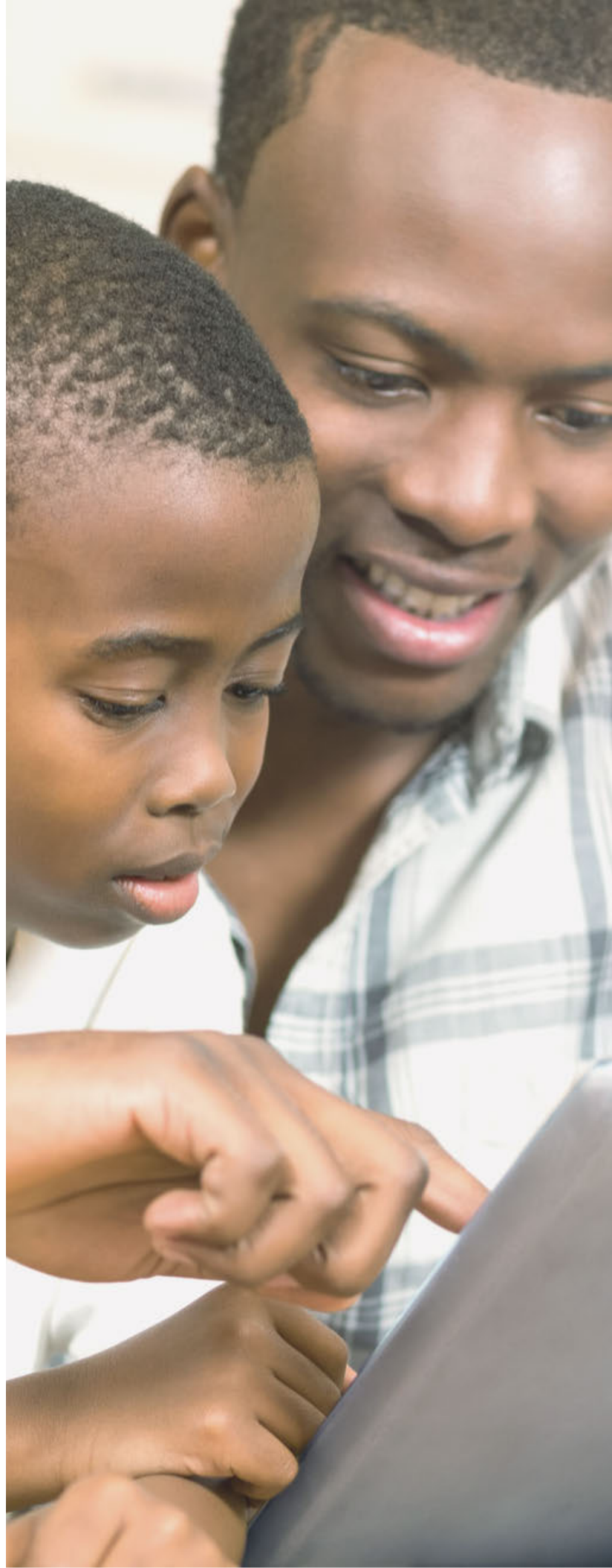
The Digital Wellness Lab at Boston Children's Hospital is an educational entity that exists to provide carefully researched health information. All information included in this guide is for educational purposes only. For specific medical advice, diagnoses, and treatment, consult your health care provider.

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How to use this guide

Use this guide to learn about the media-related health issues that are top of mind for parents today. We've included tips that are practical, easy, and based in science, to help your child of any age use media wisely and in ways that promote wellness.



Welcome!

Dare to hope! As we venture toward the “new normal,” this Family Digital Wellness Guide is here to help you and your loved ones healthfully navigate through 2021.

One year ago, we shifted virtually every human endeavor online. Some, like business meetings, were quick. Other essential activities, like education, were solved more haltingly, with stumbles along the way. But we did it. We met challenges by reinventing each human endeavor, one by one. Work and school went remote, sometimes side by side at dining room tables. We watched - and created - the news stream. Online birthday parties, proms, graduations, weddings, funerals - we did it all. And we did it together, with our families. We reached out, in unprecedented ways, to distant families and friends, binding together against uncertainty. Kids used screens and smartphones, previously toys, as power tools - and after a day of remote schooling, many turned them off to get physical.

Conceived as a reference guide to child development in the Digital Age, the 2020 Family Digital Wellness Guide was unexpectedly timely, providing advice and strategies to families who found themselves facing school closures, business shutdowns, childcare and health uncertainties. It provided useful strategies for using interactive media in effective, balanced and mindful ways. Translated into Spanish and Chinese, it addressed digital inequities and bound our global village more closely together, even as we were physically distanced.

Together, we have experienced and learned much. Knowledge we have gained, and up-to-date scientific research, is incorporated in this “new normal” edition of the Family Digital Wellness Guide. Organized by developmental stage from infancy to adulthood, it examines key transitions of each stage as they are affected, and reflected, by the screens we use and how we use them. Recommendations to optimize your child’s well-being are encapsulated in practical “protips” for everyday life. Thank you for asking The Mediatrician - we answer questions here and empower you with “ice breakers” to address those trickier parenting situations from a place of knowledge and love, opening the doors to caring, respectful family conversations.

Raising children to be healthy, happy, smart and kind is both daring and hopeful in a rapidly changing world - the Digital Wellness Lab is here to help.



~Michael Rich, MD, MPH

Dr. Rich is the founder and director of the Digital Wellness Lab at Boston Children’s Hospital, where he is known as The Mediatrician.

Infants and Toddlers

Ages Birth to 2



Babies develop rapidly in their first years and continually learn from the people and things around them. It is during this stage of development that children first smile, babble, toddle, take their first steps, and say their first words. With so many brain connections being formed, it is important that caregivers talk to babies and provide them with love. Creating an environment that encourages exploration and allows infants to learn is key. While there are many programs and apps marketed for babies, very few are based in science. When choosing videos and apps, look for research-supported media that interests and engages your child in healthy ways.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that children under 18 months avoid using screen media other than video-chatting.



Science Says...

...from music to videochat, media are powerful tools, and how babies use them affects their health and development

Content

Protip: Although it is best not to be distracted by screens while your infant or toddler is present, watch only non-scary and family-friendly shows when they are around. Babies are very sensitive to your emotions and can become upset or scared along with you.

Science says: Babies pick up on your emotional changes and may become upset with you, connecting that feeling with whatever is in their environment at the time. Toddlers may even be scared by unexpected news stories, such as those about environmental disasters or animals. When you watch media with toddlers, be aware of their feelings, and comfort and reassure them that they are okay. Stop watching it if your baby continues to be scared or upset by it.

Educational Technology

Protip: Rely on reputable, science-based, educational organizations and parenting websites for recommendations and reviews on videos, games, and apps that are best suited to your child's age and developmental stage. Be sure to use new technologies with your toddler to see how they engage with it, if it is supporting their interests, and if it helps them learn new skills.

Science says: While many videos, apps, and games are labeled as educational for babies, few have research to support these claims. While toddlers can learn from some high quality media, infants lack the brain development needed to make sense of screen content.

Monitoring

Protip: Password protect your devices and familiarize yourself with the apps you show to your toddler.

Science says: Automated ads and videos can play while your child is on a device. Try to oversee your child's media use whenever possible.

Music and Movement

Protip: Make physical activity fun by singing songs, dancing, and playing musical instruments with your baby or toddler.

Science says: Music is a wonderful way to help your child develop fine and gross motor skills and become physically active. Encourage your child to clap their hands in different rhythms or bang a drumstick on a pot. Babies can use the muscles in their mouths to coo along with you to a favorite song, while toddlers will enjoy singing with the radio or a streaming service. Dance with your baby and encourage toddlers to show how well they can balance while swaying to their favorite beat!

Parental Media Use

Protip: Set aside your cell phone and play with your child at the playground. Make sure you are fully present when supervising your child in these environments, free from media distractions.

Science says: Parents who are distracted by phones or other media while watching their child play may miss important opportunities to play and interact with their child.

Parental Self-Care

Protip: Make sure to practice self-care and take time for yourself in order to manage the stress that comes with being a new parent.



Science says: Parental burnout, or feeling stressed, overwhelmed, and exhausted when it comes to caring for your baby, is real and can lead to parental neglect and abuse. Make sure to check-in with yourself about how you're feeling, and reach out to a loved one or a professional if you find you need help. Be sure to take time for your physical and mental health, including getting enough sleep, going outside for walks, and connecting with friends and family. Social media, including online groups and forums, helps many new parents connect and share hard times, celebrate happy stories, and feel less alone.

Reading

Protip: Read to your infant or toddler in your lap daily. Point to pictures to match them up with words, make animal sounds, and explain what they are seeing and hearing. If reading from a device, such as a tablet, avoid clickable features, as these can take away from your child's ability to follow what is happening in the story.

Science says: Reading to your child helps them develop language skills and increases their understanding of the world. Cuddling them while reading will help them associate reading with happiness and strengthen the bonds you are forming.



Screen Time

Protip: Schedule media use based on your child's internal rhythms and attention span. Use screen media with your baby or toddler and watch them closely. You will know when their attention wanders—that's when you should shift to another, non-screen activity.

Science says: Using screens can take valuable time away from infants and toddlers who could be exploring their world in ways that support their development. Parents who use media with their baby are able to explain what is happening to their child and help them learn from the experience.

Sleep

Protip: Create a quiet, device-free environment for rest, as this can help your infant or toddler get the quality sleep they need. Turn off videos, loud devices, and bright screens before naps or bedtime to minimize sleep disruptions.

Science says: Daily screen viewing, such as using a tablet or smartphone, can cause your toddler to stay up later, delay when they fall asleep, and lose overall sleep time.

Age of Infant or Toddler	Recommended Hours of Sleep
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Newborn	16 hours/day
1 month	15.5 hours/day
3 months	15 hours/day
6 months	14 hours/day
9 months	14 hours/day
1 year	14 hours/day
1.5 years	13.5 hours/day
2 years	13 hours/day



Ask the Mediatrixian™

What parents ask most about their infants and toddlers

Is it ok for my baby to video chat with family and friends?

Many of today's parents face this question. Here's what you should know:

- Smartphones do emit some electromagnetic radiation, and while there are mixed data on potential dangers, the best evidence indicates that the greatest risk involved is if the phone is held against the head, rather than looked at from a distance, as is done through video chat.
- There is what scientists call a “video deficit” for very young children. This means that it takes more repeat viewings of the same content for infants and toddlers to learn an action from a screen than it does for them to learn it from a person who is physically with them.
- As early as 6 months of age, babies are able to tell when a person on a screen is interacting with them in real time as opposed to the passive screen images they see when they watch TV or a video. This means that babies can start forming relationships through video chat, especially if the chat is helped by the adult who is physically present (i.e., telling your baby they are talking to grandma, pointing and waving at the screen together, and narrating the action)
- At 12-25 months, babies learn better from real-time interactive video chat with adults than from educational videos or shows. This is likely because video chat allows an adult to react to the individual child and tailor their actions to best suit the child.

Although video chatting is not the same for your baby's social-emotional and brain development as being with loved ones in person, it is much better than no contact with them at all and can help them build meaningful relationships.

Ice Breakers

When you see something concerning, here are ways to get the conversation going.

If you see this...

Your baby is losing interest in video chatting with a loved one...

Your partner seems overly tired, upset, or distracted when caring for your baby...

Your baby is interested by the bright lights and noises coming from smartphones and tablets that are nearby...

Do this...

Say, "Let's make silly faces and play peek-a-boo together through the screen!" If your child is tired or fidgety or nothing is working, then wave and say "bye bye."

Say, "It looks like you need a break. Let me take the baby for a bit. Later, let's come up with a schedule so that each of us can get some quality 1-1 time with our baby and alone time."

The best thing for babies is to interact with other people face-to-face. Make sure your baby is getting plenty of focused time with people without devices around.



How to talk to your young child

Infants and toddlers are rapidly developing their language skills at this stage. You can help them learn new words by pointing things out and naming them. The more you talk to your child, the more language they will learn and understand.

Preschoolers

Ages 3 to 5



Preschoolers are very curious about the world around them and are motivated to explore and learn through play. They are becoming more independent and interested in kids and adults outside of their immediate family. The interactions they have with their family, other people, and their environment will contribute to shaping their personality and how they think about the world. Children this age are quickly developing language, cognitive, and social skills. Media can be a wonderful tool to help preschoolers further develop these skills, provided parents help to balance media use and set expectations that work for each child.

Be mindful of "educational" marketing claims about TV shows, apps, and other media, as these claims are often unregulated and frequently not supported by research.



Science Says...

...from TV to tablets, media are powerful tools, and how preschoolers use them affects their health and development

Attention

Protip: Avoid having TV or videos on in the background while your child is playing. When your preschooler is using media, help them focus on one thing at a time and avoid getting distracted by other apps on the device or things around them.

Science says: Increased screen time, including background TV, has been associated with more attention problems in preschoolers and a higher risk of being diagnosed with Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) criteria.

Eating

Protip: Avoid having your preschooler watch shows or videos, interact with apps, or play games that advertise candy, sugar-sweetened breakfast foods, and other unhealthy foods.

Science says: Commercials for snacks and processed foods with low nutritional value but high calories influence kids to eat in unhealthy ways. Children who become familiar with food brands and mascots (often cartoon or kid-friendly characters) will request and choose those branded foods more often, increasing their risk of becoming overweight or obese.

Joint Engagement

Protip: Use media actively with your child. Point to different objects on the screen. Ask questions about what is happening. Praise and encourage their interactions with media, all while cuddling your child.

Science says: Parents provide significant verbal, emotional, and physical support when they join in on their child's media use and interact with them. This mentoring helps them enjoy and learn more from their media use.

Limit Setting

Protip: Set clear, consistent, and realistic expectations for your preschooler's screen media use. Use timers, settings and other built-in tools to help make the transition from a screen to another activity a smooth one.

Science says: Parents often allow preschoolers to use screen media when they need to do an activity that does not involve their child, such as taking a phone call or preparing a meal. Let your child know that when you are done with your task, they will need to be done using screens and will move onto the next activity, such as playing with you or eating. Setting a timer on your phone, within the app, game, or device your child is using can be a helpful way to transition your child from using screens.

Mental Health/COVID-19

Protip: Create and stick to a healthy daily schedule or routine, even through stressful times such as a pandemic. This includes set wake-up times, mealtimes, bedtimes as well as having time for play and relaxation.

Science says: Stressful situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, can cause preschoolers to feel disconnected, worried, or sad. This has the potential to negatively impact their mental health. Providing your preschooler with a daily schedule and healthy routines can help lessen their fears and concerns, help them feel loved, and provide them with a sense of security. Make sure to establish morning routines - including a set time to wake up, brush their teeth and eat a healthy breakfast -- and create play routines. These can include time for a favorite video, TV show or game, as well as time outside, time to connect with friends or family (even through videochat). You can also consider setting up a bedtime routine.



Monitoring

Protip: Password protect devices and limit your child's access to only those apps you pre-approved to prevent them from accessing inappropriate content. Turn on safe-search mode and disable ads where possible. Save links to your child's websites and place their apps in a folder on your phone so they can easily find their favorite games and webpages.

Science says: Password-protecting devices and limiting what your preschooler has access to can help make sure that they aren't exposed to content that may frighten or confuse them. Parental controls work best when used openly and honestly. Letting your child know why there are parental controls in place can help build trust and communication with them.

Motor Skills

Protip: Leave the devices behind and take your child on a walk, visit a playground, or help them ride a bike or tricycle.

Science says: While using a smartphone or tablet can help your child develop fine motor skills, (such as writing), using screens usually does not provide opportunities for preschoolers to develop gross motor skills such as running, balance, and coordination.



Play

Protip: Make time for your child to play both inside and actively outside. Let them choose how to play and join your child when you can.

Science says: Play is an important part of a preschooler's healthy development. Playing with your children, and letting them direct the play, can help improve their memory.

Reading

Protip: Make reading a part of your preschooler's daily routine and have them choose stories that interest them, whether by visiting a library or looking online for an ebook.

Science says: Children who like to read tend to read more, which makes them better readers. Preschoolers who read or are read to are better prepared for school, with better literacy and language skills (such as spelling and comprehension).

90% of American parents say their preschooler watches TV, 64% say their preschooler uses a tablet, and 62% say their preschooler uses a smartphone.

Sleep

Protip: Create nap and nighttime routines that help prepare your child for rest. Turn off all screens at least 1 hour before bed. Read a book or tell stories before they fall asleep.

Science says: Using screens before bedtime or naptime can excite kids and keep them from falling asleep. The "blue light" that comes from TVs and other screen devices can disrupt your child's natural sleep cycle, making it harder for them to fall asleep and wake up naturally.

Social Emotional Learning

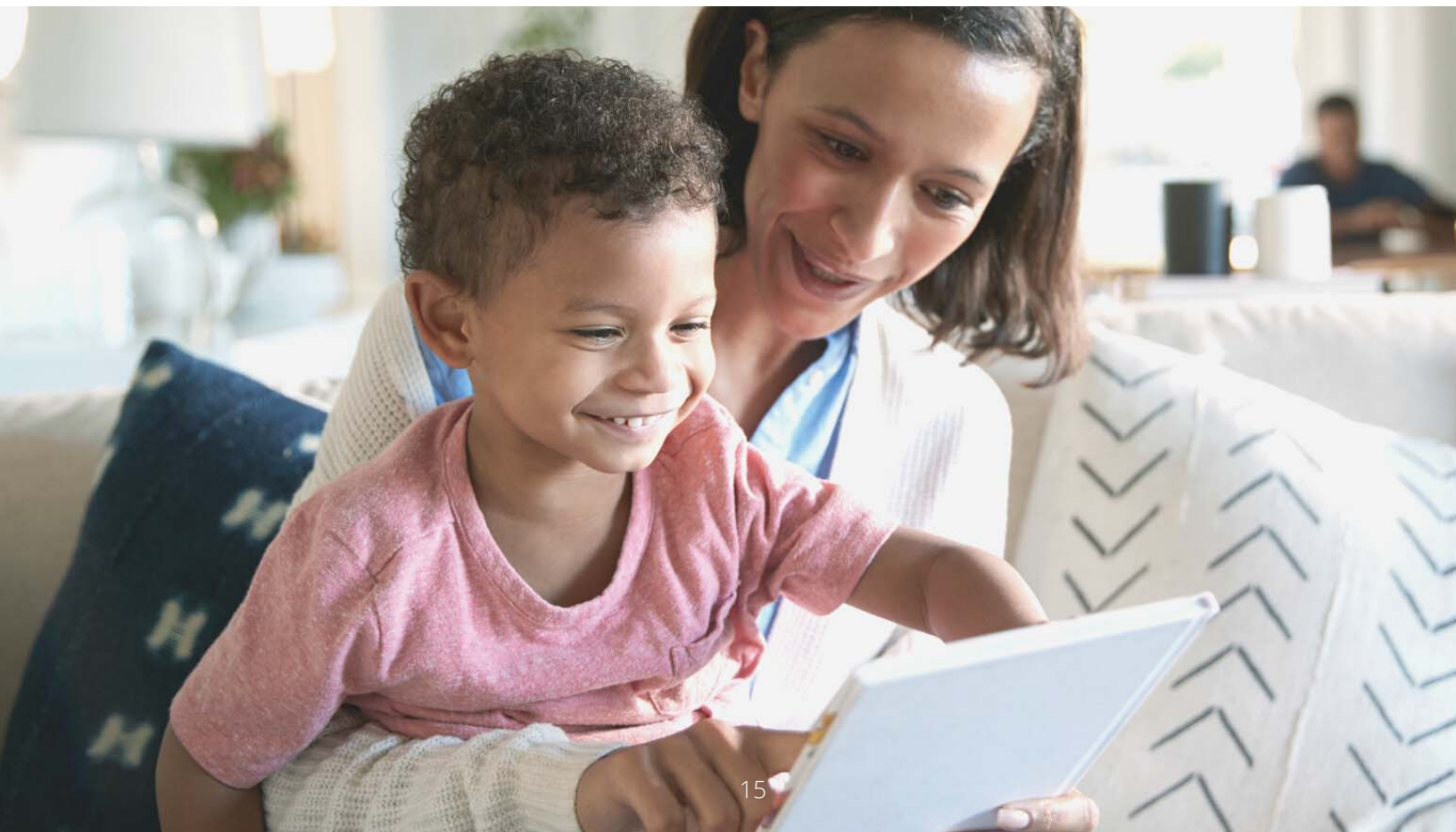
Protip: Play games that teach your child how to recognize, label, and manage their emotions. Consider using a "mood meter" to check-in with your child each day or work with them to create a "calm down kit" for when they feel frustrated. You can also discuss your child's favorite characters from games, movies, shows or books and talk about how they deal with their emotions.

Science says: Learning social-emotional (SE) skills (such as working through difficult tasks, and cooperation) with the help of a parent can help preschoolers understand emotional expressions along with ways to label and manage them. Mastering social emotional skills at a young age can also lead to improved mental health, greater involvement in community activities, and better physical health.

Social Skills

Protip: Choose TV programs for your child that they enjoy and that will help them learn. Watching TV shows or movies beforehand can help you determine whether they will positively affect your child's development.

Science says: Well-designed programs for preschoolers can improve their social skills, pro-social behavior, language capabilities, and critical thinking.





Ask the Mediatrixian™

What parents ask most about their preschoolers

Is it wrong for me to give my preschooler my tablet or smartphone to use unsupervised?

We are still learning about how children are affected by the screen media they use and how they use them. What we do know is that the best way for children to use these devices is with a parent or other caregiver. Handing a young child a device to calm them or keep them entertained is problematic because of what the screen time displaces or takes time away from:

- In-person conversation: Your child will focus their attention on the screen, missing out on what could be valuable vocabulary building, social-emotional development, and bonding with you.
- Developing self-calming behaviors: Instead of learning how to use their thoughts and imagination to regulate emotions, your child is learning that their boredom can be eliminated through instant gratification from a screen.
- Observing and experiencing the world: Preschoolers are continually taking in the environment around them to learn about the world and how to behave in it. By focusing on a screen, they are missing out on seeing and interacting what is around them.

Remember there are plenty of alternative activities that don't involve a screen. Encourage your preschooler's imaginative play, talk to them on long car rides, play games that help them identify numbers, colors, or even help them read!

Ice Breakers

When you see something concerning, here are ways to get the conversation going.

If you see this...

Your child is about to have a meltdown after their demands for a screen have been denied...

Your child is more interested in the funny sounds and animations available in their reading app than the story...

Your child seems worried or anxious about changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic...

Say this...

"Let's play that game you like together, or we can read your favorite story." If your child is still having a difficult time, ask them if they would like a snack, or if there is another activity they would like to do.

"Those are some silly sounds coming from that book! What is it about? Let's read it together and find out!"

"There are a lot of changes happening in the world, but you are safe and loved. Let's talk about some of the things you miss, and maybe how we can do them using tech."



How to talk to your preschooler

Start conversations when you and your child are in good moods (not feeling angry or hurt) and when you're both open to listening. Be sure to say exactly what you mean, encourage your child to take turns talking and listening, and give them your full attention. Let them know that you love them and that you value what they say.

School Age

Ages 6 to 10



Six- to ten-year-olds are learning how they fit into the world through school, hobbies, friends, and family. As kids this age branch out and become more independent, they begin to choose the types of media they like, including video games, devices, TV shows, and books. That said, parents play a key role in helping shape kids' choices, including what they use, watch, play, and connect with and how they do so. While it's important to encourage kids' independence and empower their decision-making, caregivers need to be there to help them focus on their school work, balance their activities, and monitor what they're doing online.

The primary goal of the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) is to place parents of young children in control over what information is collected from their young children online. As a result, many websites and social media apps require users to be 13 or older, or have their use overseen by a parent.



Science Says...

...from apps to video games, media are powerful tools, and how children use them affects their health and development

Advertising

Protip: When your child sees an ad and requests what is being advertised, use key concepts of media literacy to help explain how ads and commercials are designed to get them to want to buy things. Together, talk through questions such as, who created the ad? Why did it attract their attention? And, what values, lifestyles and points of view are and are not represented in the message?

Science says: Advertisers target children with lots of commercials, everything from sneakers and toys to unhealthy foods and snacks high in fat, sugar, and calories. Your children may also start becoming familiar with online influencers, who are also often paid to advertise different products and services on social media. Helping your child think critically about how advertising tries to change behaviors, helps your child understand the purpose of ads, and empowers them to make informed decisions.

Cyberbullying

Protip: Look for signs that your child may be a target of cyberbullying, such as hiding their phone when you walk by, losing interest in school, feeling sad, and withdrawing from friends and family. Ask your child about the kinds of things they see online and talk about with friends. Teach them how to act with kindness, both on and offline. Many schools have anti-bullying policies, so talking with your child's school can help.

Science says: Kids who are cyberbullied (bullied online through text, games, and apps) are at greater risk for depression, anxiety, and even suicide. Cyberbullying can lead to school and behavioral problems such as poor grades and acting out. The negative effects of being cyberbullied are more severe than traditional bullying and can last into adulthood.

Educational Apps

Protip: Look for apps that support your child's learning in ways that are meaningful to them, allows them to be focused and engaged (not distracted), and that can be used with others, such as yourself or their teacher.

Science says: Because the "educational" label in most app stores is not standardized it is difficult for parents to know what apps are best for supporting their child's learning. Looking for apps that meet the "Four Pillars of Learning", which are 1) Active Learning, 2) Engagement in the Learning Process, 3) Meaningful Learning, and 4) Social Interaction, can help parents choose educational apps that are best suited for their child.

Engagement

Protip: Choose platforms that are created for your child's age group, and create accounts together. Log into these accounts to see how your child is doing, and talk to them about who they are connecting with, the kinds of content they enjoy, and what they like about each app or account.

Science says: Interactive media can help kids make and maintain friendships, and meet people of different races, religions, and gender identities. Talking to your child about their online interactions keeps communication open and lets your child know you are there for them.

Homework

Protip: Set up a "school area" at home, where your child can do their school work uninterrupted. Make sure you know their online class schedule, and/or homework assignments– this way you can check-in on them when they are not in the middle of an online class, and also help them stay focused and on task with their independent work.



Science says: Creating a quiet place for kids to focus on remote learning can help them stay focused during online classes. However, kids often "media multitask," or use more than one device at a time, such as watching a video while doing their homework. While kids may think they're getting more done in less time, the reality is that it will take them longer to complete their homework, they will make more mistakes, and they won't retain as much of what they learn. Checking in on them, and what is on their screen, can help them stay focused on singular tasks.

Mature Media

Protip: Read reviews, check ratings, and watch previews for video games and shows before you say it's ok for your child to play or watch them. Make sure you feel good about what your child will be learning from these media.

Science says: Kids who watch violent or sexual TV and videos, or play mature video games, may be influenced by the content. This can include thinking that violence is an okay way to solve problems, substance use is fun, or that casual sex is popular and consequence-free.



Mental Health/COVID-19

Protip: Regularly check-in and talk to your child about how they are feeling and coping during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ask them about their thoughts on coronavirus and what worries them, while also reassuring them that they are ok, and that you are there for them. Be sure to check-in on how school is going, especially if they've transitioned from in-person to remote learning.

Science says: Having open, honest communication with your child about what they are experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic, from school closures, to their own health concerns can help them cope and prevent feeling overwhelmed by anxiety, sadness and stress during this public health crisis and beyond.

Physical Activity

Protip: Make sure your child is able to be physically active every day. This can be as simple as taking a walk around the neighborhood or visiting a park. Indoor activities, such as doing an online yoga course, having a dance party, or playing an active video game are other great ways for your child to stay healthy and active.

Science says: Kids who spend more than 2 hours a day passively using screens (such as watching a show), have a higher risk of being overweight or obese. This is most likely due to a combination of screen use and a lack of physical activity. Encouraging your child to be physically active each day and providing opportunities for them to actively play can help reduce their risk of becoming overweight or obese.

Scary Media

Protip: Comfort your child if they become scared or confused by what they see online or on TV. Let them know that they'll be ok, and remind them that you're there for them.

Science says: Scary news stories, movies, and images online can frighten kids and lead them to become overly worried about their safety and the wellbeing of others.

Sleep

Protip: Make and stick to a bedtime routine that includes having your child stop using all screen media at least one hour before they go to sleep.

Science says: Science says: Using screens before bed, such as playing a video game or watching a TV show, can excite kids and make it harder for them to fall asleep. The "blue light" from TVs and other screens can disrupt the body's natural sleep cycle, resulting in your child getting less sleep and struggling to wake up on time. On average, school age children need 9-12 hrs of sleep each night.

Social Emotional Learning

Protip: Help your child practice self-management, social awareness and responsible decision-making skills by providing them with opportunities to participate in different activities. Let your child take part in supervised risk-taking activities where they also demonstrate respect for others, such as organized sports. Watch movies, shows and sports with your child and point out instances that celebrate diversity, inclusivity and kindness.

Science says: Children become more and more independent and emotionally intelligent over time. Six- to ten-year-olds are developmentally able to form stable peer relationships, build cooperation skills, regulate their emotions, and become better at solving difficult social problems .





Ask the Mediatrixian™

What parents ask most about their school-ages child

My child is being given a laptop for school – what should I do?

Many parents in similar situations share your concern. The first step, though, is to determine whether there is truly a problem to be solved. To do that, have a discussion with your child's teacher or other members of the school administration to get a better understanding of the how the school hopes to use these laptops to teach or enhance the curriculum, how they plan to teach safe and healthy internet use, and what measures they have in place to ensure student safety.

Given the past year, (and even before the pandemic) many school systems rolled out device programs before fully considering either the positives or the potential negatives that can come with it. When discussing the laptop program with educators or school administrators, it may be helpful to ask the following:

- What are the goals of the program and how will using laptops help students achieve these goals?
- Will the laptops be used at school, at home, or both?
- What is the expected role of parents in encouraging positive, productive use of this tool?
- Are there measures in place to ensure that students don't access potentially harmful content?

When having these conversations, you may want to ask about how you and other parents can get involved and stay current with the technology your children are using so you can best support their learning process. This will bring parental concerns to the awareness of the school's administration and offer the suggestion that parents and educators work together to ensure that students are using the laptops safely and in ways that benefit their learning.

Ice Breakers

When you see something concerning, here are ways to get the conversation going.

If you see this...

Your child is watching a video containing graphic content that concerns you...

Your child is having a difficult time with remote learning...

Your child is spending more time indoors and being less physically active...

Say this...

What is the video you are watching? "Can you tell me what you like about it? Maybe we can find one like it that isn't so graphic and we can watch it together."

"It can be tough learning in different ways, let's take a break from the screen for a while and we can talk about how school is going and what we can do with your teachers to make it better."

"I've noticed you've been inside a lot more recently, let's take a walk outside, or go to your favorite park and talk about how we can be better about getting some active outdoor time!"



How to talk to your child

Start conversations when you and your child are in good moods (not feeling angry or hurt) and when you're both open to listening. Be sure to say exactly what you mean, encourage your child to take turns talking and listening, and give them your full attention. Let them know that you love them and that you value what they say.

Tweens

Ages 11-13



Eleven- to thirteen-year-olds are in the initial stages of puberty; as a result, they begin to think differently about school and learning and place greater importance on their friendships. Tweens are becoming more independent while also caring more about how others see them. Your tween will begin to show preferences for different types of media, including those their friends are into. Despite these changes, however, caregivers must remain involved in their child's activities, know the media their tweens are using, and continue to talk about and monitor their child's online accounts and devices.

At this stage, tweens begin to develop logical thinking, reasoning, and judgment, but they still need parental guidance when facing choices about their media use.



Science Says...

...from streaming to smartphones, media are powerful tools, and how tweens use them affects their health and development

Body Image

Protip: Actively listen and show that you care about how your child is feeling about puberty and how their body is changing. Talk with them about images on social and other media as these often set unrealistic ideals, and help them understand that these images are often digitally altered or filtered so that people look more 'beautiful' than they really are.

Science says: Tweens are often exposed to a lot of information online and through other media, both true and false, about how bodies "should" look and what they can do to "improve" their appearance. Certain body types are often idolized, when in reality bodies are incredibly diverse. There are many online accounts, websites, and influencers that make youth feel inadequate by encouraging them to lose weight or build up muscle, harming both their mental and physical health.

Cyberbullying

Protip: Have open, honest conversations with your tween about what they are seeing and doing online. Ask specifically about cyberbullying and if they or a friend has experienced it. Be sure your child knows that you are always there for them.

Science says: 1 in 5 tweens has been exposed to cyberbullying in some form, as the target, bully or witness. Although tweens fear losing their devices, over half who experienced cyberbullied said telling a parent was useful in stopping the cyberbullying. Many tweens find that telling someone they are being bullied makes them feel safer and lessens the negative psychological impact of cyberbullying.

Independence

Protip: Ask your tween about their favorite apps and video games, what they enjoy about them, and how to use or play them. Set boundaries together about your tween's media use, and consequences, should those boundaries be broken.

Science says: Tweens are more likely to have positive communication and form trust with their parents when they feel that parents are making an effort to get to know how they use media and why. Tweens are also less likely to engage in irresponsible or excessive screen use when their parents are more supportive of their becoming independent and self-regulated.

Learning

Protip: Get to know the types of online learning courses your child's school offers, or that their teacher recommends as a way of supporting your tween's learning at home. Be mindful of what devices and internet connection are needed to support your tween's remote learning. Ask your child's school for help if you are unsure that your child has everything they need to access a remote curriculum or course.

Science says: Remote or online learning can be a great way for some tween students to access information and increase engagement. Many tweens find online learning fun, enjoyable, and effective. That said, many homes lack access to the internet and/or devices needed for students to attend online classes and complete assigned coursework.



Mental Health/COVID-19

Protip: Help your tween safely balance the time they spend using screens with other activities, including physical activity and talking to friends and family. Make sure that your tween has daily opportunities to move around outside, such as taking a walk, and that you are available to talk about how they are feeling, especially when it comes to their experience of living through a pandemic.

Science says: Safety precautions such as school closures and social distancing to help stop the spread of COVID-19 have led many tweens to spend more time on screens and less time being physically active. Higher levels of inactive behaviors (such as watching videos on screen) and low levels of physical activity can lead to poor school performance and negative mental and physical health. Encouraging your tween to be safely physically active, and checking in on how they are doing, can positively affect their mental and physical health throughout the pandemic and into the future.

Research shows that tweens whose parents set boundaries around their social media use, spend less time using social media and comparing their appearance to others on social media. In turn, these tweens have better mental health.



Music

Protip: Get to know the music your tween likes and why they like it, strengthening your bond.

Science says: Music is important and meaningful to tweens, particularly for mood management, friendship formation, and identity development.

Parental Modelling

Protip: Remember to use media in ways that you want your tween to behave when it comes to their own media use. Make time for conversations without device distractions, including mealtimes, and be sure that you follow the house rules your family sets for media use.

Science says: How parents use media influences how their children use media, including when and how often they use it. Using media together, such as watching a show, playing a videogame or using the same app allows parents to be a healthy and trustworthy role model for their children, which in turn can affect tweens' healthy behaviors when it comes to healthy device use.

Sleep

Protip: Help your tween end screen use at least one hour before bedtime. Don't use phones as alarm clocks. Establish charging stations outside of bedrooms so they can avoid FOMO or "fear of missing out." Have tweens tell their friends they are offline overnight.

Science says: Tweens who have phones in their bedrooms sleep less and get poorer quality sleep. Alerts and notifications disrupt sleep cycles critical for moving short-term memories into learning centers of the brain. Stimulating content and taking in the blue light from screens disrupt the body's natural sleep cycle.

Social Emotional Learning

Protip: Model empathy and kindness and highlight when those behaviors are illustrated in the media. Utilize your tween's favorite television shows or video games to elevate and reinforce sharing and helping behaviors.

Science says: CASEL indicates that investment in SEL has led to improved classroom behavior, better stress management, and 13% gains in academics. With increasing independence from adults, tweens start to form group-based identities, resolve conflicts within group situations, and can build on their understanding of others to navigate complex emotional situations.

Violent Media

Protip: Limit your tweens' exposure to violent video games and movies. Help them avoid desensitization by placing violence in context with the suffering it causes. Brainstorm non-violent solutions for problems.

Science says: Watching violent movies can desensitize tweens to violence, making them feel that it's normal or acceptable behavior. Violent video game playing has been associated with aggressive thoughts and behaviors, lower grades, less pro-social behavior, increased anxiety and depression.





Ask the Mediatrixian™

What parents ask most about their tween child

Is technology decreasing kids' ability to communicate face-to-face?

While in some ways kids are connecting through the technology and media they use, hyper-focus on devices can hinder their development of social skills needed to communicate with others in-person. Teachers and others who work with children have noticed several differences in the way young people communicate now as opposed to a few years ago:

- 1. Eye Contact:** Used to communicating through a screen, many youth do not look others in the eyes when talking to them.
- 2. Body Language:** Digitally connected kids can lose their sense of personal space and awareness of where people are physically. They may stand at awkward distances from each other or bump into others while walking and texting.
- 3. Focus:** Multitasking between devices or between devices and "real life" results in skipping from one input or thought to another, splitting attention between experiences. Less attention is paid to each experience and the richness of each interaction declines.

Although technology plays a role in our inability to communicate one-on-one, it is not the direct cause. Our smartphones, laptops and tablets are tools and, used in healthy and safe ways, can help us communicate and stay connected (or reconnect) to people we love and can help us form new relationships with others all over the world. Technology only distances us when we misuse these tools by allowing them to come between us rather than connecting us.

Ice Breakers

When you see something concerning, here are ways to get the conversation going.

If you see this...

Your tween is picking up the same distracting media habits you have...

Your tween has texted something cruel to one of their classmates...

Your tween is watching videos from influencers giving diet tips and suggesting weight loss products or supplements to build muscles...

Say this...

"I get frustrated with myself when I become distracted with my phone. It makes me feel like I'm missing out on being with you. Let's make a house rule to have a time each day where none of us use our phones."

"I saw a text that you sent to one of your friends that seemed a little mean to me. I'm not going to take your phone away, but do want to talk about what you sent and how it might make your friend feel."

"I know there's a lot of pressure to look like the perfect filtered and cropped images you see posted, and that your body is going through a lot of changes. Remember that most of what you see online isn't a true view of reality. Let's talk about how these images make you feel."



How to talk to your tween

Start conversations when you and your child are in good moods (not feeling angry or hurt) and when you're both open to listening. Be sure to say exactly what you mean, encourage your child to take turns talking and listening, and give them your full attention. Let them know that you love them and that you value what they say.

Teens

Ages 13-18



Thirteen- to eighteen-year-olds are changing how they think, feel, and interact with others. Adolescent bodies undergo rapid physical changes, and many teens begin to pay even greater attention to how they look, often comparing themselves to the body "ideals" they see in media. Teens develop closer friendships and romantic relationships, often using media as ways to strengthen these connections. Despite teens' healthy drive to distance themselves from family, parents remain their most important influence and must stay involved, helping them navigate their media use, balance their time, and stay healthy.

The connection between social media use and well-being differs from teen to teen, highlighting the importance of taking your teen's unique personality into account when guiding their healthy media use behaviors



Science Says...

...from social media to wearables, media are powerful tools, and how teens use them affects their health and development

Co-viewing

Protip: Ask to watch your teen's favorite movie, show, or online streamer *with* them as an opportunity to get to know them and what they enjoy, better. Remain nonjudgmental while co-viewing, even if it is a video that you would not choose for your teen.

Science says: Teens become more and more independent in their decision making, including choosing what media they consume. Asking to watch shows or play video games with them shows that you respect your teen's independent choices. Watching together also opens the door for discussion about complex issues like sex, relationships, and substance abuse in ways that are nonjudgmental and show that you care.

Cyberbullying

Protip: If your teen admits that they have been bullied via text, social media, or another online service, reassure them that you will not take away their phone, device, or video game console. Ensure them that they are safe, and that, together, you will be able to stop the cyberbullying from happening.

Science says: Cyberbullying can lead to negative psychological, behavioral, and academic outcomes, including suicidal thoughts, depression, low self-esteem, social isolation, increased physical fighting, and poor school performance. LGBTQ+ youth in particular are more likely to experience cyberbullying and more likely not to report being bullied online. Teens often do not tell their parents about being cyberbullied as they fear being blamed and having their devices taken away.

Media Multitasking

Protip: If your teen has problems focusing on their homework or other tasks, encourage them to turn off all screen media, even background media such as music with lyrics or television, until their task is done.

Science says: Teens who "multitask" with multiple screens while doing homework are less likely to retain the information they are trying to learn, more likely to have impulse control issues, and worse working memory. Teens who already have attention issues (such as ADHD) may be more easily distracted from tasks if they are listening to music with lyrics, watching online videos, using social media, or interacting with any screen media.

Mental Health

Protip: Talk to your teen about how they use media and how it makes them feel. Create ground rules together, including how much time to spend on media, what kinds of things are ok to share, and how best to interact with others. Let them know that you will be monitoring their social media accounts from time to time. If you or they are ever disturbed by something online, talk about it directly. If your teen is acting sad or withdrawn, discuss your concerns with a health professional.

Science says: Media, including social media is an important part of many teen's lives. Intense active use of social media (e.g., sharing and responding to messages) does not necessarily indicate or lead to mental health problems. Problematic use or addictive-like behaviors as well as passive behaviors (e.g., mindless scrolling or watching TV that is of little interest) has been shown to lead to poor mental health outcomes in teens, including increased rates of anxiety and depression. Parents can help teens use media as tools to promote healthy strategies, feel connected, and improve teens' moods.



Music

Protip: Get to know the music your teen likes and why they enjoy it. This will help them to think critically about the messages in lyrics.

Science says: Listening to music is a great way for teens to regulate moods. Some music is sexist or degrading, some glorifies drug, alcohol, and tobacco use, making them seem risk-free. These lyrics can influence how teens treat each other and themselves.

Online Influencers

Protip: Monitor your teen's media use and talk to them about the ads and online influencers they see. Discuss any unhealthy beauty ideals and behaviors that are shown. Listen to how your teen feels about them, and address how these messages might be affecting them.

Science says: Influencer marketing can greatly affect teens' attitudes and behaviors regarding nutrition and health. Teen programming often embeds marketing messages about appearance ideals, unhealthy nutrition, and exercise habits that can influence negative body image and harmful behaviors.



Parental Modeling

Protip: Develop house rules for media use with your teen, and follow them yourself. Encourage healthy behaviors when it comes to screens, including having sit-down media-free meals together and conversations that are free of device-distractions.

Science says: Although your teen is becoming more independent and may not seem interested in how you use media, they are still learning from you and your actions—they still rely on you for consistency, safety, and love.

Sexting

Protip: Have matter-of-fact, non-judgmental conversations about the risks involved with sharing explicit images or content with others online—even if it is with someone your teen trusts and is in a relationship with. Sexting objectifies and dehumanizes. Teach your teen to respect themselves and others.

Science says: Sexting has been shown to cause teens regrets about oversharing and can lead to cyberbullying, depression, and in some cases, legal consequences.

Sleep

Protip: Working back from when they must wake up, help your teen set a consistent bedtime and turn off all screens an hour before that. Charge devices outside of bedrooms overnight.

Science says: Adolescence is a stage of rapid physical growth and sleep is when growth occurs. Teens need about 9½ hours of sleep. Using screens right before bed can delay their body's natural sleep cycle, as media can arouse them and the blue light emitted by screens suppresses melatonin, the sleep hormone. Device alerts and notifications disrupt quality of sleep, affecting their learning.

Social Emotional Learning

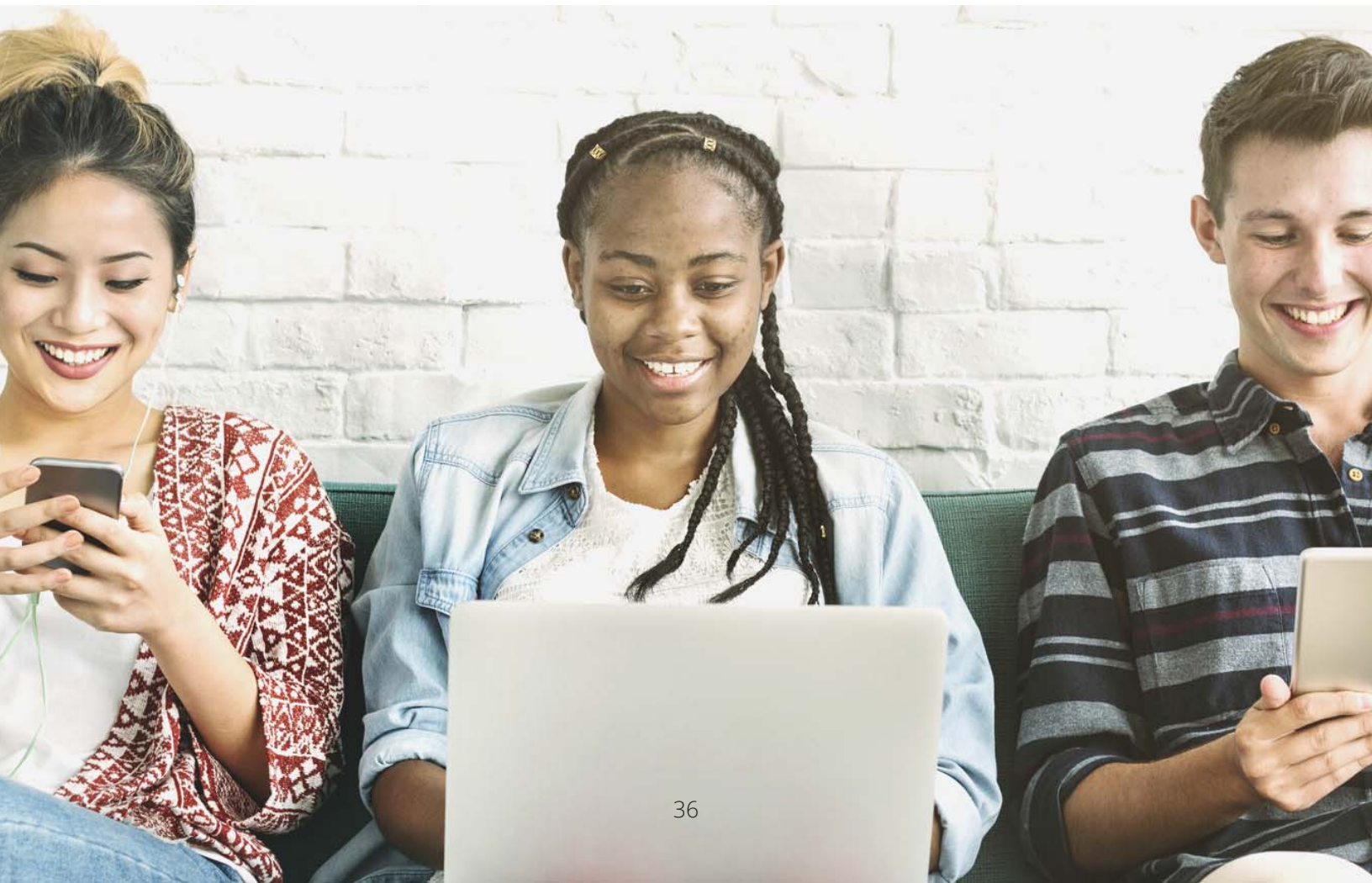
Protip: Empower your teen to solve media and technology-related problems on their own. Resist the urge to step-in and offer solutions to a difficult situation your child is encountering online. Instead, ask probing questions to help your child solve the problem independently. Discuss how decisions might impact others (positively or negatively) and what the pros and cons or solutions might be.

Science says: Supporting students' social, emotional, and cognitive development relates positively to traditional measures such as attendance, grades, test scores, graduation rates, college and career readiness, and overall well-being. Teens start to form an individualized personal identity and articulate a set of values that guide their behavior. In addition, thirteen- to eighteen-year-olds form mature relationships with others and move towards emotional independence from parents.

Violent Media

Protip: Know what shows, movies and video games your teen watches and plays, and encourage your child to think critically about violence they see in media. Talk about the hurt and suffering violence causes, as well as alternative, non-violent ways to solve problems. When possible, limit your child's violent media consumption by encouraging non-violent or less violent options.

Science says: Watching violent media can desensitize teens to violence, making them feel that it is normal or acceptable behavior. Playing a lot of violent video games can increase teens' aggression, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Parental monitoring and involvement can reduce teens exposure to violent content and reduce their aggressive behaviors and negative outcomes.





Ask the Mediatrixian™

What parents ask most about their teen

Can media use cause teens to be unhappy with their bodies and contribute to eating disorders?

Here's what we know about the complicated relationship between media and teen body image:

- Many beauty and lifestyle media contain content focused on how their audience (regardless of gender identity) can “improve” themselves. What teens take away from this content is that they are inadequate— their thighs are too thick, or not muscular enough, etc. Research shows that some teens feel measurably worse about themselves after consuming these media.
- Numerous filters, photo and video editing apps make it easy for teens to alter their appearance. As a result, many teens manipulate their selfies and photos to look more like advertised beauty ideals. Teens are constantly bombarded with this altered reality on social media, and research shows that teens who compare themselves to the images they see online experience low self-esteem and body image issues.
- Eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia are driven by a desire to take control of lives that feel out of control. Disordered eating behaviors can be the response to body dissatisfaction, and can be triggered by social media use, particularly when social media focuses on unrealistic beauty ideals.

Talk about the media messages and images your teen consumes, including the images they share of themselves. Encourage your teen to present their authentic (unfiltered) self online, and check in with them and their doctor if you notice any unhealthy or disordered eating behaviors.

Ice Breakers

When you see something concerning, here are ways to get the conversation going.

If you see that...

Your teen is spending time on their phone late at night and is having trouble waking up in the morning...

You see your teen looking at pornography online...

The music your teen has been listening to lately is mellow and filled with sad, emotional lyrics....

Say this...

"I noticed that mornings are tough. Let's try a new routine, where we all charge our phones in the kitchen at night, and do something to screen-free to unwind before bed, like taking a bath, writing in a journal, or reading a book."

"It's perfectly natural and ok to want to look at that. But remember that those are real people in the videos and sometimes the people making them aren't treated very well. Also, what they show you might be really violent and not at all what sex is actually like."

"That song you were listening to had some pretty heavy lyrics and made me concerned that you may be feeling down. How are you feeling, and what do you like about that music?"



How to talk to your teen

Start conversations when you and your child are in good moods (not feeling angry or hurt) and when you're both open to listening. Be sure to say exactly what you mean, encourage your child to take turns talking and listening, and give them your full attention. Let them know that you love them and that you value what they say.

Resources

Center on the Developing Child
developingchild.harvard.edu

Child Mind Institute
childmind.org

Common Sense Media
commonsensemedia.org

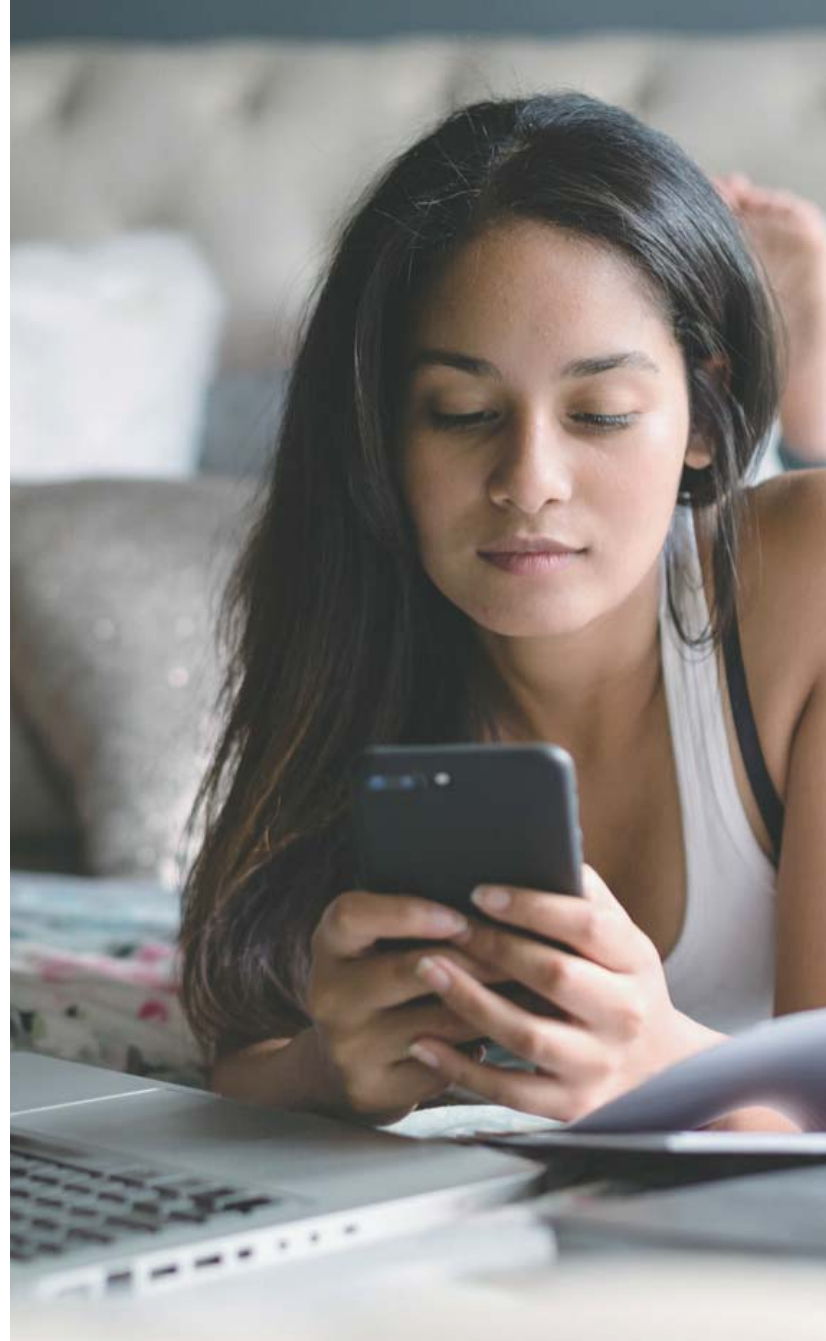
Digital Futures Commission
digitalfuturescommission.org.uk

Healthy Children
healthychildren.org/English/family-life/Media

Media Smarts
mediasmarts.ca

Youth and Media
cyber.harvard.edu/research/youthandmedia

Zero to Three
zerotothree.org



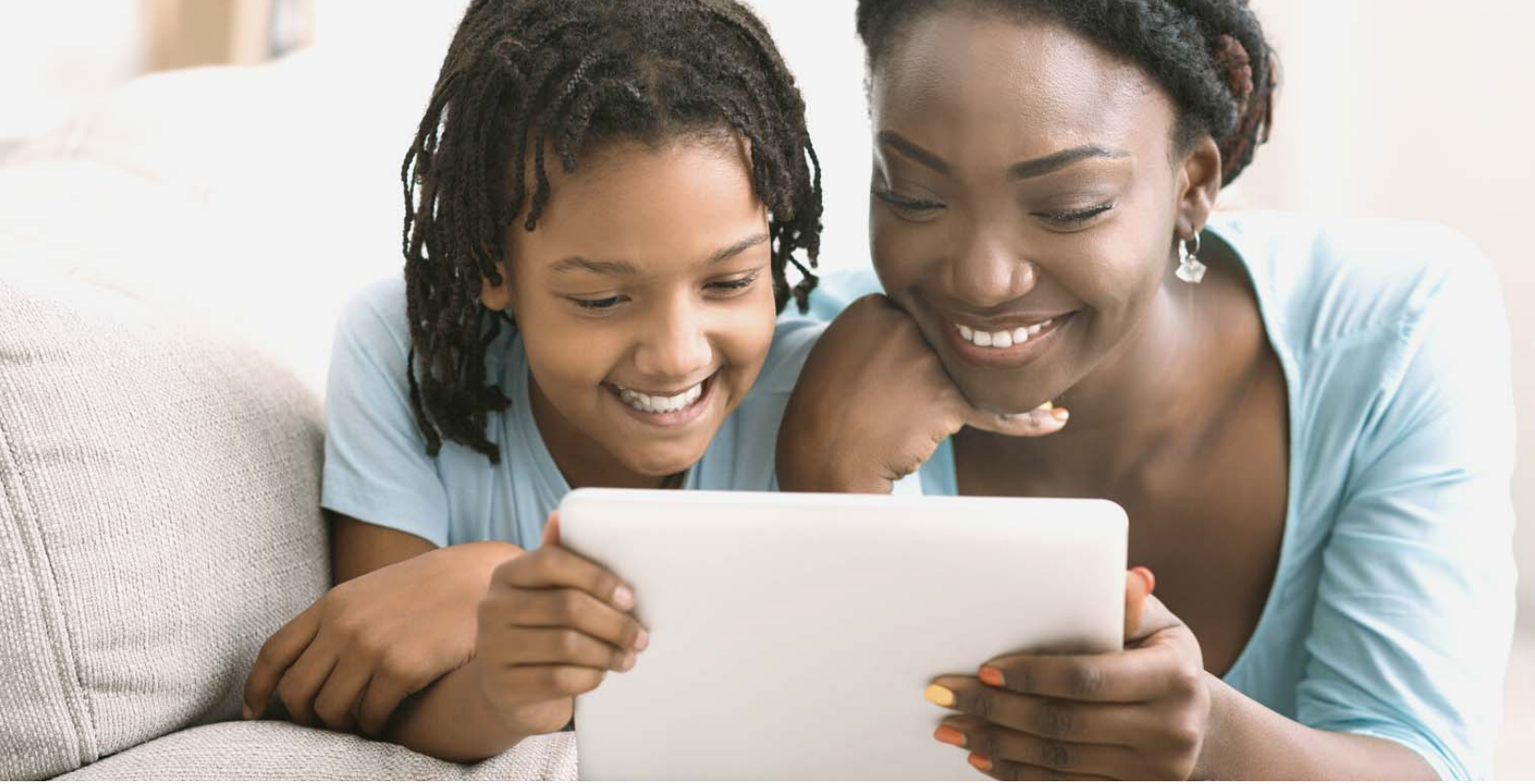
COVID-19 has created a “perfect storm” for increased family violence: more time alone together at home, money issues, a lack of support systems, and increased substance use can all contribute to violence, abuse, and neglect. Children most at risk include those in low-income households or foster care, with chronic disorders, existing mental health issues, or traumatic pasts. Even if your family does not experience violence or mental health issues in the home, be aware that relatives, neighbors, friends, or children you know may need help and support. You can use and/or share the following resources:

Crisis Text Line
crisistextline.org

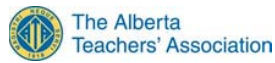
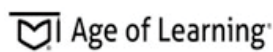
National Domestic Violence Hotline
thehotline.org

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
suicidepreventionlifeline.org

The Trevor Project
thetrevorproject.org/get-help-now/



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