

Disconnect to Reconnect: Reclaiming Attention, Presence, and Peace at Home

Katherine Nguyen Williams, Ph.D

Child & Adolescent Psychologist
Rady Children's Hospital San Diego
Clinical Professor of Psychiatry
UCSD School of Medicine



Psychology Today

Find a Therapist

Get Help

Magazine

Today

INTL

The Modern Child

The science of raising children

Katherine Nguyen Williams Ph.D.

SHARE

TWEET

EMAIL

MORE



5 Tips for Talking to Children About Mass Shootings

Research explains how to help children cope after hearing about mass shootings.



The Refugee Child: An American Story

Throughout history, most Americans have not supported refugee resettlement stateside. Studies tell us why we should or shouldn't listen to them.



How to Talk to Children About Spade and Bourdain Suicides

Anthony Bourdain's mother said, "He is absolutely the last person in the world I would have ever dreamed would do something like this." How can we tell if our children are at risk?

The Modern Child

The science of raising children



Katherine Nguyen Williams, Ph.D., is the Director of Strategic Development and Clinical Innovations at Rady Children's Hospital–San Diego and Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at UC San Diego.

Books by Katherine Nguyen Williams

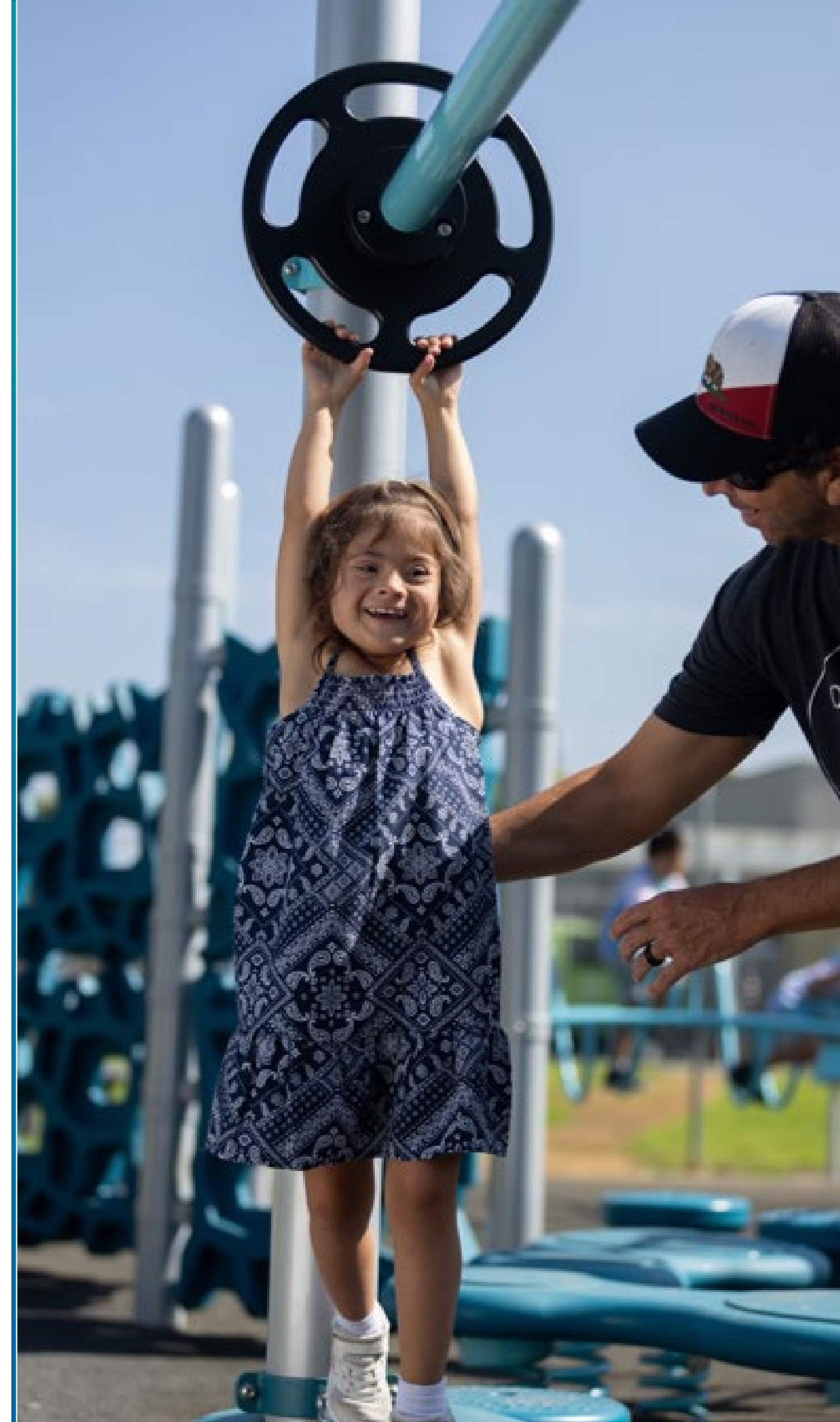


Modular CBT for Children and Adolescents with Depression: A Clinician's Guide to Individualized Treatment



Agenda

1. Impact of digital overload on attention and family relationships
2. AI, social media, and digital content risks for children and adolescents
3. Research-informed strategies to restore presence, connection, and emotional balance
4. Q & A



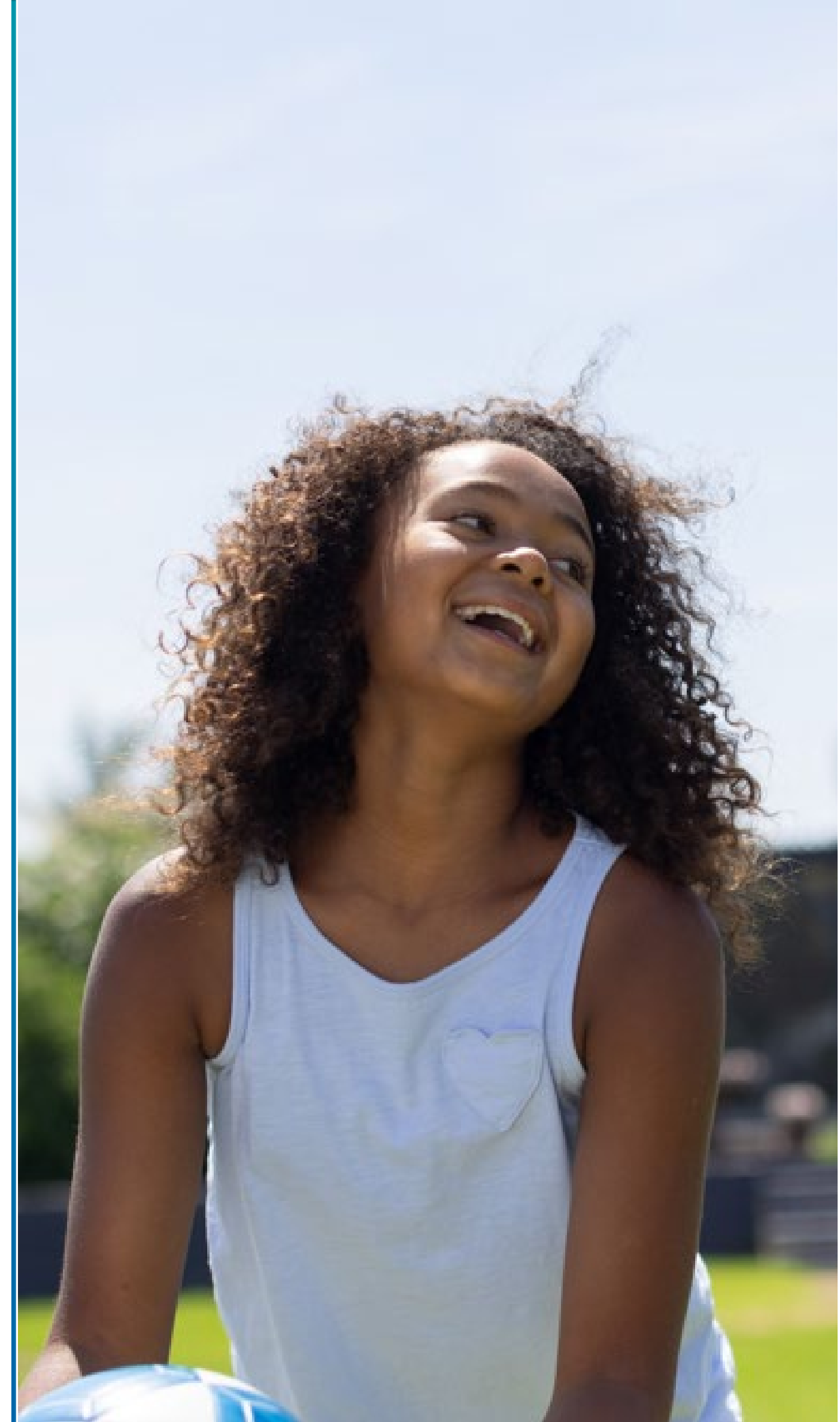
Naming the Overwhelm

- Attention is a limited mental resource—everyone experiences limits
- Feeling overwhelmed is a natural stress response, not a parenting failure
- Awareness creates opportunities to make intentional choices



Digital Overload & the Nervous System

- Continuous digital input keeps the nervous system alert
- Digital stress can be contagious and affect all family members
- Violent or mature AI content increases emotional and cognitive load



The Developing Brain & Attention

- Prefrontal cortex (planning, focus, self-control) develops into adulthood
- Children rely on adults for co-regulation
- Early exposure to mature content shapes emotional learning

Dopamine, Distraction, & Habit

- Digital platforms trigger reward pathways, reinforcing novelty-seeking
- Habit loops form through repeated exposure
- High stimulation reduces tolerance for boredom



Digital Overload and Connection

- Focused attention strengthens parent-child connection
- Distraction impacts communication and understanding
- Digital stress can affect mood, behavior, and family harmony



Social Media, Comparison & Identity

- Adolescents are sensitive to peer evaluation and social comparison
- Early exposure to mature content accelerates social-emotional learning
- Guided reflection supports healthy identity development better than restriction



AI Use, Age, and Emerging Risks

- **Ages 8–12:** AI use often centers on companionship and imaginative interaction
- **Ages 11–13:** Highest exposure to violent themes in AI conversations
- **Early adolescence (≈ 13):** Sexual or romantic roleplay becomes most common, often overlapping with violence
- **Mid–late adolescence (15+):** Decline in sexualized and violent AI use; increase in emotional support–seeking
- Exposure to violent digital content is widespread across major platforms used by children and teens
- Many children recognize screen-related risks before they can reliably self-regulate

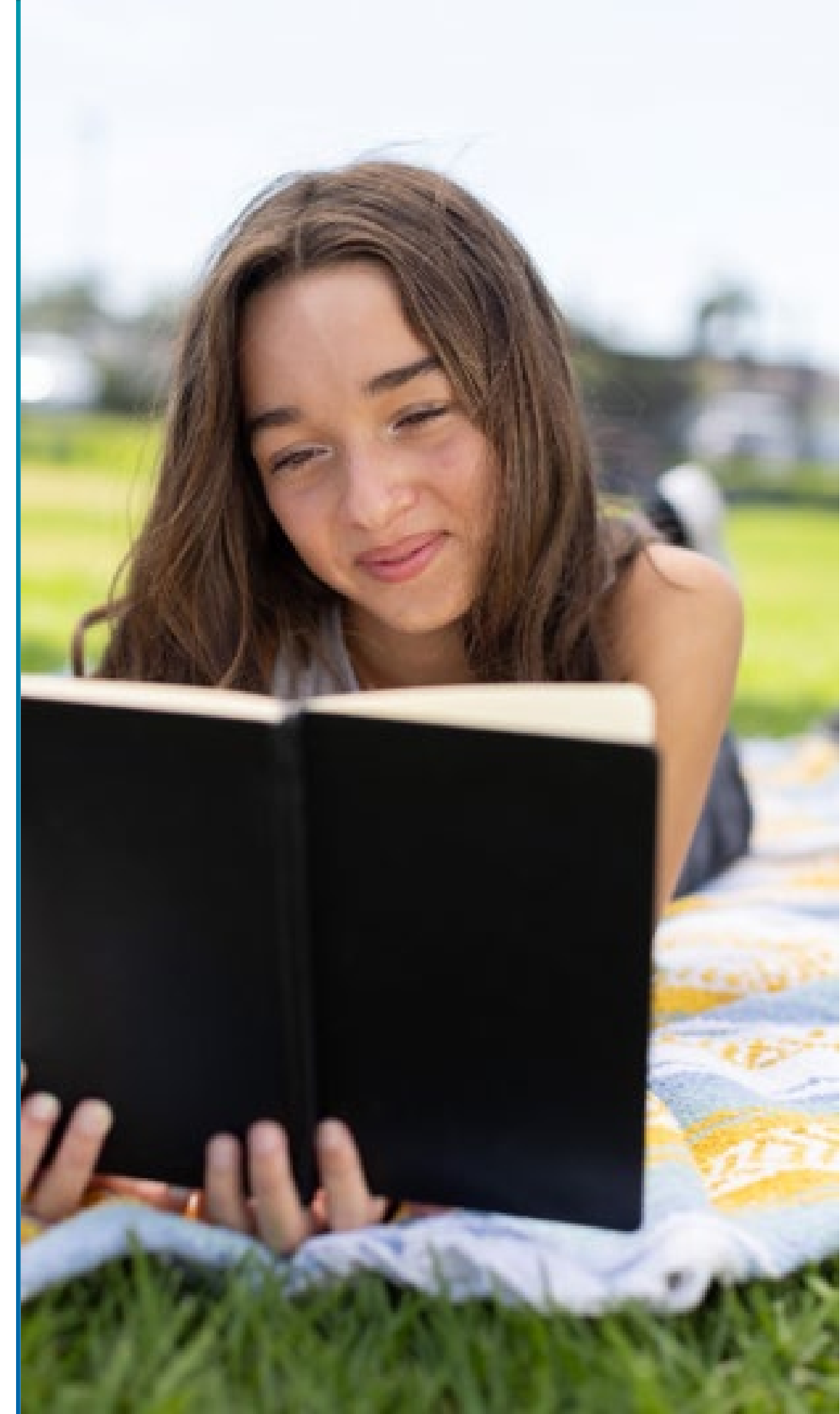
Device Rules & Family Conflict

- Device arguments are one of the most common source of parent-child conflict
- Simply removing devices often increases tension
- Parents' own device habits influence children's behavior



Bringing Peace Back Home

- Focused attention is a critical resource for family well-being
- Emotional regulation precedes behavior management
- Consistent presence strengthens resilience and trust



Boundaries That Create Calm

- Predictable routines reduce cognitive and emotional load
- Clear, consistent boundaries promote safety and regulation
- Adults model balanced technology use



Establishing Clear Technology Guidelines

- Set clear expectations: what, when, and how long for device use
- Create age-appropriate rules collaboratively
- Discuss reasons behind limits to increase understanding
- Research shows clear benefit of showing children and teens the behind-the-scenes algorithm mechanism



Daily Reconnection

- Dedicate 10 minutes of undistracted attention daily
- Check in about feelings and experiences
- Name and discuss emotions before problem-solving



When Technology Supports Well-Being

- Intentional use supports learning and social connection
- Co-viewing and structured AI interactions foster regulation
- Does this support or replace self-regulation?



Structured Technology Use

- Schedule specific times for homework, social media, gaming, and AI use
- Encourage device-free zones during meals, bedrooms, and family activities
- Introduce tech-free transitions (e.g., before bedtime)



Using Parental Monitoring Tools

- Use monitoring apps to guide, not police, device use
- Focus on visibility and discussion, not surveillance
- Turn monitoring into a teaching opportunity for responsible online behavior



Encouraging Balanced Online Behavior

- Teach children to evaluate content: safe, helpful, supportive
- Model mindful device use and calm responses
- Encourage offline hobbies, social connections, and creative play



Family Agreements & Accountability

- Create family media agreements: expectations, limits, rewards
- Include children in decision-making to improve cooperation
- Revisit and adjust agreements regularly as children mature



In Closing:

What is one small change you can make this week to protect presence and peace at home?





Q & A



Research References

- Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M. C., Waters, E., & Wall, S. (1978). Patterns of attachment: A psychological study of the strange situation. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
 - Crone, E. A., & Dahl, R. E. (2012). Understanding adolescence as a period of social–affective engagement and goal flexibility. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 13(9), 636–650.
 - Hall, J. A., Brindley, P., & Hall, S. S. (2021). The digital stress scale: Development and validation of a measure of digital life stress. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 121, 106788.
 - Lieberman, M. D., et al. (2007). Putting feelings into words: Affect labeling disrupts amygdala activity. *Psychological Science*, 18(5), 421–428.
 - McEwen, B. S. (2017). Neurobiological and systemic effects of chronic stress. *Chronic Stress*, 1, 1–11.
 - Montag, C., & Diefenbach, S. (2018). Towards Homo Digitalis: Important research issues for psychology and the neuroscience of the digital society. *Sustainability*, 10(2), 415.
 - Ophir, E., Nass, C., & Wagner, A. D. (2009). Cognitive control in media multitaskers. *PNAS*, 106(37), 15583–15587.
 - Siegel, D. J. (2012). *The developing mind: How relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
 - Twenge, J. M. (2019). *iGen*. New York, NY: Atria Books.
 - Aura Research. (2023). AI and children: Companionship, violence, and digital stress report. Retrieved from <https://www.auraresearch.com/reports>
- Speaker Notes: Full references for all research cited in the presentation.

- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.** Call: **988 or 1-800-273-TALK**; Spanish line: **888-628-9454**; TTY: **800-799-4TTY** (4889) (8255). You'll be connected to a skilled, trained counselor at a crisis center in your area, anytime 24/7.
- **ParentGuidance.Org**
<https://parentguidance.org/>
Welcome - parentguidance.org
We offer education and therapeutic support to empower and give you hope as you support your child's mental health.
- **National Parent Helpline**
<https://www.nationalparenthelpline.org/>
We provide vital information, support, and referrals through calls, texts, and chats to diverse parents, children, and youth seeking help nationwide. The National Parent & Youth Helpline™ is operated by Parents Anonymous® and available 24 hours a day/7 days a week.
- **Mental Health America**
<https://mhanational.org/mental-health-resources-parents>
Find resources on caregiving as a parent - whether caring for children or your own parents.
- **San Diego County Office of Education**
<https://www.sdcoe.net/students/health-well-being/mental-health-supports>
Prioritizing mental health is important for students to be able to learn effectively; it's also a key component that helps staff teach and support learners every day. The San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE) has compiled resources and information for students, families, and schools that keep mental health supports top of mind.
- **Soluna App**
<https://solunaapp.com/>
Confidential support for 13- to 25-year-olds in California. No cost. No pressure. Chat 1:1 with a professional coach, use interactive tools to destress, or explore quizzes, videos, forums, and more.

San Diego County Resources

- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.** Call: **988** or **1-800-273-TALK**; Spanish line: **888-628-9454**; TTY: **800-799-4TTY** (4889) (8255). You'll be connected to a skilled, trained counselor at a crisis center in your area, anytime 24/7.
- **San Diego County Access and Crisis Line.** Call: **888-724-7240**. Crisis counseling or referrals, 24 hours a day/7 days a week.
- **Rady Children's Behavioral Health Urgent Care (BHUC) Walk-in Clinic.** Call: **858-966-5484**. 4 p.m.-8 p.m., Mon- Fri. 4305 University Avenue, Suite 150, San Diego, CA 92105. Serves youth ages 5-21 struggling with concerns that pose an imminent risk to their safety, the safety of others, or significantly impair their daily lives.
- **Rady Children's Hospital Emergency Room.** Call: **858-966-8005**. 3020 Children's Way, 1st Floor, San Diego, CA 92123.
- **San Diego County Emergency Screening Unit.** Call: **619-876-4502**. 4309 3rd Avenue, San Diego, CA 92103. Available to children and adolescents for emergency psychiatric assistance.
- **Center for Community Solutions.** Call: **888-385-4657**
- **Crisis Action and Connection.** Call: **619-591-5740**
- **North County Crisis Intervention and Response Team.** Mon-Fri from 12:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. Weekends from 12:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. Escondido, call: **760-233-0133** | Vista, call: **760-305-8225**.
- **2-1-1 San Diego:** Dial **2-1-1** from a mobile or **858-300-211** from any phone

California & National Resources

- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.** Call: **988** or **1-800-273-TALK**; Spanish line: **888-628-9454**; TTY: **800-799-4TTY** (4889) (8255). You'll be connected to a skilled, trained counselor at a crisis center in your area, anytime 24/7.
- **California Coalition for Youth Crisis Line.** Call/text: **1-800-843-5200**. Available 24 hours/7 days a week. Languages other than English are available. Anonymous and confidential for youth and TAY struggling with behavioral issues. Provides local community resources for you and your family. Text and live chat available from 4:30pm-8:30pm daily via website **www.calyouth.org** or phone.
- **California Peer-Run Warm Line:** Call: **855-845-7415**. 24/7 non-emergency emotional support and referrals.
- **Crisis Text Line.** National crisis text line. Text the word "HOME" to **741-741 24/7**.
- **National Sexual Assault Hotline.** Call: **800-656-HOPE** (4673).
- **Teen Line.** Call: **800-852-8336**. 6:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. PST or text TEEN to **839863**.
- **Trevor Project Lifeline.** Call: **866-488-7386**. Text: Text the word "Trevor" to **202-304-1200**. 24-hour hotline that provides crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning young people (LGBTQ) ages 13-24. **www.thetrevorproject.org**.
- **Soluna App**
<https://solunaapp.com/>
Confidential support for 13- to 25-year-olds in California. No cost. No pressure. Chat 1:1 with a professional coach, use interactive tools to destress, or explore quizzes, videos, forums, and more.