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Healthy Screen & Technology Use: A Guide by Age

Birth to Age 3: The Sensory & Attachment Years

General Guidance:

- Avoid screens entirely for infants and toddlers (possible understandable exceptions for brief video chats with family or to see family photos).
- Focus on real-world sensory experiences: touch, sound, sight, movement, and human interaction.
- Adults can model healthy habits by monitoring their own screen time and keeping interactions with children screen-free. Whenever/wherever possible, avoid the use of devices in front of children of these ages.

Why it matters:

- Early brain development relies on human interaction and real objects, not passive stimuli.
- Screens displace face-to-face interaction, movement, and exploration.
- Children of these ages do not have the capacity to process/comprehend screen images and content. They need firsthand sensorial experiences – the more senses involved (touch, sight, sound, hearing, taste, smell) the better.

Suggestions:

- Use music, stories, nature, books with beautiful realistic images and conversation as stimuli.
- Allow for physical exploration and independence of movement whenever possible.

Ages 3 to 6: The Sensory Explorer Years

General Guidance:

- Very limited screen time. Restrict to weekends.
- Prioritize active free-play, and hands-on learning.
- Avoid fast-cut, commercial, or addictive content.

Why it matters:

- Children this age are forming foundational executive function, attention span, and concrete sensory-motor intelligence.
- Screens can introduce overstimulation and reduce attention span.

Suggestions:

- Avoid solo screen time. Any and all screen use should be co-viewed and discussed.
- Make objective rules for your home such as, "No movies or shows on weeknights."

Ages 6 to 12: The Reasoning & Social Years

General Guidance:

- Minimize screen time to only what is of high-quality, used intentionally and infrequently.
- Prioritize content that supports learning, creativity, and real-world connections.

Why it matters:

- Kids are developing logic, critical thinking, and beginning to understand cause and effect.
- Overuse of screens can interfere with social development, reading, and outdoor time.

Suggestions:

- Establish "tech-free zones" (dining table, bedrooms, car rides).
- Discuss media literacy: advertising, misinformation, digital kindness.
- As children get older, offer experience and training on word-processing, basic information gathering, route-planning, and other basic digital skills.

Ages 12 to 15: The Identity & Peer Connection Years

General Guidance:

- Set firm boundaries and expectations.
- Help them self-regulate by modeling healthy tech habits and discussing digital values.
- Ensure any media consumption such as music, tv, movies and video games are aligned with your family values.

Why it matters:

- Adolescents are vulnerable to dopamine loops (likes, scrolling), peer comparison, and tech-based anxiety.
- Tech habits become self-directed at this age — they need scaffolding.

Suggestions:

- Use tech contracts or family media agreements.

- Regularly discuss: online safety, social media behaviors, screen-free downtime, digital identity.
- Keep bedrooms device-free overnight to protect sleep and mental health.
- Begin to introduce more opportunities for computer literacy – training on spreadsheet creation, advanced word processing, presentation creation.
- Consider flip phone or non-smart phone option for communication.

Ages 16 to 18: The Preparation for Adulthood Years

General Guidance:

- Support independent, thoughtful tech use while maintaining open dialogue.
- Encourage balance, privacy with accountability, and ongoing reflection on usage.

Why it matters:

- Teens are forming habits that will follow them into adulthood.
- Social, academic, and emotional risks increase with unmonitored screen use.

Suggestions:

- Use screen time management tools to encourage self-monitoring.
- Monitoring apps and control settings are encouraged for adults.
- Parents are reminded that they pay for their child's phone/plan, so they have control over its use.
- Encourage tech for productivity, creation, and collaboration, not just consumption.
- Create and/or strengthen off-screen rituals (family meals, outdoor time, journaling, reading).

Additional Tips for All Ages

- Model what you want to see. Children copy adult behavior — including tech use.
- Create a family tech plan: boundaries, shared values, screen-free times/zones.
- Watch for signs of overstimulation, behavioral shifts, or withdrawal after screen use.