

# Unplug (from Technology) and Connect: Keeping Families Strong in a Wired World



Image credit: Adobe Stock

**Summary:** Are you having trouble getting your kids off of their devices? Could devices be getting in the way of relationships in your family? Read more to learn about ways your family can unplug and connect...

## Introduction

Our brains are wired to require strong relationships, attachments and face-to-face social contact with fellow human beings for happiness and well-being. Good relationships and healthy bonds to others keep us resilient and allow us to bounce back from setbacks. Unfortunately, our technologies and devices are so addictive, that many people are more connected to their devices than each other. The very devices that were meant to make life easier for us are now threatening to disconnect us from one another and thus, damage our physical and emotional health...

Children and youth now use technologies that did not exist just when their parents were kids. These devices have added greatly to our quality of life. At the same time, they can get in the way of physical activity or true social and emotional ties with others. When this happens, it can have a negative impact on relationships, mental and physical health.

Using technology more and more may cause us to connect less and less with each other. We may also connect less with our children. Mental health professionals are becoming concerned, because they are seeing more and more youth with emotional and behavioural problems. Strong bonds between parents, children and youth are more important than ever.

For example, technology:

- Can draw our attention away from real people. It has become so advanced (and addictive) that it seems many people prefer to interact with a device than with their spouse, friends, or children. Go to any public place, and you will find many people more focused on their device than the people they are with.
- Can make bullying, harassment and exploitation easier. Nasty comments, rumours and regrettable photos spread like viruses, and don't stop at your front door. And because online communication isn't face to face, people are more likely to write things they would never say in person.
- Can make it easier for children and youth to connect more with peers than parents. Of course it's important for children and youth to have friends. And friends do become even more important through the teen years. But friends simply can't provide the love, emotional support and guidance that parents can. For healthy

development, children and youth must have strong bonds with parents. When this bond is strong, children and youth turn to their parents for help in difficult times. Friends may not always be there when the going gets tough. But parents will. And parents are in the best position to help.

- Eats up our time so that we have less time to do healthy things like spending time with family and friends, playing with our kids, being outside, exercising, reading, volunteering or sharing our hobbies and interests with our children.

## How do I know if my child or teen is using too much technology?

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1. Does your child or teen prefer to spend time in front of a screen than with family?
2. Do you have trouble getting your child or teen away from the screen, device or game to spend time with family?
3. Does your child or teen spend more than 2 hours a day in front of a screen (for example, computer, video game or phone)? Homework doesn't count.

Answering 'yes' to any of these questions may mean your child or teen is becoming too attached to technology.

Please note, children 2-4 years should have no more than 1 hour of screen time each day. Children under 2 shouldn't have any.

## How do I know if I am using too much technology?

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Parents can also be affected by technology. Think about how much time you spend in front of a screen.

1. Can you spend time with your children, without using a device to entertain them?
2. Can you give your child or teen your full attention, without checking or doing things on your device?
3. When your children are upset, are you able to comfort them without using technology?

Answering 'yes' to any of these questions might mean that you are depending too much on your device.

## How to pull the plug

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There are many things that parents and caregivers can do to 'unplug' themselves and their children. This can help families to connect with each other.

### 1. Spend Quality Time Together

- Spend tech-free time alone with your child or teen. Aim for some time together every day. This gets harder as teens get older and schedules get busier, but do your best. This will give you a chance to talk and listen.
- For example:
  - Read together;
  - Go for a walk;
  - Play a board game;
  - Cook, bake or clean up together;
  - Teach your child or teen how to do something;
  - Volunteer together;
  - Go out for a treat;
  - Play outside.

### 2. Have Non-Technology Activities

- Make sure everyone spends time outside in greenspace. Studies show that being in nature has a positive impact on our minds and bodies. In fact, some believe that many of us suffer from 'nature deficit disorder'.

- Create chances for creative, free play. Video games and TV don't often allow children to use their own imaginations. Make sure your children have time for free play outside everyday.
- Indoors, make sure your children have toys that let them use their imaginations, like:
  - Building blocks;
  - Dress up clothes and props;
  - Arts and crafts supplies.
- Do low-tech family activities like:
  - Reading together;
  - Board games, cards, puzzles;
  - Cooking or baking;
  - Active activities such as playing with a ball, frisbee, cycling, swimming

### 3. Set limits on technology

- Think carefully before bringing new technology into your child's life. Think ahead about how old your child should be before having a phone or gaming device. It's easier to put off getting one than it is to take a device away. Consider phone options carefully as well (for example, unlimited texting may not be needed).
- Set limits on 'tech time' when your children are young. This sets a pattern of parents making rules for technology use. Give your child a certain amount of time each day for screen time (amount of time will depend on your child's age). They will have to plan on how they use the time, and when time's up for the day, it's up. As your children become teens, you can be more flexible, but still have some 'guidelines'.
- Babies and children aged 2 and shouldn't have any screen time at all. A child's brain develops quickly during these first years, and young children learn best by interacting with people, not screens (Canadian Paediatric Society).
- Parents are children's best teachers. Young children learn most of their words from parents. Children who can speak well find it easier to succeed in school.
- Limit recreational screen time for older children and teens to 1 or 2 hours each day (Canadian Paediatric Society). Recreational screen time means playing video games, using social media or watching videos. Children and youth who spend more than 2 hours a day on 'screen time' are twice as likely to be overweight or obese than youth who spend 1 hour or less each day in front of a screen.
- Set 'no tech' areas in your home
  - Keep technology (like computers, TVs, and video game consoles) out of your children's bedrooms. Having devices and screens in the bedroom is very tempting, and makes it easy for your kids to stay up too late.
- Set 'no tech' times:
  - **Bedtime.** Try to limit electronics with screens before bedtime. Light from the screen ('blue' light) blocks the brain from making melatonin, the sleep hormone. This 'tricks' the brain into thinking it's daytime, making it hard to sleep.
  - **Mealtime.** Have dinner together as many nights a week as possible, with no devices allowed (parents too!) This gives everyone a chance to connect with each other. Children and teens can help prepare meals-even young children can help by fetching things or setting the table. This can be a wonderful time to learn about food, family traditions and cooking.
  - **Homework time.** Set limits on TV and social media during homework time. Older children may need the computer for homework and research. A little extra stimulation (for example, background music) can help some children and youth. But most people are less productive when distracted by TV, Facebook, Twitter or Instagram.

### 4. Use technology wisely.

- Set a good example. Show your children and teens how to balance technology use with other activities. Try to limit your own screen time to when your children are in bed, out of the house or involved in an activity of their own. When you're with your children, make sure you are really 'present'.

This means:

- Focusing on what you're doing together;
- Looking at your children when they speak;
- Listening carefully;
- Not letting your device to draw your attention away.

If you absolutely must respond to a message or email when you're with your children, take a short break in another room, and come back as soon as possible.

- Use technology together with your kids. Play age appropriate computer and video games with your children and teens. Be mindful of the impact that violent video games can have, especially on children. Research topics of interest together, or use Skype or Facetime to chat with far way family and friends.
- Keep computers in high traffic areas. This makes it easier to keep an eye on how children and teens use the computer.
- Create rather than just consume content. Encourage children and teens to be creative and create, such as creating websites, graphic designs, art, stories or short films allows children and youth to be 'active' users, exercising their imaginations and developing other skills.
- Talk about social media.
  - Set up your own accounts to learn more about how these media work.
  - Let your kids know that you want and need to know about their Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram or other social media use. Social media use can evolve quickly. Just when parents are becoming familiar with Facebook, youth are moving on. Most youth now see Facebook as social media for parents.
  - Discuss the risks of posting or uploading photos or sharing personal information on social media. If you feel your child or teen is putting himself at risk on social media or other technology, you may need to put limits on the cell phone plan and limit computer access.
- Ask your child or teen to 'friend' you on Facebook and regularly check in. But be respectful-you don't need to 'like' or comment on everything. Youth are very sensitive to being embarrassed by their parents on social media. If you don't like something you see, or need to talk about something, do it face to face. No matter how many rules and limits you set, there is no substitute for open, honest communication.
- Set ground rules for cell phones. Because such devices are so new, we are still figuring out the ground rules on how to let our kids use them. Consider the age and level of maturity of your child or teen when setting rules. It's always better to come to an agreement by discussing things with your teen, rather than imposing rules. And although you want your child or teen to be safe, please do your best to respect privacy. It won't be helpful to comment on every 'conversation' your child or teen has. Save discussion for important safety issues.

Some things to consider:

- It may be a good idea to start out by keeping the phone in a parent's room overnight for charging. It's easier to lighten up on a rule, than to crack down later if there are problems.
  - Taking devices away if children or youth have been bullied ends up punishing the victim.
  - Youth are then less likely to tell parents if bullying happens.
- Ground rules to discuss if your teen gets a cell phone
    - Sharing the device passwords: will this be something you require?
    - What are your expectations about responding to calls or texts from you?
    - What will happen if your teen breaks the rules?

- Will you have limits on when your teen can receive calls? For example, no calls after a certain time?
- Can the phone stay overnight in your teen's room? (perhaps start out with the phone charging overnight in a parent's room)
- Who pays for lost or damaged phones?
- The limits and risks of texting (for example, it can be easier to say things you wouldn't normally say in person; it is easier to misinterpret someone's meaning).
- Courtesy and etiquette (for example, turning the phone off in certain situations).
- Risks to personal privacy, risk of sharing photos.
- Texting and driving (and texting and walking-especially crossing streets!)

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## Helpful Books

- Reset Your Child's Brain: A Four-Week Plan to End Meltdowns, Raise Grades and Boost Social Skills, by Dr. Virginia Dunckley, 2014 | View on [Chapters](#) | [Amazon](#)

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## Helpful Websites

General information about parenting teens in the age of the internet

- Media Smarts  
Canadian information and advice on how to use the new digital media.  
[www.mediasmarts.ca](http://www.mediasmarts.ca)
- Canadian Paediatric Society  
[www.caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/promote\\_good\\_television\\_habits](http://www.caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/promote_good_television_habits).
- Ottawa Public Health Parenting Portal  
[www.parentinginottawa.com](http://www.parentinginottawa.com)
- American Academy of Pediatrics  
[www.aap.org/en-us/about-the-aap/aap-press-room/news-features-and-safety-tips/pages/Talking-to-Kids-and-Teens-About-Social-Media-and-Sexting.aspx](http://www.aap.org/en-us/about-the-aap/aap-press-room/news-features-and-safety-tips/pages/Talking-to-Kids-and-Teens-About-Social-Media-and-Sexting.aspx)

Specific focus on reducing screentime

- Dr. Virginia Dunckley's website  
Practical information for parents on how to help reduce screen time and improve your child/youth's mental health and overall function  
[www.drdunckley.com](http://www.drdunckley.com)

Cyberbullying and cybersafety

- RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police).  
[www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca](http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca)

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## About this Document

Written by members of the Mental Health Information Committee of the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO), an interdisciplinary group that includes psychiatry, psychology, child/youth care, social work, nursing, and occupational therapy. Special thanks to Cris Rowan, Occupational Therapist at Zonein.ca.

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## Disclaimer

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Information in this fact sheet may or may not apply to your child. Your health care provider is the best source of information about your child's health.