



LEFT  
TO  
THEIR  
OWN  
DEVICES?

Confident parenting in a  
world of screens

Katharine Hill



*To our dear friends Silas and Annie, with thanks for your love and wisdom through the joys and challenges, digital and otherwise, over 28 years of parenting ... and still going!*

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## FOREWORD

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Somewhat to my surprise, I find that I am the grandfather of five children! Surely that can't be possible? Wasn't it only yesterday that I took Katie (my daughter) to her ballet lesson? And I'm certain it can't have been more than a few Christmases ago that I saw Lloyd (my son) put on a sterling performance as the inn-keeper in the school nativity play? But, no! The reality is that it was over 30 years ago, and in that time, a revolution has happened: a digital revolution.

Since time began, the role of parents has been to prepare our children to live independent lives. We attend to their physical needs for food, sleep, and clothing; we give them boundaries to keep them safe; and we seek to instil in them values that will guide them in the choices they will have to make, both big and small, throughout their lives. But parents today also have another task in addition to those I had 30 years ago. As far as I was concerned, issues to do with screen-time were confined to whether or not *Doctor Who* was too scary for a 5-year-old who was absolutely desperate to see it! But the world of screens that we live in today presents us with far greater challenges. As parents, we must help our children make full use of all the advantages of digital technology, as well as safeguarding them from the potential dangers.

In this book, Katharine Hill has tackled all the important issues head on and has given parents a brilliant tool that is full of practical wisdom and advice. Read it now ... and, above all, don't leave *your* children to their own devices.

**Rob Parsons, OBE**

Founder and Chairman, Care for the Family

LEFT TO THEIR OWN DEVICES?

embrace the wonderful opportunities that are there for them as they grow up in an online world.

So don't leave your children to their own devices, put your phone on silent, grab a coffee and read on!

## TOO MUCH SCREEN TIME?

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Eric Schmidt, chair of Google, famously once said, 'If you have a child, you'll notice they have two states: asleep or online.' Parents of teenagers may well recognise that description!

Many parents are concerned about the number of hours that children will spend on screens if left to their own devices, and trying to manage this has become the focus of family life. We may be tearing our hair out as our 3-year-old has a tantrum (aka an iPaddy) on being told his screen time is over. Or perhaps we're going crazy as we attempt to communicate with a teenager whose headphones seem to have become an appendage to his head and whose phone needs to be surgically removed from his hand. The issue is a real battleground in many homes, and the source of many confrontations and rows.

Sometimes our children's screen use may be more covert. I remember a babysitting incident when our children were much younger. My husband and I were running an evening marriage course and needed to be back from work and out of the door again by just after 6 p.m. At 5.45 p.m. Jack, our babysitter, arrived ready to feed our children lasagne, supervise homework and put all four to bed. We returned at 11 p.m. to find that all had gone well apart from the fact that our youngest had been sitting on the loo for the entire duration of the meal. Jack, understandably concerned, had eventually knocked on the door to find out if Henry was still alive. He emerged somewhat sheepishly, I imagine with the loo seat imprinted on his bottom. To Jack's relief, Henry's hour-long sojourn hadn't been due to D and V! He had been totally engrossed playing *Pokémon* on his Game Boy, and despite the allure of lasagne (his favourite dish), he had completely lost track of the time.

Of course, scenarios like this in the home can lead to real conflict, and parents responding to Care for the Family's survey highlighted

that the amount of time their children spend on screen is a common concern. One told us: ‘It just gets harder and harder as they get older and communication gets harder in general. All comments are seen as criticism and lead to rows. I just can’t face it, to be honest.’

A report on children’s media use by Ofcom, the communications regulator in the UK, has found that the internet is the top media pastime for UK children – overtaking the television for the first time.<sup>7</sup> Aged 5–15 they are spending around 15 hours online each week, and 3- to 4-year-olds go online for around 8 hours and 18 minutes a week. Over a half of preschoolers use a tablet (with 16% owning their own device). Smartphones are the device of choice for pre- to early-teenage children with one in three 8–11s and eight in ten 12–15s now owning their own smartphone.

These figures are concerning for a number of reasons as we’ll see below, but where the rubber hits the road for many parents is the feeling that they are in a continual battle with their children in their attempts to monitor and regulate screen use. Fiona, a mum of four, said:

*We have just come back from a week’s half-term, and I am exhausted. Each day was spent using every tactic I could think of to get them off technology and doing something else that didn’t involve staring at a screen. I didn’t want to spend half-term nagging, but that’s what ended up happening. They didn’t enjoy it ... and neither did I.*

Trying to set boundaries around screen use can wear down even the most resilient of parents. Our eldest had an electronic game called *Zelda* that he particularly liked to play, usually just before the evening meal was on the table. Busy families, overlapping schedules, long working days, shift work, homework, after-school activities, and a teenager’s burgeoning social life can make coordinating mealtimes a challenge, but we would try to eat together when we could. However, it seemed that whenever the food was on the table,

7 Ofcom, ‘Children and parents: media use and attitude report 2016’. <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/children/children-parents-nov16>.



'OK, Son, screen time is over ...'

son #1 would be at what he considered the most crucial part of the game. Requests to turn it off and sit at the table would be met with pleas of, ‘Just 2 more minutes ...’, ‘Just 1 minute more ...’, ‘I’m about to reach the next level, and I can’t save it. If I turn it off now, I’ll have to start again ...’ Much research has gone into designing games that keep people playing, and succeeding in moving to the next level was always going to be more exciting for my son than the prospect of supper on the table.

As the debate continued, the spaghetti bolognese would go cold, and my blood pressure would rise. I would like to tell you that we found an easy-to-implement foolproof method of dealing with this, but at the time we didn’t. Hindsight is a great thing, and there were definitely some strategies we could have tried that might have reduced the angst. Now a married twenty-something, George was at home recently and rediscovered this childhood game. Just the sound of the catchy tune sent those memories flooding back and started to make me feel on edge!

But apart from the effects of children’s screen time on stressed-out parents, what are the dangers to the children themselves? While some can manage on less sleep than others, most parents don’t need reminding that there is a direct correlation between (lack of) hours spent asleep and grumpiness in the morning! Children today are sleeping less per night than ever before and below recommended guidelines,<sup>8</sup> and research involving 125,000 children suggests that using devices such as smartphones and tablets at bedtime (within 90 minutes of going to sleep) adversely affects the quality and length of sleep. Given a choice, few children or teenagers would choose sleep over the next game of *FIFA* or *Candy Crush* or a group conversation on Facebook, yet sleep disturbance in children has adverse effects on alertness, concentration, mood, mental health, physical growth and development, and obesity.

Schools are reporting that many children are tired in the morning and schoolwork is being affected by the hours they spend playing

8 L. A. Matricciani, et al, ‘Never enough sleep: a brief history of sleep recommendations for children,’ *Pediatrics*, 2012, vol. 129, pp. 548–556.

electronic games long into the night.<sup>9</sup> Children's sleep patterns are also being affected by the 'always on' culture of social media. One survey<sup>10</sup> found that children were experiencing problems such as not wanting to go to sleep because they were using social media, being kept awake when trying to sleep because their minds were still active, and being woken by their phone beeping with an alert or message while sleeping. They also reported feeling tired the next day and less ready to learn. Losing track of time when using social media was also highlighted as a factor affecting wider areas of life, including sleep and schoolwork. The availability of many social media applications was identified as a key explanation for this: 'It is routine ... going through and checking each one before bed'; 'You forget about the time.'

Another issue to be aware of is the findings of a study at Stanford University,<sup>11</sup> which concluded that heavy media multitaskers have greater difficulty in concentrating and find it harder to ignore distractions and irrelevant information, whereas light media multitaskers are better able to direct and focus their attention on their task goal, control their memory and switch from one job to another. Children also reported that social media use heavily impacted their motivation to complete homework and revise. Not surprisingly, the temptation was hard to resist (for most teenagers, the choice between quadratic equations and checking the latest Instagram feed is never going to be much of a contest!). Comments from participants in the survey included: 'You can use it to procrastinate from schoolwork'; 'I'd rather be on social media than doing homework'; 'Social media takes up revision time.' Children also admitted that social media use in class can distract from learning and can affect concentration, particularly if they feel their phone buzzing. It was estimated between 50–70% of students use their phone during lessons. A challenge for the teaching profession!

Health professionals are aware of the importance of exercise for

9 Hayley Dixon, 'Primary school head forced to warn against gaming and late night TV', *Daily Telegraph*, 11 February 2013, and 'Children are too sleepy for school as three quarters get less than seven hours sleep', *Daily Mail*, 23 March 2012.

10 Fay Poole, unpublished thesis. Newcastle University, 2017.

11 E. Ophir et al, 'Cognitive control in media multitaskers. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences', 2009, vol. 106, no. 37, pp. 15583–15587. <http://www.pnas.org/content/106/37/15583>.

healthy growth and development, and there is growing concern about the lack of physical exercise and levels of obesity among young people. The World Health Organisation has described childhood obesity as one of the most serious public health challenges for the twenty-first century.<sup>12</sup> With nearly a third of children aged 2–15 overweight or obese, it has been described as ‘the new smoking’. In fact, if the present trajectory continues, three quarters of the population of the UK are set to be obese or overweight in a single generation,<sup>13</sup> and overweight children are more likely to be overweight adults, with all the accompanying health disadvantages. This is a complex problem, and there are many reasons for it, but the effects of a sedentary lifestyle on 11-year-olds who are spending more time on screens indoors and less time riding bikes, climbing trees and exploring the great outdoors have to be contributory factors.

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## WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

- ✓ Be intentional – plan how much time they are on screen

It’s great to be able to get a half hour of much-needed peace by putting our preschooler or primary age child in front of a screen. But while we catch up with a friend on the phone or do an online grocery order, it’s surprisingly easy to discover that 30 minutes has crept into an hour or more. We have simply overlooked how long they have been there. The point isn’t that screens themselves are bad – they can be a lifesaver, but they can also be overused as a babysitter.

I would often try to catch up on emails while our children were meant to be doing their homework and, with one thing frequently leading to another, before I knew it their homework had been done

12 World Health Organisation, ‘Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health: Childhood overweight and obesity’, 2004. <http://www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/childhood/en>.

13 The Centre for Social Justice, ‘Britain is eating itself to death and our plan to fight obesity is woefully inadequate’, October 2016. <http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/csj-blog/britain-eating-death-plan-fight-obesity-woefully-inadequate>.



*'Erm, honey, do you realise it's past midnight ...?'*

(after a fashion), but I would still be in work mode. While I was making inroads on the inbox they would have seized the moment to play on the Xbox. There wouldn't be anything wrong with the gaming – the issue was that I had no idea how long they had been playing. And while from time to time this was fine, what was not OK was that it was becoming a habit.

In our survey, 70% of parents said that they set some time limits on their child's online activity. How we regulate that time obviously needs to be appropriate for their age – what works for a 5-year-old would clearly be inappropriate for a teenager, but whatever our child's age there are principles we can apply that can prevent screen time becoming such an all-encompassing and recurring issue.

One word of warning is that this will never be a problem we can solve once and for all (unless, as parents, we are totally relaxed about the amount of time our child spends on screen or in the unlikely event they are simply not interested in spending their time in this way). It will be a tension we need to continually manage.

Having some age-appropriate agreed family guidelines for time on screens can be helpful. Each family is different and each child is different, so the important thing is to develop a system that works for you and for your family. What's right for you may be very different from what works for others, so you may need to prepare for your children to frequently bring that annoying character, 'Everyone-else's-parent' into the conversation. ('Everyone else's parents lets them ... [fill in the blank].') One parent responding to our survey commented that one of the biggest pressures was: 'Feeling like you can't talk to them about [how much time they are on screens] because you might not be seen to be 'cool' or friendly. Wanting to be their friend instead of their parent.' The fact that 'Everyone-else's-parent' lets them play on their Xbox/PlayStation/Facebook until 11 p.m. on a school night doesn't mean that you have to bow to the pressure to do the same. We do our children a disservice if we try and be their 'best friend'. The truth is that parents have to do and say things that best friends are not prepared to do, and as parents we may have to take a hit in the popularity stakes. No one knows your child like you; nobody loves them like you. They may have many

friends, but they only have one mum or dad, so have the confidence to agree some limits that you know work for you and your family.

Involving our children in the discussions and genuinely giving them a voice rather than imposing an arbitrary regime means that everyone is more likely to buy into the agreement. And while it's never too late, the earlier you can start to get good habits in place, the better.

The kind of guidelines you can agree when children are 6 or 7 need to change in the teenage years as they set sail with headphones in their ears and a smartphone in their pocket, on course for increasing independence. While some negotiation with teenagers can take place over screen use in the home, once they are out of the house or at friends' houses it will be up to them to self-regulate the time they spend on screens, so it's worth emphasising to them that with greater freedom comes greater responsibility. And it will be the boundaries that we have put in place over the years and values that we have sown into their lives that will equip them to exercise this freedom wisely.

#### ✓ Decide on your family values

On a camping trip when our children were small, Richard and I were talking with a family friend who was by then grandfather. He told us how he and his family had adopted 'the principle of the three Ds' as a framework for their family values. This was a very simple concept of three behaviours all beginning with the letter 'D' that were out of bounds for their family. They were:

- Dishonesty
- Disrespect
- Disobedience

The three 'Ds' are like three sides of a triangle and the family were free to do anything they liked within the triangle but could not cross over it. Each 'D' was something that was important to them as a family:

- Honesty – so there would be consequences for telling lies or other Dishonesty.
- Respect – for other people and their possessions – so there were consequences for rudeness, thoughtlessness and Disrespect.
- Obedience – so there were consequences for deliberately being Disobedient.

Family values are the principles we live by, and it can be helpful to actually think through what our values are. Individual families will have different things that they believe are important, so decide what things ultimately are important to you. We had a number of different values in our family but after hearing about the three Ds from our friend we adopted it and found that although it was a simple formula, it covered almost every eventuality, and when it came to setting boundaries, it wasn't a bad place to start. The point about having family values is that they give us something to aim for and impact how we live in all areas of family life – including the on-screen world.

✓ Use screens to enrich family life

Rather than focussing entirely on policing the amount of time our children are spending on screens, we can allow technology to enhance and enjoy family life together. Our children are grown now and three are married. Since they moved away, we introduced a family WhatsApp group which has increased communication and connection between us in ways we wouldn't have thought possible. Through the WhatsApp posts, I now know more about what is going on in their lives than when we were all living under the same roof! Of course, truculent teens may be reluctant to join in that kind of conversation, but think of ways of using shared technology that works for them such as shared playlists or albums.

It might help also to incorporate screen use in things we might previously have considered a non-screen activity. For instance, one dad told me that family outings with his boys were transformed when he changed his attitude to technology. Instead of telling them

to come off the screens and get their coats on to go outside, he adopted a different approach. He encouraged them to bring their phones with them to take photos and to use Snapchat or Instagram or even a GoPro camera to record the afternoon activity.

### ✓ Draw up a family media agreement

Many families try to draw up house rules for the family about online and screen use called ‘family internet agreements’ or ‘family media agreements’, and it’s never too early to start! These are simply guidelines in line with your family values that everyone, including parents (here’s the challenge!), signs up to. Get some drinks and favourite snacks and make it a fun experience to talk through the issues together with your children. It’s obviously easier the younger they are, but even the most combative teenager may cooperate if they think they have a voice and there’s something in it for them. You might want to introduce it when your child first begins using technology in the home independently (including video games, tablets, phones, computers and laptops).

If possible, frame it as ‘what is allowed’ rather than a list of ‘don’ts’, but with the ‘don’ts’ remember to think through what the repercussions are if someone steps outside the boundaries. For families with a range of ages of children then the guidelines will need to be on a scale according to age. The agreement isn’t a magic bullet and may be too formal for some, but part of its value is simply in sitting down together and talking these things through.

An idea from author Dr Bex Lewis<sup>14</sup> suggests drawing up a three-column sheet with ‘Yes, we can’, ‘Don’t like it’ and ‘Don’t even think about it’, with the rules potentially moving columns as the children get older. See the appendix for links specifically related to setting family internet agreements, but if you want to create your own media agreement, here are some things you might like to consider:

- How many hours a day can be spent using a computer, tablet, smartphone or playing video games? Does this include or exclude schoolwork?

<sup>14</sup> Bex Lewis, *Raising Children in a Digital Age: Communicate, Communicate, Communicate*, Lion Hudson, 2014, p. 78.

- Are there different rules for when friends come round/at weekends/on birthdays/holidays?
- What devices can be used and when? At mealtimes? Just before bed? Late at night? Bedrooms or not? (With teenagers, not permitting any use in their bedroom may be unrealistic as they do need some privacy, but the point is not to encourage isolation.)
- Are social media sites allowed, and if so, which ones?
- What information can be or shouldn't be shared online?
- What films/TV programmes can be seen? What is our attitude to adult, violent, or sexual content?
- Are any particular websites off limits?
- Who pays?
- What should your child do if they encounter something scary online or something that makes them feel uncomfortable?

The world is your oyster, but make sure that your children know that the agreement is intended to work *for* your family – a seat belt to keep everyone secure and safe rather than a straightjacket to restrict behaviour. We'll be looking at online safety basics in Chapter 7, and you might like to have a clause saying that following these guidelines is part and parcel of your family's screen activity.

As part of the family media agreement, you may also like to install some software on your family's different devices to limit time online (see appendix for further information). One valiant respondent to our survey said, 'I have programmed the router to switch off at 11 p.m. meaning that no one (including us) has access after that time so as not to show discrimination to the children.'

One family we know agrees that everyone charges their appliances downstairs at night to ensure that they all get a good night's sleep.

#### ✓ Encourage selective TV viewing

In a 24/7 screen world, it is unrealistic of us to expect younger children to have the maturity and self-control to ration their own

viewing. As parents, we can help by setting some agreed guidelines. With TV, we can encourage them to choose specific programmes to view rather than just ‘watching television’ regardless of what’s on, channel hopping, or having it on as background noise. This is so easy to do now as most of the UK’s main broadcasters provide a ‘catch-up’ service, which means that any programme can be time shifted and watched to fit in with the family routine rather than vice versa.

#### ✓ Encourage non-screen activities

When our children were younger, we were given the opportunity to spend a week white-water rafting down a beautiful river and sleeping under the stars at night. We travelled light, and any belongings had to be stowed away in waterproof bags until the evening. We had no mobiles, no screens, no technology! Nothing but the river and the incredible scenery we passed each day. If we’d told our children they would enjoy a tech-free holiday, I doubt they would have believed us, yet all four would now say that week was one of the most enjoyable and fulfilling of their lives. The principle I learnt and tried to apply when we were back home was that if, as parents, we can encourage activities that will catch our children’s imagination and sense of adventure, even if they don’t seem too enamoured at first, they will find it is possible to have a different kind of fun ... even without a smartphone or laptop.

When he was a teenager, one of our sons was excited to be going on a weekend away with his youth club. The kit list came through the week before with essential items to bring – sleeping bag, clothes that you didn’t mind getting muddy, a cake, 80s fancy dress – and then there was a PS: ‘Please don’t bring a phone.’ He was incensed. What a ‘stupid’, ‘lame’ and ‘unfair’ rule! What were the leaders thinking? How would they survive? Against all the odds and repeated petitioning from a band of agitated 14-year-olds, the youth leaders held their ground. Returning on the Sunday evening, our son reported that he’d had a ‘wicked’ weekend and, in a weak moment, even admitted that he hadn’t missed his phone.

What I am not suggesting is that parents become self-appointed outward-bound instructors, organising every minute of their children's screen-free time with high ropes/canoeing/coasteering and other risk-taking adventure activities! Not every child will like outdoor activities, and other options are available. My nephew hates any activity involving a ball, but a bank holiday local drama course enabled him to discover a wonderful talent for acting, and he has gone on to study drama at university. Exactly *what* they do isn't important. The principle is to encourage them to discover even a small amount of non-screen activity that they enjoy.

✓ Understand the teenage brain!

In recent years, advances in technology have given us some new information about the changes that occur in the brain during puberty. They are fascinating, and understanding and learning about these changes should be compulsory for all parents of soon-to-be teens! It seems that as well as the incredible burst of brain development that takes place in early childhood, there is an equally significant surge of activity in adolescence. In fact, it's all change as the brain goes through extensive remodelling (it's been described as 'a networking and wiring upgrade') to make it much faster and more sophisticated.

This process means that throughout adolescence, teenagers will get better at balancing impulse, desire, goals, ethics, self-interest and rules – what some psychologists refer to as 'the brakes'. It will result in more complex and sensible behaviour, at least some of the time(!), but at other times, especially to begin with as the brain takes time to adapt, things may not go so smoothly. The two significant parts of the brain that are involved – the amygdala and prefrontal cortex – don't develop in tandem. In practice, the bad news is that many of our teenagers won't get their 'brakes' until well into their twenties. Consequences and making logical common sense decisions come second to taking risks and having a good time. This might shed light on the fact that your 16-year-old seems unable to understand your reasoning when you suggest that FaceTiming their girlfriend until



*'It's not my fault! My prefrontal cortex isn't fully developed!'*

the small hours the night before their English GCSE exam might not have been the best idea on the planet!

We were going to visit our children's grandparents in Birmingham for a special birthday lunch a few years ago and had made it abundantly clear to everyone (including our boys) that it was a three-line whip and that we needed to be in the car and on the way by 11.30 a.m. at the very latest. (We had a reputation for not arriving on time for family gatherings – one I was anxious to shed.) Our son Ed had been on a sleepover (a misnomer, if ever there was one) the night before, but had promised to be back in good time. At 11 a.m. he texted to say they were all playing *FIFA*, but that he wouldn't be long. 11.15 ... 11.20 ... 11.30 came and went. I texted (IN CAPITALS) to convey my angst and to ask his ETA only to be told, 'Soz – bck asap.' Another phone call elicited the information that the score was Aston Villa 0-0 Man City, and the delay was because they were hoping for a result. We were now going to live up to our (clearly well-deserved) reputation for lateness at those particular family gatherings.

I was not happy – a fact which I lost no time in making my son well aware! Now, years later, I still think I was justified in losing the plot with him, but I might have approached the situation in a more considered way if I had only understood that this was a demonstration – in real time – of the teenage brain's susceptibility for fun to trump logic. They are a work in progress!

When she heard about the teenage brain for the first time, one mum with a 15-year-old said: 'It's such a relief to discover. Not only is it not all my fault, but it's not all his fault either!' Just understanding that our teenagers will approach the consequences of time on screens differently to us makes dealing with the issue a whole lot easier.

