

Why Screen Time Isn't Bad for Kids

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Screen time for kids is the worst. It's frying their brains. It's wrecking their lives. Except: That might not be true at all. In fact, screen time may not even be that bad for kids. It might actually be good for them. While screens and devices may be an easy scapegoat, they aren't to blame for everything we blame them for, according to [Jordan Shapiro, PhD](#), an assistant professor at Temple University and a leader in child development and technology. In fact, technology time limits and digital detoxes may be a parenting misstep. Instead, Shapiro says, the focus should be on cultivating healthy behaviors within digital spaces. Whether you like it or not, screens aren't going anywhere.

The real injustice is this: "We have all these parenting experts and doctors and psychologists, and they're leaders in their fields, but most of them didn't grow up in a connected world," says Shapiro. "They didn't raise kids in a connected world, and they're just trying to use the same guidance and advice they always

have without considering the new context.” The dominant conversation around kids and tech oversimplifies the role of technology in kids’ lives, reducing it to a distraction and a menace or, at best, a tool to be used sparingly and with caution. This is a parenting ethos for a previous generation. And most of us, without a known, actionable alternative, buy in.

But there is another option. Shapiro, in his latest book, *The New Childhood: Raising Kids to Thrive in a Connected World*, makes his case for a parenting philosophy update that puts technology center stage. In 2019, kids need to cultivate social skills, media literacy, curiosity, and empathy—not only in their physical lives but also in their lives online. What Shapiro says adults need: an attitude adjustment and a digital parenting tool kit. His book—grounded in anthropology, philosophy, and psychology, as well in his being a father of two—dives into both.

“What I’m offering is a more holistic, integrated, healthy way of thinking about technology,” Shapiro says. That is: no scare tactics, no shame, no guilt. “We know how to use technology. We know what values we want our kids to learn. Let’s start cultivating those values within their digital lives.”

A Q&A with Jordan Shapiro, PhD

Q

Spending so much of our time in front of a screen makes us feel guilty. And so many of us feel even more shame that our kids are growing up in front of screens. Why do we need to shift away from those negative associations?

A

We can’t go in with this idea of a zero-sum game of technology: good or bad? Because, well, who cares? It’s here.

The thing I hear most from parents is that they’re concerned their kids aren’t going to be able to relate to other kids, that they’re not going to be able to handle face-to-face relationships. They’re worried that their kids won’t be capable of appreciating nature. They’re worried about screen addiction. And the knee-jerk reaction is to take away technology or limit screen time.

“What I’m calling for is this: How do we adjust to new technology more intentionally? How do we stay mindful of our values as we do it?”

But here’s the thing: This technology is not just the new normal for kids. Being plugged in is now the norm in the adult world, too. This is all around us. Even the idea that screen time is optional at this point is absurd. Think: When you’re relaxing at home, how many screens are open? Or imagine if we were to say

offices allowed only two hours of screen time a day. Could you do your job? If we limited internet access for students, could they do their schoolwork? These technologies are built into our lives, yet we feel guilty about being on our phones or computers “too much.” And it just doesn’t help us to feel guilty about it all the time.

What I’m calling for is this: How do we adjust to new technology more intentionally? How do we stay mindful of our values as we do it? How do we preserve the things we care about most—whether that’s health or fulfillment or morals or ethics—for our children in a world with technologies very different than the ones we grew up with? We need to teach our kids how to interact with these new technologies, so that by the time they get into classrooms and offices and other technological environments, they know how to live with them in a healthy, fulfilled, happy way.

Q

What can parents do to encourage a healthy relationship between kids and tech?

A

Parents can model and reinforce positive behaviors to help kids operate more successfully in digital environments. Often people go, “Hey, we need to model good behavior with technology.” And that’s the right idea, but in practice, it ends up meaning something like: “Don’t use your own phone so much and then your kids won’t imitate you.” That’s absurd. To me it’s more like, why don’t you figure out how to use your phones with your kids? Why don’t you text your kids more often? Why don’t you play video games with your kids?

So much of your life, I’m guessing—because it’s true for most people—is mediated through the voice of your mother or your father in your head saying to you, “Are you sure you should do that right now?” Or we go, “Well, what would my mom do or my dad do?” You have this internal voice that corrects you or tells you what to think. And that’s exactly why we need to get more involved in our kids’ digital lives. We need to build that inner voice in the context of technology, and to do that, we need to give them opportunities to see how we behave online. That way, by the time they’re grown up, that nagging will be firmly implanted into their psyche.

There are lots of parents who, when I use video games as an example, go, “I don’t like video games. I don’t even understand them. What am I supposed to do?” To them, I always say, “You don’t have to play.” I’m not good enough at video games to play with my kids anymore. But no matter what new game they’re playing, at some point, I spend some time sitting with them, asking

them to show me the game, asking them why it's cool, asking them what they like about it. Is it better than the game they used to play? Why? You don't have to play as long as you're engaged in that world with them and asking those questions.

Q

It's easy to worry that when kids spend so much time on screens, their social skills will suffer. Is that warranted?

A

It's important to note that there's no normal way of interacting. How we interact with one another can't be separated from our cultural context and our environment. Intimacy and social skills have always, at all times, been mediated through a specific tool set. The current tool set happens to be modern technology, and our goal needs to be to teach kids how to interact through their given tool set. Every generation faces this question of how to preserve what we care about in relationships while we adapt to new tools. That adaptation just feels easier and more normal to kids than it does to us because it's their default.

So many parents are concerned that their kids will lack social skills because they spend a lot of their social time online, but what we miss is that this generation is really empathetic, and we partially owe that empathy to how globally interconnected they are. I walked into the living room the other day, and I heard my son, playing a video game online, say into his headset, "What? You don't know what a pancake is? How could you not know what a pancake is?" Then two seconds later he said, "Oh, you're from Ghana? Then it makes sense why you don't know what a pancake is."

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And they're constantly exposed to social progress. Like, guess what? You can't hide Black Lives Matter. There was a point when that news could have been hidden from a whole community. You can't do that anymore—there's just no way. My eleven-year-old was in the car with me the other day listening to a podcast I had done to promote the book, and he heard some adult ask the question, "Well, don't you think kids are losing social skills by being on these screens all day?" And from the backseat he said, "Wait, they think we're losing social skills? We're the ones who have no problem with whatever pronoun

people want to use. We're the ones who don't care about race. We're the ones who don't care about what gender people are. You guys are the ones with no social skills."

Q

So many of us worry that too much tech time might stunt kids' ability to connect with nature and the outside world. How big a problem is this?

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Once I brought my son up to the mountains on vacation, and I was really disappointed that he stayed on his device. But the idea that he would suddenly act like a grown-up who's like, "Let me meditate on nature," was a totally unrealistic expectation for a twelve-year-old, right? He had barely ever left home before, let alone seen a mountain like that, so he was probably a little freaked out and looking for stability. Essentially, the phone is a security blanket—we call it a "transitional object."

There's no research to back it up yet, but the premise is that maybe allowing kids to have that technology while they're experiencing something new makes it easier for them to connect to what's in front of them, because they have something that makes them feel stable. That's the transitional object theory: By trying to get rid of that security blanket, you actually make it harder for them to move away from their digital life.

When I travel with my kids, I push them really hard to use their tech to send people photos. I might be disappointed at first that they aren't engaging the way I'd want them to, but then I go, "Wait, wait. How about I just make technology a conduit to make them more aware of their surroundings?" I'll often ask my sons, "Hey, wouldn't it make a great Instagram post if you were to take a picture of this?" I'm making them aware of their environment, telling them how to think about it in a technological world, and also managing this question of what's escapism and what's not, all at once.

Q

How else can parents ensure their kids engage with nature, when screens and tech are so integrated into their lives?

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I don't understand why we have bought into this narrative where these two things are opposed. Interviewers will say to me, "What about the kids who don't get any time outside?" And I'm like, "I'm not the one who says you can't

have screen time and outdoor time; you are.”

“There’s so much technology available to actually help them appreciate the natural world, but you have to teach them to see those things together.”

Of course kids should also have outdoor time. In fact, why not use technology outside? I say this all the time. Most science is based on using technology to appreciate the natural world, so where do we get this notion that the natural world is in opposition to technology? Galileo used the telescope to appreciate nature more, not to divide himself from it.

This is the problem with our mind-set—it’s not that the tech separates us from nature. Kids can be out there using thermometers and tracking data about the weather. There’s so much technology available to actually help them appreciate the natural world, but you have to teach them to see those things together. Especially if you’re worried about your kids losing out on a connection to nature. Technology isn’t going anywhere, so we can’t create this “one or the other” dichotomy.

Q

The internet isn’t always a space that fosters compassion. How can parents help their kids become good digital citizens?

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One of the things I argue for is we should be starting kids on social media younger, but on closed networks—whether that’s your sports team or your church or your extended family. Because if I have my kids on these closed social media networks, then that gives me a chance—when my kids are six or so—to model what it looks like to interact in a safe social media space.

On a playground, when your kids are little, you tell them over and over again: “No hitting. Share. Be nice.” And you have to do it for years before they actually listen. But do most parents ever explicitly say not to be a troll or a bully on Twitter? No, not really. But imagine if my kids had seen me and my brothers interacting on social media the way they watch us at the Thanksgiving table, so they get to see how to communicate with others, even when they’re joking or teasing, in a respectful way that preserves the other person’s dignity.

Instead we wait until they’re fourteen or so—which is considered an “appropriate” age to allow social media but is also the age when kids start to ignore everything we say—and set them loose. And then we’re surprised when they use social media in ways we don’t like.

Q

Are you concerned that kids are becoming addicted to screens?

A

The idea that we think screens themselves are addictive is absurd. Kids are capable of intense focus. They get deeply invested in their projects. An example: My eleven-year-old is crazy about Lego. The biggest fight we have all the time is that it will be right before it's time to leave for school, and he's decided he had to go finish a Lego project, right now. No matter how many times I say it, he won't stop. Every time it happens, we get into a huge screaming fight.

The funny thing is everyone thinks the screens create this kind of problem, where your kid is so absorbed that they won't listen to you. In our house, Lego "does it" even more. For other kids, it might be books or art projects. But no one's against Lego or books or art as an entire concept. We don't typically blame or vilify the medium itself until it's a tech device.

Jordan Shapiro, PhD, is a global thought leader on digital technology, child development, and education. His holistic approach to studying childhood and digital play draws from history, philosophy, psychology, culture, and economics. Shapiro is a senior fellow for the Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop, an assistant professor in the Intellectual Heritage Program at Temple University, and the author of several books, most recently [The New Childhood: Raising Kids to Thrive in a Connected World](#).