

Media Habits During COVID-19: Children & Teens on Screens in Quarantine

During this period of quarantine, most children and teens have fewer school responsibilities and less access to extracurricular activities and social opportunities. Many parents are strained by the added responsibility of supervising their children during the day in addition to their typical responsibilities. In addition to fears and stresses caused by the spread of the Covid19 virus, increased contact and parental responsibilities can put a significant strain on family dynamics and create conflict. Allowing youth extra time with screen entertainment is a natural solution, typically pleasing children and freeing parents from active supervision. However, youths' physical and psychological needs have not diminished during this crisis.

Good health and development require that a majority of the day be devoted to activities other than screen time such as:

- sleep
- schoolwork & reading for enjoyment
- social & family connections
- physical activity
- chores

Developmentally-appropriate screen activities in moderation can be a part of a healthy, balanced lifestyle. However, screen entertainment is so engaging that most children and teens lack the insight and discipline to effectively limit their own use. Left unchecked, screen habits quickly dominate the lives of many youth, displacing those behaviors most vital to well-being.

Children and teens, with limited ability to make appropriate media choices, have unprecedented access to games, programs, videos, and social media containing potentially damaging content such as: violence, sex, drug use, profanity, and bullying. To safeguard their health and well-being, parents should set a structured daily routine for children and teens, which limits screen entertainment and includes adequate time devoted to those essential behaviors.

The appropriate daily amount of screen entertainment will vary with the child and a greater allowance is often warranted during the COVID-19 crisis, but should not take up the majority of any child's waking hours or interfere with sleep. Furthermore, parents should guide youth towards age-appropriate, positive, creative, and educational screen media choices. This process can be made easier by inviting children to participate in creating a daily schedule, encouraging open discussion and avoiding a blaming attitude. As well parents should set a positive example by keeping the same standards for themselves, setting up regular off-screen activities, and paying attention to self-care. Younger children typically need more firm direction, while teens often benefit from greater autonomy.

This is a great time for families to play and co-view video games, movies, and all-age programs. Many parents have more time than usual to share and discuss movies or games. However parents should be mindful regarding children who lack the self-control to control their screen habits. If parents have trouble setting limits, or their children have trouble following them, professional help might eventually be needed. Entrenching toxic behaviors can put everyone at risk. When carefully considered, some extra screen time may help us through this forced isolation. Parental guilt about a modest increase in screen time may be counterproductive and displace more immediate concerns.

If anything, this crisis should foster important family cohesion, including important discussions about healthy balanced media habits, our interconnected world, and our responsibilities to our health and community. These messages have always been critical, but have never born the emotional valence and practical significance they do now. With a bit of care, families will emerge from these times stronger than ever, and well prepared for the future.