



When life goes virtual: Tips to help your teen stay well with screens

These days, it might seem like your teen is always on a screen—a smart phone, tablet, TV, computer, video game, or other tech device. Life during the COVID-19 pandemic has gone virtual, and teens often use screens to take part in activities they used to do in-person: hang out with friends, train for team sports, join student clubs, and more.

In these unusual times, try to focus on what your teen is doing on screens, instead of dwelling on how much time they're putting in. Be there to help them navigate their online experiences. Here's what you can do:

Encourage meaningful screen use. Work together to prioritize online experiences that are engaging and purposeful over those that are passive or unsocial.

- Encourage your teen to use tech for meaningful interactions with others, like video calls and virtual games they can play safely with friends and trusted, caring adults.
- Try virtual ways of getting active, like online fitness classes, sport training, or yoga. As a family, try using apps to set physical activity goals and track progress.

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- Steer your teen toward screen-based activities that suit their interests and can help them learn something new. Look for shows and “how to” videos that they’ll like.

Make offline time a priority. Try not to let screens interfere with healthy offline activities in your home.

- Go screen-free for most meals and snacks. Research shows that your family will make more nutritious food choices and have better conversations when there are no devices at the table.
- Encourage your teen to unplug from screens at least an hour before they go to bed. This will give them time to unwind and make it easier to fall asleep and wake up on time. Do your best to keep tech devices out of bedrooms—they can disrupt sleep.
- Make a central space in your home where phones and other devices can be stored when they’re not in use. This can help to limit distraction and discourage media multi-tasking, like texting while doing homework.
- Aim for a few days each week with less time in front of a screen. Pull out the puzzles, games, and art supplies, or head outside for a spring walk or bike ride.

Consider family agreements. Make a plan, pledge, or agreement to outline what healthy screen use looks like for your family. You’ll find a variety of [templates](#) and [samples](#) online—the key is to work together to land on something that’s in line with your family values, and flexible enough for each person in your home. Be open to negotiation. Gradually let your teen take responsibility for shaping and respecting the rules.

Get involved. Be aware of the programs, apps, and social networks your teen is using. Talk with them about rights and responsibilities – they have a right to privacy and to not be harassed online, and they’re responsible for what they post and share with others. Keep conversations open and respectful – [these tips can help](#).

Consider joining in when your teen is using a screen—play a video game or try out an app together. You might find that this challenges your assumptions and helps to create space for conversation.

Model healthy screen use. Turn off your devices when your teen is around, especially if they’re interacting with you, and always when you’re driving. Unplug and pay full attention. Your actions will teach them that texts, emails, and social media can wait, and let them know that they are important.

Monitor for signs of a problem. Be honest about how your teen is doing—are screens making them happy, or are they becoming moody and irritable? Are they taking part in healthy offline activities? Are they sleeping well? If you have concerns, talk to a health care professional or call 811 to speak with a Registered Nurse.

Remember, there’s no playbook for parenting in a pandemic. Your teen will spend some days on screens more than you’d like. Do your best to keep an open mind. With your support, teens can learn to balance life online and off.

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