

RAISING 2-5 YEAR OLDS IN A DIGITAL WORLD

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION FOR PARENTS
AND PROFESSIONALS

BY DR KRISTY GOODWIN



Dr Kristy
GOODWIN

DRKRISTYGOODWIN.COM

About Dr Kristy


Dr Kristy Goodwin is a digital parenting expert (and mum who's endured her own kids' techno-tantrums!). She's a speaker, researcher and the author of *Raising Your Child in a Digital World*. Kristy takes the guesswork and guilt out of parenting 'screenagers' and is a media commentator with a gift for translating research into practical and digestible information for parents, educators and health professionals. She arms parents with facts, not fears, about the impact of 'digitalised childhoods' on young children (without telling parents to digitally amputate their kids by banning the iPad, or unplugging the TV). Kristy's on a mission to bust the myths and misinformation about young kids and screens by giving parents and professionals simple information and practical tips for raising balanced and healthy kids in the digital world.



Dr Kristy's book *Raising Your Child in a Digital World* helps parents of 0-12 year olds ditch the guilt and guesswork associated with raising young kids in the digital age.

GRAB YOUR COPY HERE





Your toddler's brain - what you must know

Why does my toddler have a techno-tantrum every time I ask them to switch off the TV, or the tablet device?

It's important to understand why your child's having a techno-tantrum (and understand that it's a normal part of development, albeit frustrating).

// Dopamine-

Screens cause structural and functional changes in the brain (but don't be alarmed because we know that all experiences, be they with or without a screen, cause changes in brain architecture). However, screens, with their sensory seductions and rewards can have a rather dramatic impact on the developing brain, especially for little ones who are still learning how to emotionally-regulate (remember, your 3 year-old may have a tantrum because you cut their toast the wrong way, so it's highly likely that they'll have a tantrum when you ask for your phone back).

The online world is INTERESTING, INSTANT and IMMEDIATELY REWARDING and if young kids are introduced to screens too early, or spend too much time with screens, it can condition them to expect this type of instant satisfaction and "easy" arousal. However, the real world doesn't emulate this level of instant gratification, so kids will not receive the same levels of satisfaction in the real world.

Using technology, whether it's mum's iPhone, or watching TV typically is a pleasurable experience for young children. Sometimes it's the sheer act of watching something entertaining (YouTube clips of toys being opened for example), or perhaps they're praised and rewarded for achieving a certain level in a game. As a result, your child's brain is releasing the neurotransmitter 'dopamine' and the reward pathways in their brain are activated. Consequently they want more and more of this neurotransmitter. So when you ask for your smartphone to be returned, or the TV to be switched off, you're literally terminating their supply of dopamine (and hence, the techno tantrum ensues) and this is why children often appear frustrated, angry and irritable after they've been 'screening'. They're having dopamine withdrawals.

TIP- Offer your child appealing transition activities to entice them off the screen. Demanding that they shut the laptop and go and do their homework is not an appealing transition activity. Give them a choice of 2-3 different activities that you know that they like, so that their dopamine supply isn't completely terminated when they unplug.

// Disrupted state of flow–

When children are engrossed in an online activity (for example, they're watching funny episodes of Peppa Pig, or they persist with a jigsaw puzzle app) they often enter the 'psychological state of flow'. Csikszentmihalyi coined this term to describe how we can become so engrossed and immersed in a task that we lose track of time. When children expend a significant amount of mental effort, like they often do when gaming, or creating content on computers, they often enter the state of flow.

When we walk in the room and demand that they switch off the movie, or finish playing Minecraft, we're literally disrupting their flow state. They're often left feeling frustrated and as a result the techno-tantrum erupts.

TIP– Give your child ample warnings before their screen time will end. Only use time warnings if your child's old enough to understand the abstract concept of time (for example, telling a 3 year-old that they have five more minutes of TV is meaningless because time is such an abstract concept for young children under around 6 years of age). Make sure that you make eye contact with your child to ensure that they've actually heard you because chances are that they're so engrossed with their online activity, that they may not actually hear you when you give them a verbal warning. "Yeah Mum!" is often a default, generic response our kids give when we bark orders at them.

//State of insufficiency-

The online world causes children to feel like they're never finished. There's always one more episode to watch, or another level in a game that they can reach, or another app to play. We never feel like we're complete in the online world, as there's no finish line. Unlike a book that has a final chapter, or a Lego set where there's a sense of completion, we don't ever get that feeling of satiation or satisfaction in the digital world. There's always more digital seductions enticing them.

This is tricky to manage with children because we struggle with this too as adults (raising my guilty digital hand to say that I find it hard to go to bed without one final check of my inbox because I know there's always something else I can look at).

TIP- We need to establish and enforce firm boundaries around screen-time. We need to impose a finish line for our kids. We need to have firm rules around how long they can use devices and then stick to these rules (even when they combust into the techno-tantrum because over time these will diminish if we're consistent with our rules). We need to have these conversations about rules before the device is switched on.



// Brain is primed for novelty-

The prefrontal cortex, which is the part of the brain responsible for managing children's impulses and some of their other higher-order thinking skills, has a novelty bias. It's always seeking novel information and stimulus. The prefrontal cortex is under constant threat in the digital world as it's continually bombarded by the sensory smorgasbord the online world offers. However, the developing brain is not yet wired to cope with this constant onslaught of information (actually this part of the brain isn't fully developed until their twenties).

And this is exactly why your little ones find it so hard to switch off You Tube or turn off TV- there's a constant, never-ending supply of entertainment.

The offline world simply doesn't offer this constant state of novelty and interest. Time in nature is a lot slower paced and doesn't offer the immediate rewards and pleasure that the online world provides.

TIP- Balance your child's screen-time and green-time. Provide plenty of unplugged time in nature each day where they don't use screens. This will ensure that their brains become accustomed to the slower pace and not conditioned on the constant rewards that the online world offers.

// Overloaded nervous systems-

There are so many sensory inputs for little kids to process when they're using screens (sound effects, background music, animations, videos, colours, graphics just to name a few). This can cause young children, or children with sensory processing difficulties, a sensory overload. As a result, their nervous system can become overwhelmed and kids can "melt-down" when they come off the screen. It's common for kids to emotionally-combust and appear agitated, moody or irritable after they've used a screen. They've become hyper-aroused. Whilst we don't yet know why, anecdotally we're hearing reports that boys, more than girls, are affected by screens in this way.

TIP- allow kids to empty their sensory cups after they've used a screen. You can do this by getting them to run around outside, ride their bikes, go for a walk, put their feet on the grass, roll down a hill, lay on the swings, climb up and down the stairs, use playdoh. Basically, you want them to be physically active and re-set their sensory system. Try and recognise your child's preferred sensory system and cater for this preference. For example, is your child a "toucher"? If so, provide them with opportunities to use their tactile system, like playing playdoh, or in the sand, or using shaving cream after they've used a screen. If you use screens before dinner time (and many of us do, myself included), give your child an opportunity to empty their sensory cup before they sit at the table. This will have a remarkable impact on their eating (I promise, I've road-tested this and so have many other families who've listened to my Parent Seminars and the results are amazing!).



Screen-time without Scream-time

My digital workshop *Screen-time without scream-time* will provide you with more tips and strategies to manage screen-time so that it doesn't always end in tears and tantrums.

FIND OUT MORE



How can I prevent techno-tantrums?

As a mum who's experienced her fair share of techno-tantrums with her kids, I wish I could offer you a silver bullet, or guaranteed solution. However, techno tantrums are inevitable (and normal part of development- see my previous section) but there are some simple things you can do to reduce their likelihood or the severity.

Here are some tips to reduce the likelihood of experiencing a techno-tantrum:

// Set firm guidelines- as a family you need to establish (and enforce) firm guidelines about 'how much' screen time your child can have each day. Determine an amount that's right for your little one. Have these discussions before a screen is turned on and in an informal and playful way. Don't have these conversations when your little one is having a techno-tantrum as the part of their brain (amygdala) that's responsible for their emotional response has taken over.

// Give two gentle reminders- children often become completely engrossed with what they're watching/playing/creating when using a gadget because they enter the psychological state of "flow". Before their time is about to expire on their digital device, give them two warnings that their time is about to expire. Make sure that they make eye contact with you and acknowledge what you've said, as they often become so engrossed with what they're watching/playing that they

// Give them quantities- up until around 6 years of age (sometimes a little later), kids don't actually understand the abstract concept of time. So giving them a time-limit is meaningless. Instead, give younger children, or kids who haven't yet mastered time precise quantities. For example, you might say, "You can watch two episodes of Peppa Pig today." or, "You can watch three YouTube clips."

// Set the exact finish time- if your child does understand time limits, sometimes we forget what time kids actually started using their screen (I do, anyway). Instead, giving a precise "switch off" time is an effective strategy, as it is firm, non-negotiable parameter.

// Use a timer- your child is much less likely to argue with your smartphone timer or an egg timer than with you! Use the timer on your digital devices (e.g. iPhone or iPad) to set and enforce screen time limits. Most devices have a clock function so make sure you use this.

// Empty their sensory cups- for many children, particularly boys and children with sensory processing difficulties, it's essential that they empty their sensory cup after using a screen. Screens can overload kids' nervous and sensory systems (because there's so much sensory input to process when they'r plugged in). So often, techno-tantrums are an emotional and physical 'release' because their sensory system is bombarded. Simple activities to empty their sensory cup include riding a bike, going for a walk, sitting in nature, rolling, climbing stairs, push-ups, star jumps, playing with playdoh, using essential oils, rolling on a ball. Basically, it's anything physical and activates their sensory system at a slower pace.

// Encourage your child to switch off- ask your child to switch off the device (i.e. turn off the TV, power down the tablet, turn the gaming console off), instead of you walking in the room and quickly (or angrily) flicking off the TV, or prying the tablet from their hands. This helps them to feel like they're in control. It's a trivial gesture to adults, but very empowering for little ones.

// Have an appealing transition activity- remember, using a screen is a pleasurable experience for your child (their brain is releasing the neurotransmitter dopamine). So encourage them to turn off the device and offer them a selection (two choices is fine) of activities to participate in. For example, you could say, "Turn off the iPad. Then, would you like to go for a bike ride, or have a wrestle with Dad?"

// Play bad cop- if you experience a techno tantrum after using the four tips above, have a direct (adverse) consequence related to the device. For example, your child may not be able to use your smartphone the next day because they couldn't pass it back when you told them their time was up. You only need to implement tip #5 once or twice and your child (usually) soon learns that these limits are enforceable (and their desire to use the digital device is a very strong motivator for them).

*I help solve parents'
digital dilemmas
just like this in
my seminars.*

Designed specifically for parents, educators and health professionals, my seminars translate the latest research into practical and digestible information and simple strategies to ensure that screen-time doesn't always end in scream-time!

FIND OUT MORE





How much screen time is ‘safe’ for my child?

There are no ‘safe’ screen time thresholds. We don’t have scientifically-tested screen time limits that are deemed ‘healthy’. In 2015, the American Academy of Pediatrics introduced more relaxed and realistic screen time guidelines.

Rather than focusing on ‘how much’ screen time your child’s having each day, I recommend parents focus on:

// WHAT are they doing online? Is it educational? Age-appropriate? Supporting their development? Developing their language skills?

// WHAT’S the opportunity cost? What are they missing out on when they’re online? What’s the displacement effect? What are they not doing as a result of being online? Kids have 7 basic, unchanging developmental needs (relationships/attachments, language, sleep, play, physical movement, nutrition and executive function skills) and we have to ensure that screens aren’t eroding or adversely impacting on these basic needs.

// WHEN are kids using screens? Minimise their use of back-lit devices like tablets and smartphones in the 90 minute period before nap or sleep time. Studies have shown that these devices can delay the onset of sleep because the blue light suppresses the body’s production of melatonin which kids require to fall asleep quickly and easily. Also, avoid rapid-fire arousing screen-use before sleep or school.

// HOW are kids using screens? Teach children healthy digital habits so that their screen-time isn’t impacting on their musculoskeletal development, vision, hearing and social skills.

// WHERE are kids using screens? We need to preserve tech-free zones in our homes (and schools). We also need to ensure that kids are using screens in publicly-accessible places at home (so we can support their learning and keep them safe- as little ones can easily have “appcidents”).

*Let me take the guesswork and guilt
out of parenting young children in the
digital world...*



**RAISING YOUR CHILD
IN A DIGITAL WORLD:
FINDING A HEALTHY BALANCE OF
TIME ONLINE WITHOUT TECHNO
TANTRUMS AND CONFLICT**

By Dr. Kristy Goodwin

GRAB YOUR COPY HERE