

#Parentech

Parenting in the digital age

Healthy Habits with Dr Kristy Goodwin



Developed for #parentech - parenting in the digital age.

Boundaries in the digital world

Our kids are growing up in a screen-saturated world. They're learning to tap, swipe and pinch often before they've learnt to ride a bike or grip a pencil. Some kids are spending more time with pixels than with people!

Whether we love it or loathe it, technology is here to stay, mentoring our kids how to leverage the benefits technology offers and also mitigate the potential pitfalls must be our parenting goal.

We need to teach our kids how to be masters of media and not slaves to the screen!

Parents as Pilots of the Digital Plane

To develop healthy technology habits, our kids need their parents to be the pilot of the digital plane and assuming this role of pilot helps their children navigate the digital terrain. Despite at times feeling ill-equipped or lacking the technical skills and knowledge your child has, you do have life experience and a fully developed prefrontal cortex (the part of the brain that's responsible for high-order thinking and impulse control) that your child hasn't yet developed. When parents are the pilot they can help their child deal with turbulence, without crashing the plane. When kids go in the wrong direction (which is a normal rite of passage as a child or adolescent), parents can help them course-correct. When our kids are facing scary digital dilemmas, they'll come to the pilot and not fellow-passengers to help them. But remember they will only do this if their parent is the trusted pilot.

Assume the pilot's seat early - I suggest the minute you hand your toddler your smartphone, or turn on the TV for your pre-schooler, you assume your role as the pilot. Parents need to be in control and involved in their child's digital life - you wouldn't let your little one take over the controls and navigate the plane, nor should you allow them to assume the role of pilot of the digital plane.

As pilots of the digital plane, parents need to establish and enforce healthy **BOUNDARIES**. When children have firm and consistent boundaries they're more likely to develop healthy technology habits so you don't need to ban or avoid screens - your kids will love that!.





HOW MUCH time kids spend with devices ...

Kids need guidance to develop healthy habits with screen-time limits. Two of the reasons that they find it so difficult to switch off devices is: (i) that when they're using screens they often experience the 'state of insufficiency' where they never feel 'done' or 'complete' and (ii) they often enter the 'state of flow' where they literally lose track of time when they're using a device.

Keeping a lid on how much screen-time kids accumulate each day is important, as there's a displacement effect associated with screen-time. That is, screens represent an opportunity cost. An hour spent gaming, or watching You Tube clips is an hour not spent reading, or playing outdoors, or being physically active. As parents, we must enforce boundaries around how much time kids spend with screens to ensure that their screen-time doesn't displace their other essential developmental priorities (such as sleep, play, social interaction, language and physical activity).

Healthy habits - top tips:

Set time limits before devices are switched on- have discussions about how much screen-time kids can have before the device is switched on - it's near impossible to set limits and kids will want to negotiate once devices are switched on.

Warn them- the research calls it 'cognitive priming' but it basically means warning your child that their screen-time is about to end. Screen activity is usually pleasurable so kids' brains are releasing the neurotransmitter dopamine. Marching into the lounge room and demanding that they switch off the TV or shut the laptop lid, cuts off their dopamine supply. Giving them ample warnings that their screen-time will soon end helps to prepare them mentally to switch off (allow them to finish up activities, like letting friends know they'll be exiting the game).

Use timers- use the timer app that comes with your smartphone or tablet device and set a time limit. Alternatively, use kitchen clocks, microwave timers and even sand-timers for younger kids who cannot read clocks. **BONUS TIP-** when using a clock app use the 'stop playing' option hidden under the sound effects button and the device will automatically lock itself once the time has elapsed.

Only use limits if your child understands time- children typically don't understand the abstract concept of time until they're between 6-8 years of age. So it's pointless prescribing, "You've got an hour on the iPad." if your child doesn't have a conceptual understanding of what constitutes an hour. For example, you could say, "You can watch two episodes of Peppa Pig and then I want you to turn off the device." Or "You can reach level 7 in the game and I want you to turn it off."

Give them cut-off times (not an amount of time)- If your child understands time, give them the cut-off time and not the amount of time they can spend with the device. This makes the boundaries very concrete and also helps forgetful parents remember how long their child has been on the device. For example, your child might start watching TV at 3:30pm and you've agreed that they can have an hour so you'd tell them that they need to switch off the TV at 4:30pm.

Don't negotiate- it's likely that your child will desperately plea and bargain (even perhaps offer to unpack the dishwasher for three weeks just for "five more minutes...") when their screen-time has expired. Try not to give in to their demands because this tells your child that with a bit of pester-power that mum or dad's limits can change. And we all know how pester-power works!

Be flexible- This may seem to contradict the above point, but it's essential that we're flexible with our screen rules. I wouldn't like my husband coming in and demanding that I turn off the TV if I was up to a really exciting part of a movie. Sometimes, we must be flexible and allow our kids to finish a task or get to a particular scene or level so that they can finish their screen-time.

WHAT kids do with technology

Content really is king. What a child does with a screen, what they're exposed to, allowed to play, or the social media platforms they're engaging in is a critical consideration for parents. Yes, the amount of time they spend **plugged-in** is important, but it's far more important to carefully assess what they're doing with their time when they are using devices.

As the pilot of the digital plane, parents need to know their child's destinations. What digital playgrounds is your child playing? What are the risks? What's the potential? Is it for leisure or learning? What values does it promote? Is it age-appropriate for your child?

Age-appropriate content for your child is key.

Not only do parents need to guide their child's use of technology so they're using age-appropriate technologies, but they also need to have firm boundaries so that their child isn't exposed to inappropriate content such as pornography or violence. Put simply, kids cannot un-see things. Once children have seen inappropriate content, there's very little that can be done.

In Australia, the average age at which children are being exposed to pornography is 8 years of age! We must ensure that they're not being exposed to pornography by installing Internet-filtering tools and setting up parental controls on all devices. Whilst these preventive measures are essential, ongoing conversations are also critical. We need to talk to our kids, in age-appropriate ways, about these online concerns.

A relatively new trend called 'digital doctoring' is now occurring where You Tube clips, specifically designed for kids, have unsavoury content such as murders, beheadings and violence inserted. For example, a Peppa Pig clip had an execution video inserted into it after the first three minutes had been playing. Like pornography, our kids can be traumatised and psychologically-scarred if they see violent content.

Healthy habits - top tips:

Curate content- create playlists on You Tube, create folders on tablet devices of the apps that are appropriate for your child to play, or let your child know what TV channels they're allowed to watch.

Install Internet-filtering software on all digital devices. I personally use and recommend the **Family Zone** product as it enables parents to limit what apps, games, TV shows, websites kids can access, enforcing another important boundary such as limits to screen time.

Find age-appropriate technology- Common Sense Media provide up-to-date app, movie, TV show, video game and website reviews with an app called Kids Media (available for both iOS and Android devices). The Australian Council on Children and the Media also have a *Know Before You Go* and *Know Before You Load* movie and app review tools.

Know the technology- many parents feel bamboozled and overwhelmed by the rate of technological change. It's essential that you understand what technologies your child is using and the potential pitfalls associated with these technologies. The Office of the eSafety Commissioner has a wonderful online tool called iParent which provides up-to-date information (and printable PDFs) about the latest technologies kids and teens are using.



WHEN kids can use technology

There are two times of the day when parents need to be very cautious about kids' technology use: (i) before school and (ii) before nap or sleep time. I'm not suggesting that parents need to *completely* avoid screens at these times, but parents need to be mindful about *what* kids do with screens at these two periods of the day.

Rapid-fire, fast paced screen action can hyper-arouse the brain. The use of screens before school and sleep can impact their attention spans and adversely impact the quality and quantity of sleep kids can get each night.



Healthy habits - top tips:

Set a digital bedtime- specify an exact cut-off time when device need to be put away. 60-90 minutes before bedtime is ideal.

Establish a landing zone- identify a specific place in your home (kitchen counter, study, buffet, lounge room) where all the digital devices go each night for charging. Bonus tip- make sure they're charging the device and not the empty case.

Do a technology swap- some children like watching something before bedtime. This is where a technology swap can help. Rather than watching on the tablet device (which emits blue light) watch it on the TV (which doesn't emit as much blue light and children sit further away from it).

Have a Bored Board- have some suggested activities written on a whiteboard from which kids can select. These are activities that kids can do before school instead of using digital devices.

Use digital tools- Tools like The **Family Zone** product allow families to set up routines around when digital devices can be used (also restrict times of the day when you don't want kids using screens, for example, in the middle of the night or very early in the morning before mum and dad wake up).

Empty their sensory cups- To help calm kids' nervous systems, that are often hyper-aroused after they've used screens, provide activities that enable them to empty their sensory cup. This can include things such as running outside, jumping on the trampoline (anything physically active and outdoors is usually a great sensory experience). So too is eating crushed ice, having a bath or shower, playing Lego or a jigsaw puzzle. Basically, anything that calms the nervous system down and allows the senses to re-calibrate is helpful.

Allow kids to be bored- Avoid using screens to compensate for boredom. It's okay for kids to be bored. In fact, boredom is good for kids! *A*lways using screens to avoid boredom can cause kids to develop a digital dependence.

WHERE kids can use screens.

Our kids are often playing in digital playgrounds and we need parents to supervise the easiest and most logical way to do this is if technology is used in open places in the home. As the pilot of the digital plane, parents need to prescribe exactly **where** devices can and cannot be used in the home. This is challenging to do, given the prevalence of mobile devices. This is also critical when kids come to your house for a playdate (and to enforce if your child goes to a friend's house for a playdate).

Keeping technology in publicly-accessible areas of the house has dual benefits. First, it helps parents to be involved in their child's digital lives. Research consistently shows us that parental involvement (co-viewing) is beneficial for our kids' learning, especially in the early years. When parents co-view or use technology with their child, it helps them to make meaning from the screen and shows your child you value what they're doing online. This is a subtle, but powerful way of conveying to your child that technology isn't toxic or taboo and you're really interested in what they're doing. Whilst it may not always be possible to sit down and play a video game with your child (although that's also great too), having ongoing and incidental conversations with your child ensures that they're actively involved with the media and not simply a 'digital zombie'.

The second benefit associated with kids using screens in publicly-accessible areas of your home relates to cyber-safety and cyber-bullying. Kids take risks- they always have, but now their risks and mistakes have digital DNA attached to them! Neuroscience confirms that kids' brains are wired to take risks- their prefrontal cortex (the part of the brain responsible for logical decision-making) is not fully developed. However, our kids now have access to powerful digital devices which can be used to easily share and curate their mistakes (such as sharing private information, or posting an image they'll later regret, or sending a nasty message). If our kids are using devices in bedrooms or hidden away from their parents/carers then they're more likely to engage in risky activities. Remember, it's highly unlikely that your child will be sending sexts whilst they're sitting next to you on the lounge, but much more likely to do this in their bedrooms!

Healthy habits - top tips:

Bedrooms- keep bedrooms tech-free zones. Devices in bedrooms have been associated with poorer quality and quantity of sleep and also increase cyber-safety risks. Develop healthy sleep hygiene by ensuring that devices are left out of bedrooms

Meal areas- keep devices away from meal areas helps to promote family interaction. Meal-times should be a sacred time for families to connect and interact and phones can act as a digital intruder at the table. For younger children, digital distractions at the meal area, can also compromise their eating habits.

Play areas- research has consistently identified that background TV can compromise the quality of kids' play and impact on their language skills. (Background music is different- so long as the music is soft, slow-paced and familiar then it's unlikely to be distracting.

Cars- short, everyday trips, it's best to keep cars as device-free zones. This is a rich opportunity to have conversations with your kids as they're literally held captive in the confines of your car. And if they're at an age where they don't want to talk, then this 'white space' is great for their brains. Constantly processing information from screens can be exhausting and their brains and nervous systems need a break from the sensory stimulation screens provide.

Bathrooms- I think this one goes without saying!



WITH WHOM kids can use technology.

It's vital that parents establish boundaries around exactly whom children and teens can use screens with both in the physical sense and also online. Using technology with someone, whether it's watching TV or playing a game or app with a sibling, a friend, or parent or carer has been shown to be beneficial as it keeps kids engaged and stops the digital zombie effect.

However, it's also vital that parents are aware of who their children are interacting with and playing with online, as many apps and online games now have chat rooms and other modified aspects of social media.

Parents need to have ongoing conversations with their children about who they're interacting with online and remind them (because the part of the brain responsible for logical decision-making isn't fully developed until their twenties) that not everyone on the Internet is who they say they are. Given that many kids are naïve and incredibly trusting of people they're interacting with online, they're vulnerable to online predators.

A recent trend called 'catfishing' is when someone poses as someone else to manipulate victims (who are described as 'catfish'). Kids mistakenly think that if a pop-up chat window appears in a game or app they're playing with a picture of Justin Bieber than they must be chatting with him directly. Children have been duped into thinking they were speaking to the real singer and sent nude and partially nude photos at his request.

Just like you wouldn't invite a stranger into your house to sit and chat to your child, nor should you allow them to interact online with people they don't know, unless you're actively supervising them.

Healthy habits - top tips:

Have ongoing conversations- Know exactly what digital playgrounds your child is playing in and supervise so you know who they're interacting with. Know exactly who they're speaking to online and interacting with and let them know if their interactions are appropriate (remember, their brains are wired to be impulsive as their prefrontal cortex isn't yet fully developed).

Teach kids online etiquette- Our kids don't learn social skills and online etiquette through osmosis. We need to explicitly teach them and remind them how to interact appropriately online. Remind them that every comment, post or profile has some form of digital DNA attached to it.

Don't introduce social media prematurely- giving kids access to social media before the legal age (most social media platforms have a minimum age limit of 13 years), or before they're emotionally and socially ready to cope with the demands of social media is incredibly risky, as they'll instantly be exposed to unfamiliar people. They can also start to seek external validation from social media by posting sexually explicit, inappropriate or risky content just to gain likes and comments.

Encourage them to come to you if they have a problem- we know that many kids are subject to cyber-bullying or see inappropriate content online and whilst they know they should report it to a parent or teacher, most don't because they're worried about the consequences. Many kids fear that they'll be digitally-amputated if they go to a parent or teacher for help. So it's vital that we have open and ongoing conversations with our kids and remind them that they can come to you with any concerns.





HOW kids use screens (Vision).

Given that kids are spending increasing amounts of time with digital devices and often at younger and younger ages, it's vital that parents ensure that they're using them in healthy and correct ways. Incorrect, excessive or premature use of screens can potential harm a child's visual development.

Ophthalmologists and optometrists are reporting treating increasing numbers of children for myopia, which is near-sightedness, and computer vision syndrome. Early exposure, increasing time spent with screens and a lack of time in natural sunlight may put kids at increased risk of myopia. Unhealthy screen habits place children's eyes under many stressors at earlier ages and often for increasing periods of time.

The rapid adoption of tablet and mobile devices means that children are spending more time with backlit devices that emit blue light. Blue light is potentially harmful because it can penetrate to the back of the eye. Children's eyes are still developing and haven't yet developed the protective pigments that enable them to filter out some of the harmful blue light.

Healthy habits - top tips:

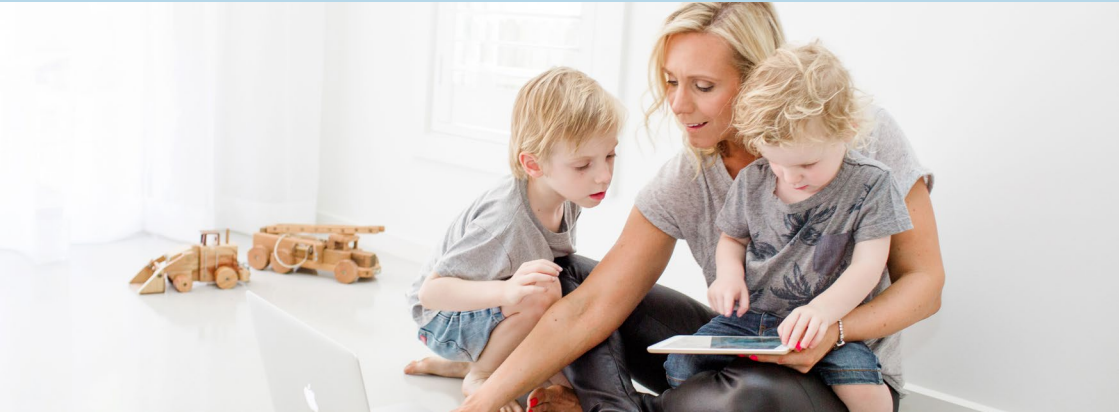
20-20-20-20 rule- Children need to take frequent breaks when using digital devices. Every 20 minutes a child uses a screen, remind them to take (at least) a 20-second break away from the screen, blink 20 times (this also helps to lubricate the eyes and prevent computer vision syndrome), to look at something at least 20-feet away (approximately 6 metres which helps to develop depth of vision) and to do something physically active for 20 seconds (star jumps, run on the spot, stretch to help the body calibrate and reposition so no unhealthy postures are adopted).

Encourage screen-free breaks outside- Time in natural sunlight is vital for healthy visual development. Children need 10-14 hours of natural sunlight per week for healthy eyes. Time in nature also gives eyes a much-needed break from looking at things close distance.

Minimise glare- Glare from light sources can place greater demands on the eyes and cause eye strain. Minimise external glare by closing blinds, shutters or curtains when using screens and avoid using digital devices in direct sunlight or directly underneath fluorescent lights.

Adjust display settings- The brightness of the screen should be comparable to the surrounding brightness of the room. Eyes should not have to struggle, squint or strain to read a screen.





HOW kids use screens (hearing)

Audiologists anecdotally report that they're treating increasing numbers of young children and adolescents for tinnitus (ringing in the ears) and noise-induced hearing loss (a permanent and serious condition). The World Health Organization (sic) estimates that 1.1 billion people worldwide could be diagnosed with noise-induced hearing loss (NIHL) because of unsafe use of personal music devices including mp3 players and smartphones, as well as exposure to noisy entertainment venues. NIHL can occur as a result of exposure to one loud noise, but it typically develops because of repeated exposure to loud sounds over time (as is the case for many kids incorrectly using headphones).

Children's consistent use of headphones above safe hearing levels is a huge threat to their hearing. Research confirms that use of headphones above 75dB can cause permanent hearing loss. However, many parents are surprised to learn that most commercial mp3 players can reach more than 130dB (contingent upon the model of mp3 player and brand of headphones used)! Hearing damage is cumulative, which is a potential concern as younger and younger children are now using headphones, meaning they may be susceptible to hearing loss in years to come- we don't yet have the long-term research to confirm this, as yet.

Healthy habits - top tips:

Volume control- Use the settings on the device to set maximum volume levels. Many products do not allow users to set a specific decibel level, but you can set maximum levels based on what 'sounds' suitable. Check with individual manufacturers as to how to do this.

Avoid using ear-bud style headphones- children should use noise-cancelling, ear-muff type headphones (it's not essential that they're the expensive branded headphones that tweens will insist you buy them) as these cancel some of the background noise, making it easier for children to listen to the music without having competing background noise.

Limit time with headphones- children should not use headphones for more than 60 minutes/day.

No headphones when being a pedestrian- Young children don't typically develop their peripheral vision until they're 8 years of age so they rely more on their sense of hearing when crossing the road. If they're digitally-distracted with headphones, their sense of hearing is compromised.



HOW kids use screens (posture)

There are potential risks to kids' physical health if they're using screens excessively or incorrectly. Tech-neck, gaming claw and text-thumb are the colloquial terms used to describe the serious physical ailments that can result from repetitive or incorrect use of screens.

Chiropractors, physiotherapists and occupational therapists are anecdotally reporting increasing numbers of children presenting with musculoskeletal problems. They attribute this increase to the early introduction of screens, the amount of time children are spending with screens and/or the adoption of unhealthy ergonomic postures.



Healthy habits - top tips:

Encourage regular breaks- Regular breaks away from screens prevent children's muscles from fatiguing. When they're tired children are more likely to adopt poor postures. If children have a break from using a screen and do something physically active in the interim, when they resume using a device they'll be more likely to adopt healthy ergonomic postures.

Teach correct ergonomics- how to adjust desks and work areas to suit their physical needs. For example, when using laptops and desktop computers their feet should be flat on the ground and their knees and spines should be at a 90° angle too. Use chairs with adjustable heights, tilts and lower-back support (or insert a cushion to provide extra support). With mobile devices like tablets and smartphones, encourage children to lie on their stomachs as this keeps their necks in a neutral position (and as an added bonus, they'll naturally reposition themselves as their elbows will tire). Another alternative with touchscreen devices is to use tear-shaped bean bags, as this allows them to bring devices to their eye level while maintaining their posture (just remember to switch the device to airplane mode first before popping it in their lap to reduce any possible risks associated with electromagnetic radiation).

Limit the weight of schoolbags carrying digital devices- many school-aged children are now carrying tablets and/or laptops in schools bags as part of Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) initiatives. Children shouldn't carry bags that are more than 10% of their body weight. So it's important that parents monitor the weight of kids' school bags and make adjustments where necessary.



About Dr Kristy

Dr Kristy Goodwin is one of Australia's leading children's digital wellness experts (and a mum who's also experienced her children's techno-tantrums!). Kristy is the author of **Raising Your Child in a Digital World**, speaker, researcher and media commentator who de-bunks the myths about young kids and technology. Kristy translates the research into essential, practical and digestible information for parents, educators and health professionals trying to navigate the digital terrain.

Kristy delivers talks to parents, educators and health professionals throughout Australia about how technology is changing childhood and adolescence. If you're interested in finding out more about Kristy's seminars or to enquire about her speaking to your community visit her website or email her team via enquiry@drkristygoodwin.com



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