parenting ideas

INSIGHTS

There are better questions than 'How much screen time?'

'How much time should my child be allowed in front of a screen?' 'What about my five-year-old?' 'How long should I let my 13-year-old play Fortnite?' As a digital wellness and online safety expert, these are some of the questions I am most frequently asked.

They are certainly all relevant questions as parents fumble about trying to make rules and boundaries around their child's screen time habits. Obviously we all want to prevent the screen time obsessions we hear about in the media. We want to maintain a sense of control over our child's screen time habits.

As the digital world is far more complex and nuanced, our approach and questions need to mirror those complexities. We can certainly apply some time limits, and prescribe times when devices are not to be used. But it's wise to ask more pertinent questions to help us make more informed choices about the rules and boundaries we set up for our kids.

In particular, there are three important questions we should ask. These are:

1.'What is my child doing with his or her screen?'

There's no point worrying about how long your child is on a screen if you have no idea what they are doing when they're on it. Handing a child a device without guidance can lead to a vast range of different experiences. One child might spend the time researching the dietary habits of a green tree frog, or learning how to make the best paper plane to fly with a younger sibling. Another might watch a funny cat video, or even watch hard-core pornography. These are vastly different ways to spend their time online.

2.'What is the effect of the screens on my child?'

Is your child enjoying socialising online because it allows them deeper connections with their friends, provides them with support and gives them a sense of belonging? Alternatively, is he or she feeling excluded or being cyberbullied? A child's online experiences can help or hinder wellbeing. If online activities lead to tantrums when transitioning to offline tasks, or even aggression then it may be a sign that online use is having a negative impact.

3.'What is my child missing out on?'

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Children and teens benefit from involvement in a wide range activities so they can maintain optimum physical, social and emotional development. Spending time outdoors, enjoying active sports, connecting face-to-face with friends, sharing family meals, keeping up with homework and assisting with household chores are the types of activities that most experts agree are beneficial for children and young people. If the amount of time a child spends on digital devices excludes him or her from these types of activities then it can be considered excessive. If this is the case, then it's reasonable to expect that, with your assistance, your child begins to place some limits on their screen use.

Digital devices present new challenges for parents to manage. As a result parents need to shift the focus away from simply managing a child's time to helping him or her successfully integrate screen use into their daily life in ways that support learning, development and wellbeing.

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Martine is a parent educator and a youth and family counsellor who speaks, writes and consults on the challenges faced by families in the modern world. Martine has a Masters in Counselling and a background in secondary education. Through her personal and professional work with families raising children, she recognises the important role technology plays in the social and emotional wellbeing of young people. Martine is an accredited speaker with the Office of the eSafety Commissioner.