



A Dozen Tips to Help your Family Thrive in the Digital Age

1. Set respectful rules of engagement.

Sharing pictures of your kids takes control away from them. Same with updates about them in your Facebook, Instagram or Twitter feed. Luckily, there's a simple rule: Ask their permission! Asking your kids before sharing [teaches them that you respect them and their privacy](#). What's more, this practice brings up the opportunity to discuss boundaries with your children.

Set up some rules. Every single member of the family should have be on the same page about posting or sharing images of other family members. For example, older siblings should not share images or video of younger siblings. Parents have told me that implementing this simple practice of asking before sharing a picture brought an immediate and measurable increase in family trust!

Click [here](#) to share this advice on Facebook. Sign up [here](#) for my newsletter!

2. Find other ways to share.

Social media is great for keeping people up to date on your family. But think of who's on the other end of your shares. Your child's grandparents may have an unlimited appetite for photos of your family but your high school friends and work buddies might have a more modest interest.

There's an easy way to solve this. Find alternatives to social media for your family album. Try using [Dropbox](#), a password-protected website, or even good ol' e-mail to share more regularly with your "inner circle" of people who really do want those weekly pics! The rest of your online social circle will be grateful—if they haven't hidden you already.

You can create a [Family Social Media Policy](#) to help reinforce the different levels of sharing. Not using social media as your family album will yield a smaller digital footprint, which your children may appreciate one day. Plus, 600 people don't need daily pictures of your kids, I promise.

3. Create unplugged zones.

Not every room in your house has to have a TV or “second screen.” Make sure that the comfiest, coziest spots in your home are not taken over by media devices. Everyone needs some offline time. Check out the section on curating your home in [Screenwise: Helping Kids Thrive and Survive in Their Digital World](#).

When kids are older, let them get messy in the kitchen with their friends making pizza or cookies. For younger kids, make sure the dress up clothes, board games, new puzzles, and art-making supplies are as accessible as the TV, gaming devices, and tablets. Stock an accessible kitchen drawer with fun supplies and change them out regularly so your children will be surprised. For bigger kids, collect a box of recycled stuff that they can make things out of. Accessible musical instruments are great too. You can even take a trip to the beach or the park without your phone--just try it! If that makes you really nervous, check in with yourself about your own connection anxiety.

These unplugged times offer different kinds of of engagement--and this variation and the ability to take pleasure in a variety of activities will support your child. Perhaps there are pastimes that you have also let go of in the smartphone era. See if any of them come back for you if you cultivate them once again.

4. Promote creativity over consumption

Encourage your kids to be creators—not just consumers. How do you do this? Make stuff together, online and offline. In the digital realm, you can make a family scrapbook, design a videogame, do a digital photography enabled scavenger hunt, make a photo calendar for grandma, write some code in [Scratch](#) or make a horror movie on YouTube.

Offline, build a model of your dream city, make some cookies, sew a patch on your favorite jeans. Take your kids to Maker Faire. Prepare a multi-course meal with “what’s in the house.” Send them to camp to learn to build robots or design costumes, or find broken things in your house and learn to fix them from YouTube videos.

Get some fun ideas here: [No Time For Flashcards](#) and here [Tinker Lab](#).

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5. Mentor more than you monitor.

If you want to know what your kids are doing on their devices, start by talking with them. Have empathy for their experiences, and ask them what would make their texting and social media encounters better, easier or less stressful. [If you are tempted to use spy software to see what they are doing, consider having them give you a tour of their accounts as alternative.](#) Before they download a new social application such as Instagram, have them show you how other kids are using the app, and ask them to show you both positive and negative examples. It is a great way to hear them explain their own discernment process.

If you feel you must spy, disclose that you have access to their communication and explain why. Be sure you are being honest with yourself about what you are looking for before you start reading their messages, etc.

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6. Structure transitions to minimize screen-monster syndrome.

Use habits and routines to minimize post-screentime tantrums and flip-outs. Don't let screentime be the unstructured time that fits in around everything else. If your kids love Minecraft, let them have specific "Minecraft times." Try making a calendar. Plan what they will do AFTER their immersive screen experience, too. If they turn into "screen monsters" and act unpleasant when it is time to unplug, let them know you'll be dialing back their time in 15 minute increments until you find the increment that does not transform them into monsters. Let them take some responsibility for their mood and behavior.

Note: Don't be surprised if your children or spouse let you know when you have become a screen monster. Make sure to take responsibility for your mood and behavior!

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7. Stay digitally informed.

You need to know what's out there. That game your child is obsessed with—is it age appropriate? In line with your values? Yes, there is a lot of dreck out there, but you will also find some true gems. Apps that allow kids to be more creative or design their own experience are more engaging and support more learning than simple "flashcard apps."

Luckily, there's so much great information available. You can follow bloggers that critically evaluate apps/shows and games for kids. Here are two that I love: A Mighty Girl (great recs for all genders) and [geekmom](#). You can also find tons of helpful reviews at [Parent Choice Awards](#). Also, you can use social media to check in with your community about the best and worst apps out there. When your kids love a game or app, especially as they get older, ask them to identify what makes a good game. This can feed their critical consciousness and support creativity over consumption! (see number 4!).

On the social media front, in addition to many online sources, ask young adults in your life: a just-out-of-college colleague, or college-aged niece or nephew can give you a tutorial on Instagram, Vine or [whatever the latest, greatest app](#) might be.

[Click to share](#) my advice on dealing with unfamiliar apps.

8. Be present.

Try not to spend too much time "[Alone Together](#)." In her critique of our relationship with technology, Dr. Sherry Turkle describes families and friends eating lunch while their attention is immersed in their smartphones. Notice if your family is spending lots of time "Alone Together," all in the same room, but with each of you on his or her own "second screen." [Kids in my workshops designed apps](#) to help keep their parents focused on real life!

Be the parent that has unplugged breakfasts and dinners with your family. That means you, too! Your boss can wait. Many of us are checking email hundreds of times a day. Productivity experts and family experts agree—this doesn't help your productivity OR your relationships. If you text at dinner, don't expect your tween or teen to leave their phone somewhere else or turn it off. Model focused conversation, eye-contact, and turning off all devices during family time, otherwise it will be very difficult to get your teen or tween to unplug and be present...ever.

9. Teach your child to how to evaluate media.

The variety of media available today offers a lot of teaching opportunities. Select the right ones, in the right moments, to open up an issue for further discussion. It's all in how you approach it—you don't want to rain on their parade!

For instance, engage with them about stereotypes in media. Instead of insisting, "That show is sexist," ask them what they think about the men and women characters. How are characters of different ethnicities portrayed?

Don't overdo it. If you use every opportunity with every show or game, your children will not enjoy watching/playing with you. But getting them to notice these things as part of a deeper discussion of issues like racism and sexism will make them informed, critical viewers. You may wish to stock your media library with stories with women and/or people of color as the hero. Don't count on broadcasters to do this for you. As an example, [A Mighty Girl](#) is a great resource, and not just for parents raising girls!

10. Use digital training wheels.

Any form of communication offers challenges—the digital world just adds more layers of complexity. It takes time and practice to learn the best methods.

Before you give your kids their own email account, let them try using a "family email" account (e.g. Teng Holland family@emailprovider.com). Make sure that your child—and *their friends*—know that it goes to everyone in your family. This centralized account works a bit like having a landline in the kitchen: You are not spying, but it is a SHARED, PUBLIC account.

Before you give your kids their own phones, make sure they know how to answer the phone properly, use the right salutations, make a call, and leave a message politely. Have them practice and demonstrate these skills before you buy them their own device.

Last but definitely not least: make sure they know the [rules of texting](#), as well.

[Click here](#) to share these helpful rules on Facebook. Your friends will thank you. Remember, every other parent is trying to figure this out, too.

11. Teach how to live in an unfiltered world.

Unfortunately, there's a lot of stuff out there that's simply not appropriate for children. Each family has a different set of values, but you are sure to run into something that you won't allow in your house. Filtering will only get you so far. "Nanny apps" might seem attractive but they can't protect your child from everything. [Ducky Tube](#) is fine for your four year old, but your seven year old will want that origami video from Youtube! Or the latest dance trend on Tik Tok. Even if you filter the Internet at home, what happens outside the home? Your home isn't the only place your children will access the Internet. Don't delude yourself--it is an unfiltered world out there.

Address this directly. Don't leave them alone to surf at very tender ages, and use the together time as teaching moments. Talk about what they can search for, and what they shouldn't. Show them how to detect an inappropriate site—before they click on a link. By middle school or sooner, you may find that filtering gets in the way of things your child needs to do research for homework. If you choose to filter, make sure you use one where you, the parent, can selectively unblock sites as needed.

Bottom line: you are smarter than the filter. And by middle school (if not sooner) so are they.

12. Ditch the distractions.

Doing homework in the [presence of distractions](#) is no easy task. There are endless distractions, right there on the very screen your child is using to work on her assignments.

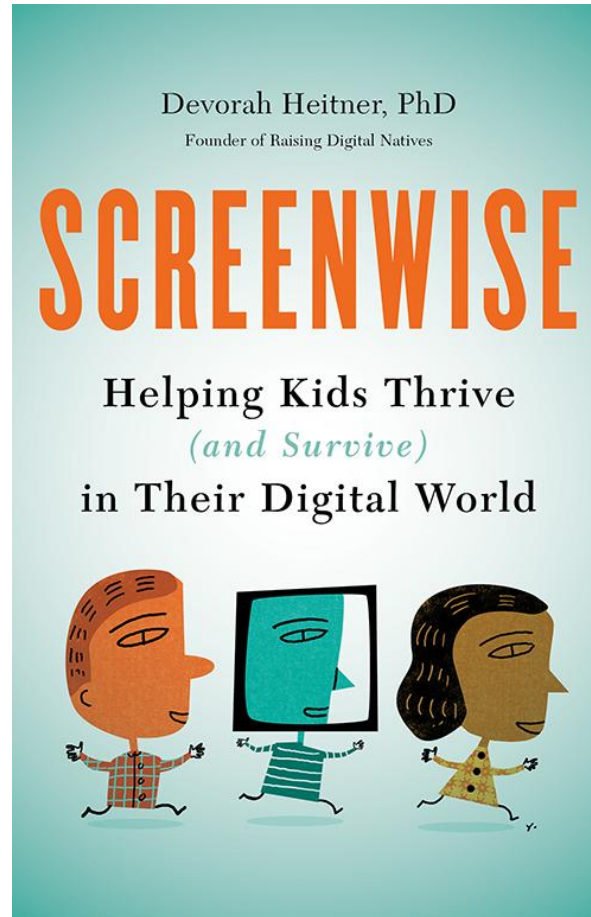
Many parents tell me that wifi makes completing homework take longer than it should. So, how much of your child's homework can be done unplugged? Can you turn off the device's wifi—or even the home wifi—and still get your work done? Find out how much connectivity is truly required and then break study hours up into “unplugged” and “plugged” study hall. Unplugged homework means no smartphone in hand—put it away until “plugged” time. Homework will get completed much faster. You can model this for your child when you need to block distractions to complete important work.

Also, as your child gets older, teach them how to use productivity apps like [Anti-Social](#) to limit their social media time or [Freedom](#) to temporarily shut off alerts and reminders during homework time. Get them to take responsibility for managing distractions before college. At least one former college professor (me) thanks you very much!

I hope you found these tips useful! I'd love to hear about your experiences with implementing them.

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