

# How to Reset Your Family's Screen Time After the Pandemic



By [Maryam Abdullah](#) | [Greater Good Magazine](#)

According to a [survey](#) in the United States in March 2020, over 80% of parents lost child care due to the pandemic's closures of schools and child care centers—and around [two-thirds](#) of them were [parents](#) who continued working during the pandemic.

At the same time, a [recent study](#) highlights that this child care pressure coincided with a dramatic spike in children's media streaming across the country. Because parents were without support, and many were experiencing [stress](#) and poor mental health, using screens might have been their last resort. In these circumstances, “warning parents about screen

time may not produce much beyond parental guilt,” explain study authors Joshua K. Hartshorne, professor of psychology at Boston College, and his colleagues.

Another [recent study](#), of parents in California’s Central Valley, also highlighted the conflict that parents were experiencing around their children’s screen use during the pandemic. “I would say it’s been negative for us just all the way across the board,” said one mother. Another mother explained, “Well, I would honestly not like that much [screen] time but then I say, well, what else can they do?”

While parents also recognized the potential benefits of screens, like helping kids stay connected with friends and learn about technology, they voiced concerns about how much time their children were on screens, its “addictive” nature, and how it reduced their children’s physical activity.

Screen time has also been an issue for adults during the pandemic. With limited coping options, [adults turned to screens](#) during stay-at-home orders, with a sharp rise in watching TV and using social media. But people who changed their habits during COVID—by watching more TV shows and movies and using more social media like Facebook and Instagram—tended to be less happy.

Now that U.S. cities have opened back up again and schools will likely welcome students in person in the fall, you may wonder whether now is the time to help your family recalibrate how screens fit into your life. But it can feel overwhelming to begin to nurture new habits. If you want to change your family’s screen use patterns, consider these strategies to take small steps forward.

## **Self-reflect**

Parents who spend more time on screens [tend](#) to have children who do the same. While your first reflex may be to want to

help your children, gently ask yourself: How are you feeling about your own screen use?

Even prior to the pandemic, [research](#) showed that moms and dads turn to their smartphones for different reasons during stressful parenting moments. Many parents say that they use their phone for a virtual escape—to mentally and emotionally get away from a hard time with their child. For example, “He was crying and yelling and so I went to my room and shut the door and got on my phone to distract myself from the situation I was in,” describes one parent. Parents who take virtual escapes tend to have greater parenting stress, be more distracted by their phones, feel guiltier using their phones, and have a harder time co-parenting.

But parents also [use their phones](#) for real-time social support, like asking another person for help on how to handle a situation with their child. Parents who sought out social support with their phones tended to have better co-parenting and less guilt when they used their phones. However, this shouldn't be the take always, and engage your child in a social group or club can also be one way to release stress and see your child develops social skills and proper connections with everyone. By visiting [MetroQueens.org](http://MetroQueens.org), you will learn more about building your child's confidence and good character.

And when parents need in-the-moment tips, some use their phones to search for topics like how to communicate with their toddler or activities to do with their child. Sometimes parents use their phones for “checking themselves”—to calm down so they don't cause harm. One mother explained, “My child was throwing a god awful fit and I was trying to calm down so I wouldn't scream at him.” In addition, parents engage in parallel media use when they're using their phone at the same time their child is on screens, like checking emails while kids are watching YouTube.

These findings highlight that not all screen time is harmful, of course. Understanding your own patterns and deciding where you might want to change are good first steps.

## Try self-compassion

Perfection is an unattainable ideal when it comes to parenting at any time, but it's a particularly destructive aspiration during a pandemic. If your inner critic is being vocal about your children's screen use, then reply back with [self-compassion](#).

Self-compassion can be a healthier way of dealing with stress, both in general and more specifically around screen use. First, rather than berating yourself when you feel overwhelmed, try to be tender and warm, just as a dear friend would be toward you. Then, remember that you're not alone in experiencing hardships as a parent—in fact, most parents have been under tremendous strain this past year. Finally, practice mindfulness by noticing your thoughts, emotions, and sensations in the present moment with openness and curiosity rather than criticism.

Not only does practicing self-compassion [alleviate parenting guilt and shame](#), it also [boosts parents' resilience and hope](#) during hard times.

## Take a balanced view

“People use language to make sense of themselves and the world around them,” explains researchers Rebekah Willett and Nathan Wheeler from the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

In a [recent study](#), they interviewed parents and analyzed the way they talk about their children's screen use in their daily lives. For example, one parent talked about “policing” her children's screen use and “picking her battles.” Willett and

Wheeler found that all of the parents in their study repeated: “negative scripts about media which incite parents to tightly control their children’s media consumption, as well as contradictions about the effects of media on children.”

In their recent book, [Parenting for a Digital Future: How Hopes and Fears about Technology Shape Children’s Lives](#), researchers Sonia Livingstone and Alicia Blum-Ross warn against exaggerating the problems around screen use, being an adversary to your children over it, and hyper-focusing solely on how much time children are on screens. Instead, they share a more holistic way of understanding children’s screen use across three dimensions: content—what they are watching on their screens; contexts—where, how, when, and with what they are using screens; and connections—how screen use is nurturing or undermining their relationships.

In Livingstone and Blum-Ross’s [recommendations to parents](#), they offer these reflection questions to evaluate whether your child’s screen use is really a problem:

- *Is my child physically healthy and sleeping enough?*
- *Is my child connecting socially with family and friends (in any form)?*
- *Is my child engaged with and achieving in school?*
- *Is my child pursuing interests and hobbies (in any form)?*
- *Is my child having fun and learning in their use of digital media?*

*If the answer to the above questions is more or less ‘yes,’ then it may be that parents could consider whether their fears over digital media use are well-founded. If the answer to these questions is more or less ‘no,’ then these particular parents and children may need to put in place regulations and restrictions in order to address problematic use.*

# Collaborate with kids on-screen use goals

Researchers Meghan Owenz and Blaine Fowers recently developed a [framework](#) to help families improve their screen use by setting goals that promote meaning- and growth-oriented well-being.

First, they suggest, set “approach” goals that focus on good outcomes that you want to reach. Approach goals are different from “avoidance” goals, which have to do with refraining from doing something negative. For example, rather than setting a goal to limit screen time (avoidance), set a goal for outdoor play (approach), which would naturally take the place of time spent using screens. Approach goals nurture positive feelings and thoughts, are more effective and easier to stick to, and cultivate well-being. Some areas that parents might want to set goals around include social activities, play, outdoor activities, independent work, and literacy.

Next, instead of pursuing goals alone, work on them together as a family. Parents often limit screens by setting a rule, without involving their children in the decision. One problem with individual goals like this is that they can lead to conflict between parents and kids. A shared goal, in contrast, could be doing art together or even doing parallel activities, like working on chores. Shared goals bring parents and children together because they build teamwork.

Finally, aim for goals where the process of achieving the goal is beneficial in and of itself. A goal of reducing screen time by making kids agree to screen contracts may teach kids to follow rules, but not much else. One alternative is to choose goals where the steps toward the goal build your child’s capacities and help them realize their potential. For example, you can develop [family reading goals](#) that include storytime as a shared parent-child activity or listening to audiobooks as

an independent activity. Reading together as a family and having conversations about books is not only a path to [reducing screen time](#) but may also foster a love of reading and [improve children's "theory of mind"](#)—the ability to understand others' thoughts and feelings.

As we try to shift our everyday screen habits, parents can use a balanced approach for their kids and themselves. “Recommendations about children’s technology use are about best practices, and in reality, it is not feasible for all families and educators to follow them all the time,” explain Brenda Hassinger-Das, professor of psychology at Pace University, and her colleagues in a [recent in-depth research review](#) of children and screens. Because there isn’t a one-size-fits-all solution for screen use, tackling screen challenges will require a generous dose of creativity, patience, and family teamwork.

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