


Dear OU Parenting,

My son spends a lot of time in front of the screen. With the summer approaching, I'm nervous that he'll be spending even more time on the computer. How much is too much, and should I set the limits even though it usually creates a big blowup between us? F.M.

Michal Silverstein, MSc**Dear F.M.,**


Although you didn't mention the age of your son there are certain facts that apply to almost everyone across the board. I will start with general information and move on to address specific age groups.

Most parents can recognize the signs that their child has watched too much. They often look dazed, irritable, sluggish, and bored. Although there has been awareness of excessive screen time for several years, we must acknowledge the recent spike due to the pandemic. According to research, screen time in adolescence doubled since the beginning of the pandemic. This includes only recreational use such as gaming, social media, and surfing the web, and not educational use. Whereas adolescence pre pandemic spent four hours a day on screens, they are now on screens nearly eight hours a day. Seeing this in context

is important. Our children's lives have changed drastically in the past two years and screen time is only one indication.

In general, studies have found that kids who are on screens more than two hours a day scored lower on language and thinking skills. And kids who were on screens for more than seven hours showed a thinning of the brains' cortex, which manages critical thinking and reasoning. Basically, children who aren't interacting enough with their surroundings, and aren't communicating enough with real people through dialogue, are suffering. Children learn mostly by exploring their surroundings so when that is inhibited it can negatively impact development, especially at a young age when the brain is developing rapidly.

Research has also revealed that blue light which is emitted from screens inhibits the production of melatonin which can delay sleep. In addition, playing computer games makes the brain more alert, and activated and therefore it's harder to fall asleep. Kids are turning to screens as an escape, avoiding feelings of anxiety, depression, and emptiness. When a person is on a device the pleasure sensors in the brain are activated, which reinforces more watching and can lead to screen addictions. There's a correlation between high levels of stress, sleep deprivation, and social problems due to excessive screen time.

There's a clear negative correlation

between excessive screen time and our children's wellbeing. Having said that, we also know that screens have become almost an appendage to our youth- an extension of themselves. Considering this reality, how do we as parents, guide our children towards healthy habits? How much can we or should we intervene?

Although I will offer some tips and strategies, this topic is vast and cannot be covered in one article.

Communication- No matter how old your child is you should communicate openly about screen use. For a young child (ages 6-12) you should set time limits (up to 2 hours a day), restrict content, use filters, and put the screen in a public place so you can supervise and watch with them sometimes. Explain that this is all part of your job as a parent to keep them safe and healthy. Considering how screen time impacts your child, it's worth setting boundaries even if it causes an argument. Depending on the age you can share more details such as the positives and negatives of screen usage. Be curious.

As they emerge into early teens you should engage them in conversation and acknowledge the struggle of navigating social media and address the benefits and drawbacks. It's very important to avoid being judgmental, and instead encourage exploration together, to decide what limits are reasonable and what can be agreed upon. If you create this open dialogue, they will know they can turn to you to ask your advice regarding content or trends on social media. The feeling that teenagers have today when they aren't on social media for a while can cause anxiety and a strong feeling of FOMO- fear of missing out.

Even adult children in their late teens early 20's can use some guidance to navigate struggles and confusion caused by social media.

Be a role model of your use of devices. Show that you can limit your usage. Be present when you're with your children and put your phone away. Also have specific times when phones are put away such as mealtime, bedtime, or family time. Less screen time is linked to stronger family and friend relationships.

Trust your child or teen. If you have open communication, they will involve you in their lives. It is not recommended to check their phones and invade their privacy. This usually leads to a cycle of lying, deception, and mistrust.

Try to enforce a healthy lifestyle consisting of adequate sleep, exercise and eating a healthy diet. The more time spent outdoors the less time your child will be on a device.

Being a parent during this time is challenging for many reasons, one of which is the excessive use of screens. As we guide our children toward healthy habits, we must remember that being connected to the Torah, the real source of meaning and perspective in our lives is key to navigating this struggle.

Be'hatzlacha ■

I would like to thank Joy Epstein, MSW, highly experienced individual and family psychotherapist for sharing her wisdom and experience with me on this topic.

Michal Silverstein has a MS in educational psychology and counseling. She facilitates parenting workshops in and around Jerusalem and maintains a private practice.