

Outsmarting the Smart Screens:

A Parent's Guide to the Tools that are Here to Help



<http://www.bostonglobe.com/lifestyle/style/2013/09/05/age-ubiquitous-screens-some-exhausted-parents-have-stopped-policing/wruDFQbdLFG2KdCkCPLb7L/story.html>

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I heard that my toddler should not be allowed to watch any TV, but that just seems unrealistic.

I'm overwhelmed. What do I do?

The key is to limit the dose. But you don't have to do it alone! There are some very simple tools to help you, so you don't always have to feel like the bad guy.



Do you feel like it's hard to limit the amount of time your children spend in front of the television, computers, video games, smartphones, and tablets?

You are not alone. We hear this from parents all the time!

Technology can be educational and fun. But, children are spending more and more time in front of all these different screens. Too much exposure can have a negative effect on their eating habits, schoolwork, and sleep. Healthy kids need healthy limits on their screen time. In this packet, we share a few creative tips we've heard from parents about this issue, and guide you through some tools that may be useful when you want help turning the screens off completely.

To use the technology we highlight in this guide, you don't need to be any sort of expert. We went out and found the tools that will make setting time limits **much, much easier**. They keep track of the time for you, so they become the bad guy—not you. We have tried them out ourselves, and we have seen that they are very simple and they actually work. Give them a try! They will help you avoid the homework time and bedtime battles, and leave more time for other activities, like craft projects and creative play.

Of course, every family is different. You are the best expert on what works for your children, not us! But, if you are a parent with children in afterschool or other out of school time programs, and you're feeling like you need help setting healthy screen time limits, **let us be your guide**.

One additional piece of advice: if you try some of these changes, give them time to work! You may be surprised how some initial resistance fades over time.

And you're not alone! As reported in the New York Times (Sept 10, 2014), when Steve Jobs was running Apple, he noted that in his household "we limit how much technology our kids use at home."

For some other tools and tip sheets, visit osnap.org or the Harvard School of Public Health Prevention Research Center website <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/prc/>.

We would like to say a special thank you to Kim DeAndrade from Cambridge Public Schools and Erin Gutierrez and a wonderful group of parents from the John M. Tobin Montessori School. Parents are the true experts, we are just here to help!

Ready to take a look at the tips and tools? Read on!

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Frequently Asked Questions

Are there any ways I can use the TV without actually watching TV?

Parents have shared with us some creative ideas for using the TV other than actually watching TV. Many new TVs connect to the Internet. If you want to have the TV on in the background so it doesn't feel so taboo, you might stream music or videos on it. One parent we spoke with suggested streaming a guided mediation video or a video of a sunrise!

I'm not very tech savvy. Will I be able to figure out how to use the tools in this guide?

Yes. The tools highlighted in this guide are very simple to use. If you can plug something into the wall, you can use the tools in this guide!

What tips do you have for parents of preschool children?

It is easiest to set healthy limits on your children's screen time when they are very young. To help your children form healthy habits early, we recommend that young children do not have their own cell phones or TV in their bedrooms. The tools in this guide will help you set healthy limits on the time they spend in front of TVs, computers, tablets, and cell phones.

What tips do you have for parents of elementary school children?

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends a limit of 2 hours per day of screen time for children in school. (This doesn't include using a computer for homework.) It's even more important to make sure that children are not doing their homework and watching TV at the same time. Keeping a TV out of your children's bedroom will help you avoid the bedtime battle. One tip parents shared with us is letting children earn TV time with tasks like reading. The tools in this guide can help you make these changes! For more information, visit http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/84/2012/11/take_control_of_tv.pdf.

My children are teenagers. Is it just too late to set limits?

If you're just starting to have the conversation about screen time limits with your teenager, you may be feeling like it's too late to make any changes. The tools in this guide will still be a big help. Start by talking with your teenager about a reasonable limit on screen time. Try using the tools in this guide to help your child stick to these limits. Limiting screen time will help your child learn important life skills, like time management.

What are some activities that my children can do instead of watching TV?

Less media time means more time for children to be creative and physically active after school! One parent shared the idea of listening to Sparkle Stories (<http://www.sparklestories.com/>). For some ideas on healthy activities to fill out-of-school time, visit <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/prc/projects/food-fun/>.

How do all the members of my household get on the same page about screen time?

Media in the household affects everyone. It's important to have a conversation with all the members of your household about how important it is to be healthy role models for your children.

Tools to Limit Screen Time: One Page Cheat Sheet

Tools to Limit Television Time

The Tool: TV Timer BOB

How it Works: Instead of plugging your TV into the wall, you plug it into TV Timer BOB. You choose a daily or weekly allowance TV for each child.

Let's say you let each of your children watch one hour of TV per day. When your daughter wants to watch her favorite show, she types her code into the machine, and the timer starts counting down.

When the hour is up, TV Timer BOB automatically shuts off the TV!

The Cost: \$79.99

Tools to Limit Computer Time

The Tool: Parental Controls

How it Works: On an Apple computer, parental controls are located under **System Preferences**. You can set up time limits for weekdays and weekends. There is also a "Bedtime" section where you can choose specific hours when you child can't log in.

On a PC computer, go to **Control Panel**. Under **User Accounts and Family Safety**, select "**Set up parental controls for any user.**" You can use parental controls to set up time limits for weekdays and weekends. You can also choose specific hours, and during these hours your child will not be able to log in.

The Cost: Free

Tools to Limit Smartphone Time

The Tool: Lockwork

How it Works: For Android Smartphones, Lockwork will let you block out certain hours when you want to turn your child's smartphone into a regular phone. They can make emergency calls, but they can't text or browse the Internet.

Right now, there is no way to set time limits on an iPhone® or iPad®. But, you can set up parental controls to choose what parts of the phone or tablet your child can access. To set up parental controls, go to **Settings**. Under Settings, go to **General**. Under General, go to **Restrictions**. (A note of caution: if you turn apps off and then turn them back on, they are reorganized in alphabetical order on the phone.)

The Cost: Free

Tools to Limit Video Game Time

The Tool: TV Timer BOB

How it Works: Instead of plugging your TV into the wall, you plug it into TV Timer BOB. You choose a daily or weekly allowance TV for each child.

Let's say you let each of your children watch one hour of TV per day. When your daughter wants to watch her favorite show, she types her code into the machine, and the timer starts counting down.

When the hour is up, TV Timer BOB starts beeping and will automatically shut off the video game. **To prevent possible damage to the hard drive, shut the video game down safely when the beeping begins!**

The Cost: \$79.99

Tools to Limit Television Time

Television

- The idea behind **TV Timer BOB** (Nextphase, Inc.) is very simple. Each child has a separate account with a four-number passcode that you can choose together. Next, you set a television time allowance for each account. It can be a daily allowance or a weekly allowance. Let's say you choose 2 hours per day for your daughter.
- When she wants to watch television, she turns on the television and enters in her passcode. The two hours starts counting down. When the 2 hours is up, the television automatically shuts off.
- Let's say there are certain hours that you don't want your child to be able to watch television, like at bedtime. You can use TV Timer BOB to set up "blocks." During these times, your child will not be able to turn on the television.
- TV Timer BOB costs \$79.99 at Amazon (go to <http://www.amazon.com> and search for "TV Timer BOB") or at Family Safe Media (http://www.familysafemedia.com/tv_timer_hopscotch_bob.html). We know this is not cheap, but could make a big difference. (Just think about eliminating the daily hassle of shutting off the TV – Bob does it for you!)

Cable

- Cable **parental controls** vary depending on your provider. Check the website or call your provider to review options for parental controls.
- As just a couple of examples, with Time Warner Cable® (<http://www.timewarnercable.com/en/residential-home/tv/features/parental-controls.html>) and DIRECTV® (https://support.directv.com/app/answers/detail/a_id/1766), you can block out programming that you do not want your child to access. You can set up these blocks by specific television shows, by the rating of the show, or by certain times. Similar features are available with Comcast and Fios. But these do not limit time on screen.



<http://ecx.images-amazon.com/images/I/31tSK2QuJL.jpg>

Tools to Limit Computer Time

Desktop and Laptop

- Setting up **parental controls** on your child’s desktop or laptop computer is the best way to limit your child’s computer time.
- For **Apple® computers**, parental controls are located under **System Preferences**. You can use parental controls to set up time limits for weekdays and weekends. There is also a “Bedtime” section. In this section, you can choose specific hours, and during these hours your child will not be able to log in.
- To set up parental controls on a **PC laptop or desktop**, go to **Control Panel**. Under **User Accounts and Family Safety**, select “**Set up parental controls for any user.**” You can use parental controls to set up time limits for weekdays and weekends. You can also choose specific hours, and during these hours your child will not be able to log in.
- Parental controls are automatically included with laptops and desktops, so there is no extra cost.



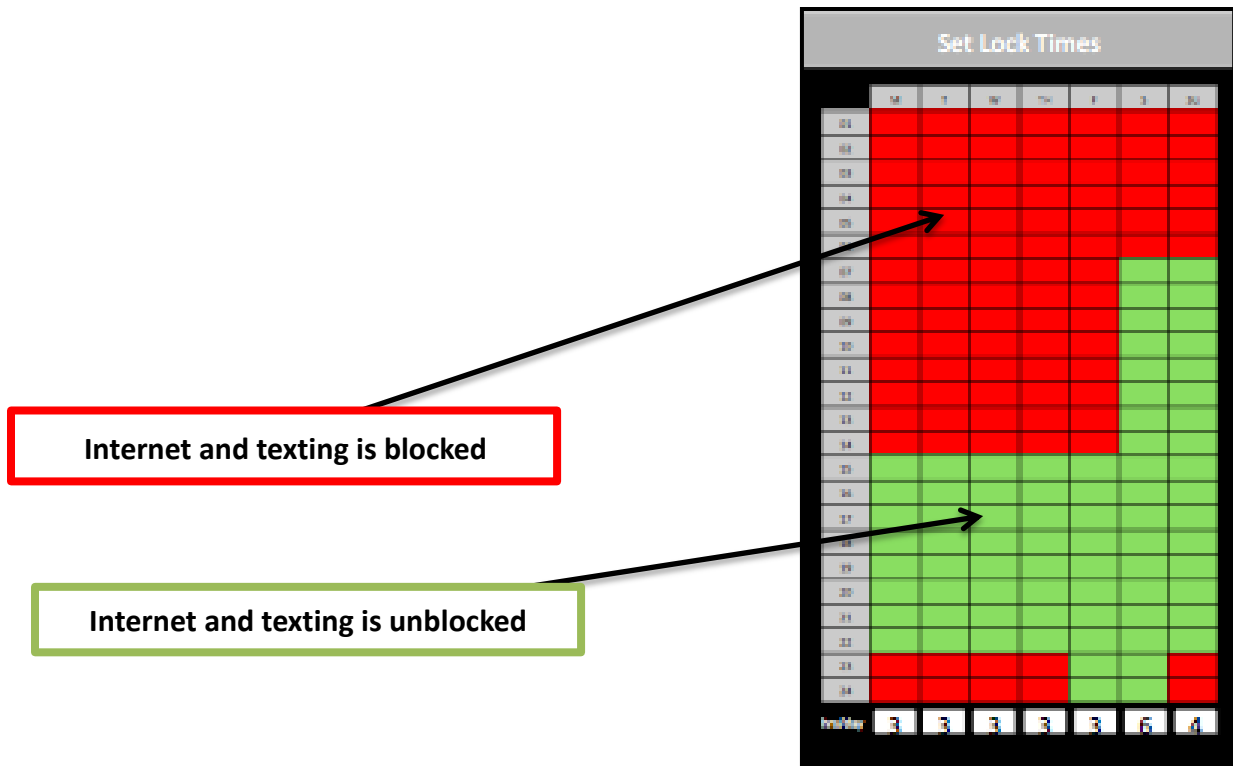
Parental controls let you manage your children’s use of this computer, the applications on it, and the Internet.

To change parental control settings, click the lock icon to enter the name and password of an administrator.

Tools to Limit Smartphone and Tablet Time

Android™

- [Lockwork](#) is an app for your Android smartphone or tablet, created by Jeff Gortmaker and Jake Burchard. It is currently in beta and is coming soon to Google Play™. This app locks the device during the times you don't want your children to use the device, such as during homework time or bedtime.
- When the phone is locked, your child can still make calls to a list of VIP numbers.
- For each day of the week, you can choose the hours that it will function as a smartphone and the hours that it will function as a regular telephone. When the phone is acting as a regular phone, your child can use it to make phone calls, but cannot text or access apps or the Internet.



Apple®

- Currently, there is no way to set time limits on an iPhone® or iPad®. You can, however, set up **parental controls** on these devices. Parental controls will allow you to choose what parts of the phone or tablet your child can access.
- To set up parental controls on an iPhone or iPad, go to **Settings**. Under Settings, go to **General**. Under General, go to **Restrictions**. **A note of caution: when apps are turned back on, they are reorganized in alphabetical order.**
- The **Restrictions** section of the phone allows you to turn off certain parts of the phone. For example, you can block Safari. However, you cannot block the Internet completely or turn off texting.



Tools to Limit Video Game Time

Console (PlayStation®, Xbox®, Wii™)

- The idea behind **TV Timer BOB** (Nextphase, Inc.) is very simple. Each child has a separate account with a four-number passcode that you can choose together. Next, you set a television time allowance for each account. It can be a daily allowance or a weekly allowance. Let's say you choose 2 hours per day for your daughter.
- When she wants to watch television, she turns on the television and enters in her passcode. The two hours starts counting down. When the 2 hours is up, TV Timer BOB starts beeping, and will automatically shut the TV off. **To prevent possible damage to the hard drive, shut the video game down safely when the beeping begins!**
- Let's say there are certain hours that you don't want your child to be able to watch television, like at bedtime. You can use TV Timber BOB to set up "blocks." During these times, your child will not be able to turn on the television.
- TV Timer BOB costs \$79.99 at Amazon (go to <http://www.amazon.com> and search for "TV Timer BOB") or at Family Safe Media (http://www.familysafemedia.com/tv_timer_hopscotch_bob.html). We know this is not cheap, but could make a big difference.

Some Science

How is it that these electronic controls can be so effective and efficient? It may help to think of the *transaction costs* involved in “selling” your child the idea of “limiting their screen time” (whether it be TV, computer, tablet, smartphone, videogame, etc.). Since the devices can be turned on anytime, you as a parent need to monitor their use, keep track of time, and then make sure the agreed upon rules are followed. Keeping track of time is really difficult - how can you monitor cell phone use late at night? All of this requires your effort – often every day – and if conflict arises, the time and emotional costs involved can be quite high. Hence we refer to these as *high transaction costs*.

To give an example, this used to be the case with purchasing books – there were high transaction costs. You often had to go to a bookstore, find the book (if not there, go to another store) and then purchase it. Now in a few clicks via the internet it can be ordered (at low cost) and delivered to your doorstep. Similar advances have led to lower transaction costs in other areas.

You can see the electronic controls we describe here as lowering the transaction costs of effective parenting to limit the dose of screen time for your children. This may be a rough analogy, but we know it works! There is some literature discussing transaction costs – Oliver Williamson won a Nobel Prize for work in this area, and there is some application to the area of the family. We see “outsmarting the smart screens” fitting within this tradition.

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