- Screen time / Child development

Scroll less, do more

The best ways to get children to put screens down and enjoy life offline.

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IN an ideal world, our children would spend school holidays playing outside and making the most of the glorious weather.



But the magnetic lure of devices like phones and tablets means they often remain indoors staring at a screen, whatever the conditions.

It's one of the top modern parenting problems – how do you persuade kids to spend less time staring at screens?

"Children should go outside, play, explore and recharge, but the reality is many will still spend plenty of time on their devices," says Ghislaine Bombusa, director of content and digital at Internet Matters, which supports children and young people's online safety.

"Rather than banning screens altogether, parents should focus on helping children build a healthy balance. That means encouraging plenty of offline activity while making sure screen time includes creativity, learning, connection and fun, not just scrolling through social feeds," she advises.

And it's not just older kids that use screens too much these days – according to the latest data from the Children of the 2020s study led by UCL, two-year-olds watch television, videos or other digital content for an average of two hours each day, which is double the daily screen time recommended by the World Health Organisation for this age group.

Kathy Leatherbarrow, early years consultant at early years training provider Eden Training Solutions, says: "School holidays can be a brilliant time for young children to spend more time outdoors, because it gives them space to move, explore, use their imagination and enjoy active play away from screens. But many parents know it's not always as simple as saying 'go outside'.

"If a child is used to turning to a tablet or TV during quiet moments, the switch to outdoor play can take a bit of encouragement."

Here's the experts' advice on how to get your kids off devices this school holidays:

Children are much more likely to put their devices down if there's something enjoyable waiting for them, Bombusa points out. "Whether it's a trip to the park, a bike ride, baking together or a water

fight
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in the garden, making offline activities appealing can naturally reduce time spent on screens," she says.
Leatherbarrow says making outdoor play feel easy and familiar often helps young children feel happy to choose it rather than staying inside on a device. "It might be a small bucket of garden toys by the door, a simple water-play activity, a nature hunt or a short walk to spot colours or leaves," she suggests.
"It doesn't need to be complicated - the aim is to give children something simple, safe and age-appropriate to start with, so getting outside feels like a natural option rather than a battle."
Instead of imposing rules, involve children in agreeing when devices will be used and when they'll be put away, Bombusa suggests.
"Children are much more likely to stick to boundaries they've helped create, especially as they get older," she points out.
Build regular breaks into the day by keeping mealtimes, family outings or the hour before bed free from devices. "These moments help children switch off and reconnect with the people around them," explains Bombusa.
Children follow the example of their parents, so a key aspect of getting them to put their devices down is for parents to do it first, says Hector Hughes, co-founder of the UKS first digital detox escape in nature, Unplugged.
"Screens have made being inside more compelling than being outside, which has removed the opportunity for children to connect with nature, embrace a little boredom and boost creativity," he says. "So put your own phone down first. Kids are watching what you do, so set the example. If you want them off screens, they need to see you off yours, too."
For the tween age group (eight to 12-year-olds), Bombusa says the trick is to give them some freedom while keeping clear boundaries. "This is a good age to review time limits together, use activity reports as conversation starters, and encourage them to split their device time between social connection, learning and creative use rather than just scrolling," she advises.
"It can also help to involve them in choosing summer challenges, for example, taking photos, filming a project or using an app to support a hobby, so devices become part of a wider mix."
Theurgetopickupa phone is usually just habit or boredom, says Hughes, who suggests that if there are other easy-to-reach items available it will encourage kids to stay away from their devices."leave alternatives out in the open, like cards, a book, something to make. Out of sight genuinely means out of mind," he says.
Hughes says an instant camera "scratches the same creative itch" as a phone camera but produces something physical which kids might enjoy instead of scrolling on their devices. "There's something quite exciting about only having one shot at a photograph," he points out.
Hughes explains that when guests arrive at Unplugged, they lock their phone in a box. "Try something similar at home," he suggests. "Use a designated box, set a specific time, and make it feel like an occasion or a challenge rather than just an enforced rule."
Bombusa says heavy-handed control can backfire with teenagers, so the emphasis should shift from restriction to collaboration and trust.

“Encourage them to selfmanage more, review settings together, and talk openly about how their online time makes them feel, especially if they’re vulnerable, anxious or using screens as an escape,” she advises. “The goal isn’t to remove devices, but to help teens use them in a more intentional way, balancing social connection, creativity and downtime with offline activity and sleep.”

Ultimately, it’s not realistic to think you’ll be able to stop kids using devices all summer, but Bombusa says it’s valuable for parents to help children of all ages to at least vary how they use them.

“Creative activities like making videos, coding, drawing digitally or learning a new skill provide much more value than spending all their time passively scrolling through feeds,” she adds. – PA Media/dpa

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