Helping fathers manage their children's screen time

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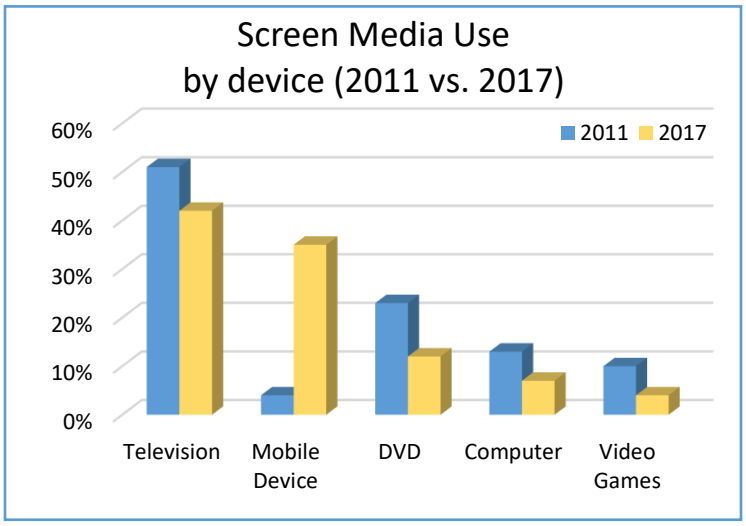
Why is managing screen time important?

"Screen time" refers to the amount of time a person spends watching or using an electronic device such as a television, smartphone, tablet, computer, or gaming console. Although television viewing still accounts for close to half of most people's screen time in the U.S., the use of mobile devices and digital media has grown exponentially over the last few years.[1]

In 2017, almost all children (98 percent) under the age of 9 lived in a household with at least one mobile device, compared to 75 percent in 2013 and 52 percent in 2011. In the same year, 42 percent had their own mobile device, compared to 7 percent in 2013 and less than 1 percent in 2011, which accounts for 35 percent of their screen time (compared to only 4 percent in 2011).



Faced with these rapid changes, today's parents are trying to help their children navigate a media landscape that has changed significantly since their own childhoods. It has become clear that daily or near daily screen use is here to stay, as children are exposed to screens not only in their homes but also in child care settings, preschools, and schools.[2,3] Therefore, it is important to understand how parents can help monitor their children's screen time – limiting it as necessary but also understanding how to use it in a healthy capacity.[4] Fathers may have questions such as, "Is screen time good or bad for my children?" and "What should be the daily limit given the realities of screen time in my life?" To help answer these questions, this brief presents information about screen time research, considers the implications for parents and children, and provides tips and resources to help fathers manage their children's screen time.

What the research and medical communities say about screen time for children

Most research on screen time has focused on children's exposure to television. This research has identified health concerns and negative outcomes correlated with the duration and content of viewing. The main concern has been that too much screen time can replace adequate sleep, physical activity, social interaction, and other activities essential for healthy development. Some studies have shown that excessive television viewing (more than five hours a day) may lead to children gaining weight, particularly if they are mindlessly snacking while watching or seeing advertisements for poor quality food.[5] There are also concerns that watching violence on television or other screens, particularly close to bedtime, can lead to sleep or behavior problems.[6,7]

In 1990, to help address concerns about excessive television viewing, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommended that parents limit their children's television viewing and watch with them to help interpret what they see.[8] Subsequent AAP recommendations have included removing television sets from children's bedrooms, discouraging television viewing for children

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younger than 2 years, and encouraging more interactive activities to promote proper brain development, such as talking, playing, singing, and reading together.[9] By 2016,[10] in response to changing screen habits, the AAP recommended that parents:

- Avoid screen time other than video chatting with children younger than 18 months old.
- Limit screen time to one hour per day of high-quality programs for children aged 2–5 years, and help them understand what they're watching.
- Set consistent limits on time spent using any media for children aged 6 years and older.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has similar guidelines, although they recommend avoiding screen time until 24 months.[11]

The AAP recommendations are still largely based on research concerning exposure to television. There has been limited research on the impact of screen time and newer technology, such as mobile devices, mainly because it is too early to evaluate long-term outcomes of the increased use of these newer devices. Also, although researchers agree on the importance of physical activity and healthy sleeping routines, some have expressed doubts about the correlative evidence between screen time and negative psychosocial and physical health, as well as motor and cognitive development, pointing instead to the effect of mediating factors such as the content and context of the media experience.[12,13]

There is one outcome that is unequivocally affected by screen time in some contexts – sleep. Sleep is crucial for the mental and physical health of children of all ages, but all screens, including phones and tablets, emit blue light, which can cause disruptive sleep if children are exposed to it before sleeping. A recent study looking at the sleep, screen time, and physical activity routines for children in the United States found that only half of children aged 8–11 years met AAP recommendations of 9–12 hours sleep a night for this age group.[14,15] A review of 20 studies, involving more than 125,000 children aged 6–19 years, found that:

- Children using devices such as smartphones and tablets at bedtime had more than double the risk of a disrupted night's sleep compared to children without access to such devices.
- Placement of any screen device in a child's bedroom was associated with a range of negative outcomes, including lower overall school readiness.
- Bedtime use of media devices was associated with an increased likelihood of inadequate sleep quantity, poor sleep quality, and excessive daytime sleepiness.[16]

In general, however, there are indications that the link between child outcomes and screen time depends on the type of screen time activity, the child's age, and the content and context of the screen time. It also seems that screen time is likely to reduce other activities children need to participate in to learn and grow. We explore this more in the following sections.

Types of screen time activity

There are four types of screen time:[17]

- Passive (e.g., viewing entertainment shows or playing smartphone games)
- Creative (e.g., viewing educational programs or participating in cognitively stimulating activities designed for learning, creating, or developing a skill)
- Active (e.g., playing with apps or video games that require physical movement)
- Communicative (e.g., interacting with other people via social media, texting, or video chat)

Passive screen time is the cause of most concern for the AAP and others who recommend screen time limitations, although a limited amount of viewing time is considered appropriate, if children are viewing high-quality educational content.

Communicative screen time via video chat

Online applications like Skype and FaceTime can be used to connect with family who live far away or who are otherwise not present physically. This is an especially useful tool for families struggling to be connected despite physical boundaries. It is also a useful tool for fathers or mothers not living with their children, as it gives them a chance to be a more involved with their children from a distance. These communicative screen activities may be more beneficial for younger children because older children tend to replace Skype and FaceTime with social media, which is more isolating and prone to problems such as cyberbullying and peer pressure to engage in sex or other risky behaviors. One drawback of video chat for young children may be the lack of physical contact and difficulty making eye contact (depending on camera placement), so it is advisable to have an adult present in the room with the child to help manage the experience.[18]

Communicative and active screen time via video games

A study of children aged 10–15 years found that those who played video games for an hour or less per day tended to be more social and satisfied with life than those who didn't play video games at all. However, those who played more than three hours a day were less likely to be happy and more likely to report problems with hyperactivity, attention, and relating to their peers.[19]

Active video games like Nintendo Wii Fit U and Xbox Fitness can promote physical activity in children and are a great alternative to outdoor play when conditions limit going outside.[20] Active games function on intrinsic motivation and can encourage physical activity for sedentary children and teenagers.[21]

Creative screen time via electronic books

There are obvious advantages for reading from electronic books (e-books) as they can be downloaded to mobile devices for ease of access, particularly when away from home, while some are relatively inexpensive and others can be borrowed from a local library. This may be of greater benefit for older children, as early research with young children indicates that distracting "bells and whistles" in an e-book (e.g., touching a picture to make a sound) can detract from a child's understanding of the story. However, studies looking at differences between print and e-books found no difference in preschool and school-aged children's comprehension if the story was well constructed and delivered without any electronic gimmicks or distractions.[22]

Passive and communicative screen time via social media

Social media can be passive or used for communication. Passive social media includes things like scrolling Instagram or Twitter content without engaging with others. Communicative social media on the other hand involves chatting, liking others' posts and pictures, and otherwise engaging with an online community.

Creative screen time via educational programs and apps

Screen time can be creative and educational depending on the content. For example, Common Sense Media (https://commonsensemedia.org/) is a website to help parents find programs and apps to actively engage their children, depending on their ages and interests, while PBS is a good source of educational TV programming. Research has identified ways in which the following shows may build skills of young children: Sesame Street (reading and literacy skills), Peg + Cat (early math skills), Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood (empathy, self-confidence, and emotion recognition and regulation), and Arthur (perspective taking and advanced moral reasoning).

Impact of adult screen activity on children

Besides the four types of direct screen time activity outlined above, children can also be affected by the screen time activities of adults in their lives. Research has identified potential consequences of frequent screen use in two other areas – background TV and technoference – that are important to keep in mind when thinking about children's screen time exposure.

Background TV

In a recent survey, 42 percent of parents of children aged 8 years and younger indicated that the television is on in the background "always" or "most of the time," even when no one is watching.[23] Another survey found that children aged under three years are exposed to background television for an average of 5.5 hours a day.[24]

Having the television on in the background when children are playing, even when no one is watching, can have detrimental effects for children. Parents may think that their young children are not aware of background media, but hearing or seeing something on the screen can take a child's focus away from their play and exploration, disrupting their natural way of learning.[25] Also, if parents are watching an adult program, studies have shown that they talk and respond much less to their children.[26]

Technoference

Parent-child interaction is also affected by the amount of time parents spend on their smartphones and other devices. More than one-third of teens feel that their parent spends too much time on mobile devices and get distracted by their phone during in-person

conversations, while a similar percentage of parents of teens admit they struggle with the allure of screens.[27,28] This technoference (i.e., technological interruptions to interpersonal interaction and time spent together) can have negative effects for children, particularly younger children. Studies have shown a connection between parental use of mobile devices and children "acting out" to get their parents' attention.[29,30]

Age Differences

Children younger than three years

There is some evidence that young children can learn through screen experiences if they actively engage with educational apps or watch high-quality educational programming under an adult's guidance, as the AAP recommends.[31] However, experts warn that unmonitored screen time (i.e., passive television watching without guidance from an adult to help interpret what is being watched) is associated with slower development of language and cognitive skills. Some also argue there are no significant *benefits* (although also no drawbacks) of screen time for very young children, even when they are watching educational programs.[32]

One concern is that screen time reduces children's interaction with adults and observation of their surroundings. Another concern is that screen time replaces activities that are essential for learning, such as independent play time, which is especially beneficial in developing problem-solving skills.[33] Although young children can imitate simple actions they see on TV, it is easier for them to learn from real-life interactions with people and exploration of their environments, compared with information delivered via a screen.[34]

While parents may find it convenient to keep toddlers temporarily engaged with a screen while they complete chores or other household activities, they should also have one-on-one time with their children each day and ensure that their children have non-screen playtime.

Children aged three years and older

There is little research to suggest that screen time has direct, negative consequences for children aged 3 and older.[35] However, research has shown an association between excessive amounts of screen time (four or more hours a day) and poorer emotional regulation skills in preschoolers (e.g., difficulty calming down after experiencing excitement).[36] Another study of 1,013 children aged 10–11 years, found that more than two hours a day of television viewing or computer use was associated with increased risk of psychological difficulties, such as emotional, peer, concentration, and conduct problems.[37]

What is most important during these years is being mindful of the content that children are watching, making sure it is age-appropriate, and engaging in screen time experiences with them (i.e., avoiding passive screen time).

Teenagers and screen time

Although anxiety and depression are associated with excessive screen time at nearly all ages, this association is strongest for teens because they are spending more time with screens – and social media in particular – than younger children.[38] A study drawing on annual surveys of more than a million 8th, 10th, and 12th graders between 1991 and 2016 found that adolescents who spent more time on electronic communications and screens (e.g., social media, the internet, texting, gaming) and less time on nonscreen activities (e.g., in-person social interaction, sports/exercise, homework, attending religious services) had lower psychological well-being, whereas those who spent only a small amount of time on electronic communication were the happiest. It is important to consider, however, that psychological difficulties may lead to greater screen time use, rather than greater screen time use leading to psychological difficulties. Teens with psychological difficulties may spend more time on screens than other teens because they are depressed, anxious, socially isolated, or otherwise do not want to engage in other, more "social" activities. This has not been adequately explored in the research.

Also of concern is sexting and cyberbullying[39] as well as texting and using social media while driving,[40] which is more common among teenagers than older individuals and can lead to injury or death. Teens' screen time use may be linked with poor psychological well-being because of these dangers, not because screen time is inherently bad.

In fact, other studies have identified benefits in terms of social support and connection for teenagers who use social media in moderation. One study suggested a U-shaped relationship between internet use and depression, with increased risks of depression at both the high and low ends of internet use. Another study found that older adolescents who used social media passively (e.g., viewing others' photos) reported declines in life satisfaction, whereas those who used it for communication (e.g., interacted with others and posted content) did not experience these declines.[41] A study from 2017[42] indicated that moderate use of digital

technology is not intrinsically harmful and may actually be advantageous in a "connected world," and other research also supports the use of social media to foster social inclusion among teen users who may feel excluded or who are seeking a welcoming community.[43]

It is also important to note that the amount of teens' screen time – and what they are doing during their screen time – varies widely. A 2015 survey showed that, on average, U.S. teens spent 1.5 hours watching television, 1.5 hours listening to music, and 1.1 hours on social media.[44] However, this usage varies quite widely as, on any given day, 29 percent indicated they watched no television, 19 percent did not listen to music, and 42 percent did not use social media.

Content and context

Our review of the research suggests that rather than focus on *how much* screen time children are engaged in, it may be advisable to look at the *content and context* of the media experience. For example, is the content designed to encourage age-appropriate learning and are parents engaged with their young children during screen time?[45,46] It may also be helpful to think of what type of screen time – passive, active, creative, or communicative – a child is engaged in.

3Cs

Researchers have recommended that parents consider the "3Cs" (the child, the content, and the context)[47] when making decisions about their child's media experiences.

- **The Child.** How old is the child? What are their specific interests? What is their attention span? What other factors (e.g., abilities, emerging skills, current mood) might affect their screen experience at the time?
- **The Content.** Does the content engage the child in meaningful and active ways? Are the themes and topics age-appropriate? Is the content relevant to the child's real-life?
- **The Context.** Is the child alone or with an adult when watching or playing on the mobile device? Is an adult responding to questions and helping the child understand and apply what they are seeing and experiencing on the screen?

E-AIMS

Researchers also recommend a process to assess the extent to which screen content is **E**ngaging, **A**ctively **I**nvolving, **M**eaningful, and **S**ocial (E-AIMS).[48] This recommendation is well aligned with research suggesting that creative, active, and communicative screen time may have benefits for children and adults.

- **Engaging:** Is the screen content interesting and fun for children, with a focus on learning a particular idea or skill?
- **Actively Involved:** Does the content actively involve the child by asking them to respond to something new and/or do something mentally challenging?
- **Meaningful:** Is the content presented in a context that is relevant to the child's life and designed to help them learn by linking new information to what is already familiar?
- **Social:** Are there opportunities for school-age children to engage with their friends, or play an educational online game together? Are there opportunities for parents of young children to talk about and/or share in the media experience with their child?

Summary

The evidence supporting the various recommendations about screen time is not always clear. When making decisions about screen time for children, the most important things to consider are the type of screen time (whether it's passive or some other type); the age, abilities, and interests of the child; the content of different media experiences; and the context in which the child will engage with an experience. One way to actively think about these things is by developing ground rules for all family members (children and adults). Some families create a family media plan to clearly document their plans regarding screen free areas and times, limits on screen time, and more. Below are some possible ground rules and questions to consider before developing a family media plan.

Sample ground rules:

- No phones during mealtime.
- No screens in the bedroom.
- No screen time in the hour before bedtime.

- Turn off the TV when no one is watching.
- No more than 2 hours a day of recreational TV viewing.

Family media plan – questions to consider:

- Should we designate "screen free" zones in the house? If so, where?
- Should we designate "screen free" times on weekdays? If so, when?
- Should we set a "curfew" time when devices are turned off at night? If so, when?
- What TV content is OK, what isn't? How will we decide?
- Should we use our phone or tablet settings to block the blue light that can disturb sleep?
- How can we limit exposure to food ads?
- At what age can our children have their own smartphone?
- How should we balance the amount of screen time with other activities such as reading books, playing outdoor games, and hobbies?
- How much sleep do we each need, based on our age?
- How will we use the privacy controls on our mobile devices?

For more information to help with these decisions, see Age-Based Media Use Advice from Common Sense Media; How to Make a Family Media Use Plan from the AAP; and the other resources at the end of this document.

For information on filtering out the blue light on mobile devices, see How to Stop Blue Light From Disturbing Your Sleep.

Tips for dads: Ways to manage screen time

These tips are drawn from various resources, all of which are included in the helpful resources section of this brief. Practitioners can share these tips with fathers verbally or as a handout to accompany group or individual discussions.

- **Talk with your children about why their screen time needs to be managed and the importance of having limits to screen time.** You can also share the possible negative effects of screen time to help them understand why you are setting limits. Children tend to follow instructions better if they know the reasoning behind it.
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- **Engage in screen free activities and one-on-one interaction with children.** Playing outdoor games gets them into a habit of exercising – a habit that can be carried into adulthood. You can also play indoor games like cards and board games. One-on-one interaction creates opportunities for parent-child communication and helps children build on their communication skills.

- **Create tech-free time and tech-free zones for your household.** This can include creating areas and times for everyone to be together. For example, designating dining areas and dinner time as tech free is a good way for parents and children to "be present" and engage in conversation. Creating a healthy distance from technology and screens can provide a needed break for everyone in the family.
- **Set a screen time limit for your children.** The screen time limit can differ on weekdays, weekends, and holidays and will depend on your family's schedule and your child's age and needs. Engage your kids in making this decision and discuss it with them before setting a limit.
- **Set a screen cut-off time for your children to help them get into a routine.** Setting rules such as "no screen time after 8 p.m." or "an hour before bedtime" can prompt children into a night schedule. Reading to children before bedtime promotes a healthier sleep routine rather than screen time before bed, which has been linked to poorer sleep.
- **Steer your children toward forms of media that actively engage them.** Supervise the content they are exposed to and encourage them to choose their screen content independently and wisely.
- **Use technology to help you.** Parents can set up parental locks, turn on safe browsing options, and monitor screens from a distance to supervise the content their child is watching. Many smartphones will produce reports of screen usage that can

help parents monitor their children's (and their own) screen time. If your children use screens at night, use smartphone settings to avoid the blue light that can interfere with sleep. You can also control access to wifi networks and manage your children's access to technology within certain hours of the day.

- **Know that children can use their computers to find ways around TV limits.** Fathers should closely monitor computer usage since many children know how to stream or download programs via their computer. Keeping the family computer in a central area of the house can help with this.
- **Know that children can find ways around screen time limits by engaging with screens outside of the home.** For example, they may go "play" at a friend's house but end up watching YouTube or playing video games the entire time. You may want to communicate with the parents in other households where your children spend time about your rules for screen time use.
- **Choose screen time activities that encourage physical activity for your children.** An example of an outdoor screen game is Pokémon Go, which requires the players to walk around to different areas as the game progresses. Wii Sports or other indoor sports games are a good option for children to engage in physical activity while staying inside.
- **Be aware of your own screen time and screen use in front of your children.** If your child is allowed one hour of screen time per day, try to model that in your own usage. Limit your passive screen time as much as possible, and take breaks so you aren't sedentary for long stretches. If you work remotely or must answer emails after work hours, explain to your kids the distinction between obligatory and voluntary screen time. Parents are the most important role models for children.
- **Take screen-free family breaks or trips with your children.** A five-day screen-free period combined with increased social interaction has been linked to better comprehension of nonverbal facial cues and emotion recognition skills in adolescents aged 11–13 years.

Tips for dads of young children (aged 0–3 years)

These tips are drawn from Zero to Three's screen sense resources.

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- **View, play, or join in screen experiences with your children.** Talk about what they are watching and doing; ask questions about the story or characters in a program or game; and talk about what they are discovering. This helps young children make sense of what they are seeing and doing on screen so they can learn from their experience and develop their language skills.

- **Avoid background media.** Turn off the television when children are playing or when no one is watching, and during daily routines like mealtime. Reserve time to watch adult-focused programs when children are not present.
- **Take screens out of the bedroom.** Screen time before bed makes it hard for children to get to sleep and enjoy restful sleep. Reading a story, cuddling, and singing songs can better prepare them for a good night's sleep.
- **Limit screen time to ensure lots of interactive time in the real world.**
- **Look for screen content that is appropriate for your child's age** and is relevant and familiar to them.
    - With young children, look for screen content that encourages social interaction and actively engages them while helping them stay focused.
    - See Common Sense Media for age-appropriate recommendations of books, movies, TV shows, and apps.

If you and your child's mother live in separate homes, try to work together and agree on a family media plan for both households. If that is not possible, remember kids are adaptable. They can usually accept that there are different rules and expectations in "mom's house" and "dad's house." No matter what, focus on clear guidelines for your own home. If your children ask why there are different rules here than in mom's house, explain that "mom and dad just have different rules, and that's okay."

Resources for dads

- Tips for Fathers: Helping Children Manage Screen Time and the Online World (NRFC webinar September 2019): https://www.fatherhood.gov/sites/default/files/webinar/slides/nrfc_september_2019_webinar_slides.pdf
- Screen sense resources from Zero to Three: https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/series/screen-sense#resources-for-parents-and-caregivers
- Kids and tech: Tips for parents in the digital age: https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Tips-for-Parents-Digital-Age.aspx
- The importance of putting down your smartphone: https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Parents-of-Young-Children-Put-Down-Your-Smartphones.aspx
- Teach your children to use technology in a healthy, responsible way: https://www.nytimes.com/guides/smarterliving/family-technology?utm_source=sharetools&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=website&emc=eta1
- Small Town Pops podcast on screen time: https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/small-town-pops/id1391800027?mt=2&i=1000416767440
- When and where children should use electronic devices: https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/feb/07/children-parents-screen-time-electronic-devices-bedrooms-uk-medical-officers
- The health impacts of screen time: A fact sheet for parents from the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, UK: https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2018-12/rcpch_screen_time_parent_fact_sheet_-_final.pdf
- Age-based media advice from Common Sense Media: https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/uploads/pdfs/2017_cs_aap_brochure_digitalprint_en_final.pdf
- Helping kids with ADHD manage screen time: https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/add-adhd/at-a-glance-helping-kids-with-adhd-manage-screen-time
- Nine steps to more effective parenting: https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/nine-steps.html
- Your teen needs you to be their digital mentor: https://www.gottman.com/blog/teen-needs-digital-mentor/
- Screen time and children: How to guide your child: https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/childrens-health/in-depth/screen-time/art-20047952

General resources

- More information about media use and brain development: https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Media-Use-and-Early-Brain-Development-Audio.aspx
- Realistic screen time solutions for kids (and their parents): https://www.nbcnews.com/better/health/realistic-screen-time-solutions-kids-their-parents-ncna850056
- New findings add twist to screen time limit debate, Institute for Family Studies: https://ifstudies.org/blog/new-findings-add-twist-to-screen-time-limit-debate
- Are you too strict with screen time?: https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/news/2017/12/18/maybe-youre-being-too-strict-your-kids-screen-time-study-suggests/960894001/
- Learning resources for age 4, Public Broadcasting Service: https://www.pbs.org/parents/learn-grow/age-4
- The new childhood: Raising kids to thrive in a connected world, Jordan Shapiro: https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/titles/jordan-shapiro/the-new-childhood/9780316437257/
- Parenting in the digital age teleseries, Susan Stiffleman: https://susanstiffelman.com/digitalsummitupgrade/
- Should screen time be limited? BBC Parentland podcast: https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p0787vc3
- Common Sense Media: https://commonsensemedia.org
- The benefits of time outside and away from technology: Uhls, Y. T., Michikyan, M., Morris, J., Garcia, D., Small, G. W., Zgourou, E., & Greenfield, P. M. (2014). Five days at outdoor education camp without screens improves preteen skills with nonverbal emotion cues. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 39, 387-392.
- Teens who are constantly online are just as likely to socialize with their friends offline: https://internet.psych.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/532-Master/532-UnitPages/Unit-11/Jiang_Pew_2018.pdf

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