

Is it Time for a Digital Detox?

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Published: December 27, 2017 06:21 AM, Charlotte Parent Magazine



THE HEMPE FAMILY

We see it everywhere. We find ourselves doing it and allowing it to happen.

Sometimes giving a kid a screen to entertain them is just easier. Plus, screens can offer entertainment, education and social connection, right? So, what's the harm?

Melanie Hempe thought the same thing when her oldest son started playing video games at the age of 13.

“Adam (Hempe) is my first of four children and like every other mom, I was not educated on the effects of technology on children, especially boys and video games,” she says.

He was drawn to video games, so they gave him a Game Boy. Melanie Hempe played the role of “Game Cop Mom,” as she calls it, making sure he didn't spend too much time on the device, but once he was given a laptop from school, everything changed.

“At that point I lost all ability to hold him accountable and manage his time. He dropped out of sports and social activities, and gamed in all the nooks and crannies of free time throughout his high school years.”

She thought it was just a passing phase, but it became much more.

The Battle Begins

“We had a lot of conflict in our home over time spent on the game away from other activities like doing things with the family, spending time with friends, chores and sports,” she says. “He didn't even want to get his driver's license. He would have anger outbursts.”

One summer I even gave him an option of quitting his game or moving out for the summer. He chose to move out.”

Tom Kersting has seen the first-hand effects this digital world has on kids. He speaks from 18 years of psychotherapist experience, as well as 23 years of experience as a school counselor. He has written a book on the topic, titled “Disconnected: How to Reconnect Our Digitally Distracted Kids.”

“The deterioration of kids’ mental, emotional, social, academic and family lives is unparalleled. Anxiety and depression are through the roof. ADHD diagnoses are way up and the teen suicide rate is at an all-time high,” Kersting says. “Ultimately, the average kid is spending nine hours per day, on average, in a cyberworld rendering it difficult for them to handle issues in their real world; they’re simply not spending enough time in the real world and therefore they are not developing effective coping skills when confronted with even trivial situations.”

The American Association of Pediatrics recommends children younger than 18 months avoid screen media, and children 18 to 24 months of age have limited access with adult supervision while watching high-quality programming. Children ages 2 to 5 years of age should limit screen use to one hour per day, and children over the age of 6 should have consistent limits put on time spent on digital media.

From Entertainment to Addiction

As for Adam Hempe, he dropped out of college after his first year. Having spent most of his time gaming in his dorm room, he made no friends and had incompletes in classes. It was at that point that Melanie Hempe, a registered nurse, began researching the effects of video games on kids’ brains and realized that her son was addicted.

“Research shows that the brain responds to gaming like a gambler’s brain responds to a slot machine,” Melanie Hempe says. “Excess dopamine is produced but over time the body begins to produce less in order to regulate itself. The child can become depressed if they don’t continue to play more.”

The even bigger problem that parents miss beyond the addiction-inducing chemicals is everything the screen is replacing. “Many kids are completely missing out on developing the necessary habits and life-skills required for future success. And these childhood hours will never be recovered,” she says.

For many families, screens have become commonplace and default devices that become an expectation. Kids turn to them for entertainment and assume they will receive their own devices and social media accounts at a certain age, but you don’t have to follow the crowd.

“The advice I give to parents to help them reclaim their children’s brains is to be aware of social conformity. We see what other families do and our brain justifies it as OK,” Kersting says. “It is critically important that we get a handle on devices because this generation is the experiment for the negative effects of screen overuse. We know that it is not a neutral activity and that our children’s brains are rewiring themselves to accommodate the unnatural consequences of spending so much time on a screen,”

The B.E.S.T. Screen Plan

As Melanie Hempe did more research and spoke with more families, she realized the need for parents to have a better understanding of what screens are doing to their children's well-being. She founded Families Managing Media and developed the B.E.S.T. Screen Plan, which stands for "balanced electronic screen time."

Developed through medical advisory and working with doctors throughout the country, the B.E.S.T. Screen Plan is backed up with science, research and medical recommendations — and a whole lot of first-hand experience by the Hempe family. The plan includes three stages: rethinking screens, reclaiming kids and reconnecting families. Families Managing Media walks parents through this process during local seminars and via online resources.

"Parents are paramount when it comes to changing this issue," Kersting says. "Parents must model the behavior that they wish their kids to employ. That means parents must disconnect themselves from their devices as much as possible when they are present with their children."

Finding Freedom

Things have changed for the Hempe family. Adam Hempe joined the U.S. Army and was able to break his gaming addiction. Melanie Hempe took a different approach with her other three children when it came to screens. Her daughter did not receive a smartphone or social media accounts until she was 18 years old. Her 13-year-old twin boys don't have phones, and they maintain a game-free home.

"I made every mistake out there, but I've learned and figured it out, and I've gone back and made changes when I needed to," she says.

Instead of spending an average eight or more hours in front of screens, the family chooses to focus on other things like sports, outdoor activities, meal time and conversation.

"We aren't antitechnology. It's about balance," she says. "Our family is having so much more fun now that we've changed our approach to screens. There is so much more freedom and less stress."

Melanie Hempe says she often hears parents say their biggest parenting regret was giving screen access to their kids too early. "You can't redo childhood. Making screen changes may seem difficult at first, but you will cherish your decision for years to come."

Melanie Hempe is the Founder of Families Managing Media, a North Carolina based non-profit dedicated to the helping families Rethink screens, Reclaim kids and Reconnect their families. www.FamiliesManagingMedia.com