

I Gave My Kid a Screen-Free Summer—and You Can Too

After years of nightly fights over YouTube and Netflix with my 8-year-old daughter, I decided to hide every screen in our house for the summer. It worked.



BOYS PLAY IN WATER IN SAN BERNARDINO, CALIFORNIA. (JOE SOHM/VISIONS OF AMERICA/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP VIA GETTY IMAGES)

By Michaeleen Doucleff, PhD

Two years ago, I arrived at the end of my rope with my 8-year-old daughter's screen time.

Throughout her life, my husband and I closely followed pediatricians' advice around screens. Starting around age 6, we allowed our daughter

Rosy to watch Netflix or YouTube for about an hour each day. We rarely let her viewing go beyond two hours, as the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has long advised.

Several years later, I found that I was struggling harder and harder to pull her away from devices. She would beg for screen time all day. When the timer went off, our thoughtful and helpful daughter suddenly began acting like a rude toddler. She yelled and fought with me. Sometimes, she would run around the house at 9 p.m., crying or begging for “one more episode.” One night, she curled up into the fetal position and hid under her desk, whimpering. I had to coax her out by rubbing her back gently and talking to her in a whisper.

This is so ridiculous, I thought. *Why do we go through this horrible ritual every single night?* So two years ago, I made a resolution: For the entire summer, our family would go screen-free.

No iPad for Rosy. No social media for me. No video games for my husband. No streaming platforms for any of us. We could text and call friends as much as we wanted, but outside of work, we would use no screens.

I initially worried we would fail miserably—or that we would succeed yet *feel* miserable. But I couldn’t have been more wrong. After a week, my daughter started to do things that I never expected. In the afternoons, she played outside voluntarily until dinner. One morning, I walked into her room and found her still in her pajamas, reading a book—and wanting to keep reading.

Getting rid of the screens wasn’t as hard as I thought it would be. In fact, it was fun. Why? Because I had the tools and strategies to impose the policy successfully and overcome the pull of products intentionally engineered to addict children and captivate them for as long as possible. And you can too.

Let me explain.



For the past six years, while doing research for my 2026 book, *Dopamine Kids*, I've been studying how apps and games work in our brains—and how they shape our habits. I've read hundreds of studies and interviewed dozens of psychologists and neuroscientists. And as I explain in my book, I discovered something striking: Common parenting advice around screens is based on psychology and neuroscience from 20 to 30 years ago. It's woefully outdated, and it sets parents up for failure.

For example: According to psychologist Wendy Wood at the University of Southern California, parents are commonly advised to teach their children to use willpower to limit their screen time. In other words, as parents, we're supposed to teach kids how to resist temptations in front of them, by, say, letting them watch YouTube videos every day and telling them to stop after one hour.

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The most recent guidelines from the AAP recommend that parents start to teach children this skill even when they're as young as 2 years old. "Let's do a challenge where you turn off the iPad/game console/TV by yourself, without me having to remind you. Do you think you can do that?" the AAP suggests parents say to a child. And when Rosy struggles to stop watching cartoons, it recommends I tell her, "It seems like you're having a hard time putting your device down. Let's talk about that."

“Fifteen to 20 years ago, it was thought you could train willpower,” says psychologist [Marina Milyavskaya](#) at Carleton University, in Ottawa, Canada. “A lot of studies have tried it with adults, but there’s no strong evidence to suggest that strategy works long-term. And there are no studies that I know of with kids,” who generally have less willpower than adults.

More recent [studies show](#) that willpower isn’t an effective strategy against temptation even for adults, says [Michael Inzlicht](#), a psychologist at the University of Toronto who led a few of these studies. “It’s not going to help anyone regulate their device use in the long run.” [One study](#), which he co-authored with Milyavskaya, found that relying on willpower only left college students exhausted and depleted, and didn’t actually help them resist temptations more often. In fact, he believes this approach backfires because it builds entrenched habits.

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“The advice doesn’t work,” Wood confirmed. It also perpetuates the myth that getting rid of screens is difficult, and that children need screens “to unwind,” as the AAP guidelines explicitly [state](#).

We can make our lives much easier—and more joyful—if we take a more modern approach to screens, Inzlicht, Milyavskaya, and Wood all told me. We do that, they said, by setting up our homes and routines so that children voluntarily choose offline activities, and even begin to fall in love with them. “You can truly learn to like activities that are good for you,” Wood told me. “Kids’ choices are malleable.”



What does this look like in practice?

The first step, before you take away the screen time, is to begin to replace it with offline activities that children are *excited* to do. Behavior scientist BJ Fogg at Stanford University has spent nearly 30 years studying how to change people's behaviors. "You have to find something the child already desires," he told me. "This is the key to lasting change"—and creating a new habit that sticks.

For example, I knew that my daughter wanted to learn to bike to the grocery store by herself. So before school let out for the summer, I tuned up her bike and started to teach her how to navigate our neighborhood on her own. We even managed to cajole a tween down the street to join us. Rosy also told me that she wanted to learn to crochet. So I ordered a crochet kit and stocked up on other art supplies that she loved. Finally, I knew that she liked to watch Netflix and YouTube because she loved all the adventurous stories in the shows. So I bought her a CD player and several audiobooks for screen-free storytelling.

There's a pervasive idea in our culture that parents should "Let Kids Get Bored. It's Good for Them," as a *New York Times* headline read in 2023. "Boredom . . . spawns creativity and self-sufficiency," another *Times* article claimed in 2019.

The logical conclusion of this philosophy is to take away screens and replace them with . . . well, nothing.

But this strategy is only shooting us in the foot, says neuroscientist David Zald at Rutgers University. Many studies have shown that boredom doesn't spark creativity or prompt us to go seek out friendships. Instead it correlates with an array of problems, including

unhealthy eating, attention problems, depressed feelings, frustration, and even political extremism.

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Instead of trying to suppress that energy, Zald says we should direct it toward something else. So, when Rosy came begging for Netflix after dinner, wanting to watch cartoon kids have adventures online, I redirected her to go have *real* adventures by biking with her friend. And if she still whined or nagged, I pulled out a new audiobook for her to enjoy instead.

BJ Fogg's second tip is to celebrate analog activities. Instead of treating the biking, art projects, and audiobooks as less exciting alternatives to the digital activities, I began to hype them up. I pointed out how great she felt after biking, and how much fun she had laughing and dancing with her new friend. When she sewed a pink purse with a blue-ribbon strap, I showed genuine excitement and interest in it. "Can you explain how you did that?" I asked.

"You need to make the child feel successful about the new activity," Fogg said. "Habits form quickly when we feel good."

Further, instead of telling Rosy how "I know it will be hard to end the iPad," as some parenting experts recommend, I focused on all the fun awaiting her outside or with her friend. Finally, I began to denigrate devices and apps. I focused on how screen time soured our moods. How we always argued when screen time was over, and how being on screens left her cranky, unhappy, and only wanting more. "I want to do

activities that make us feel good afterward,” I repeated each day. “And ones that don’t try to make you watch them 24 hours a day.”

I did all of this in the weeks leading up to the end of school. So when the last day finally came, I was ready to launch the third and final step: “Curate the cues.”



Cues are things around us—like objects, sounds, or smells—that trigger a desire to take action. The mere sight of the iPad or my laptop was a powerful cue for Rosy. It triggered an intense craving and motivation to watch videos.

The easiest way to stop an unwanted habit is to simply remove the cues for it. But here’s the part that often goes unmentioned: Cues can also be feelings and thoughts. So I can’t simply put the iPad in a drawer where Rosy knows it lives, because the mere *knowledge* that going online is an option will trigger her desire to do it.

“If you’re teaching your brain that in this context, and in the presence of these cues, you’re going to go and watch videos . . . then whenever you’re in that situation, you’re basically primed to do it, and to do it again the next day,” said neuroscientist [Anne-Noël Samaha](#) at the University of Montreal. “Those cues gain a lot of control over our behavior. These activities can very easily become habits that are inflexible.”

So, instead of placing the iPad out of reach, I had to perform a magic trick. I had to make Rosy *believe* her devices had completely vanished from our home and that screen time was no longer an option at all. In that way, her brain would learn that videos aren’t an option—but biking, crocheting, and audiobooks always are, and actually are quite fun.

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And so, on the eve of our screen-free summer, I went around the house, collected up all the devices that Rosy used for screen time, including my phone and laptop, and hid them in a place that I knew she would never find them, even if she tore the house apart looking for them. I also wanted a place I would feel embarrassed to go and retrieve them.

So I hid them . . . in my dryer. (In the summer, we dry our clothes outside, so I knew I wouldn't need the dryer for a few months.)

Then I filled up our home and yard with the cues for the offline activities. I propped up Rosy's bike on the front porch so she could hop on it easily. I created an art nook in our living room so her crochet needles and acrylic paints could trigger a desire to create art. And I bought a few new audiobook CDs to offer just in case whining grew intolerable.

Then after dinner, when Rosy asked, "Can I watch, Mama? Can I watch?", I was ready to launch our bold experiment. "Oh my gosh, Rosy, tonight I have a wonderful surprise for you. Something that may just be better than watching cartoons . . . if you're up for it." I explained to Rosy that that night, I would teach her to ride to the market alone. Together we headed out of the door, leaving the cues for Netflix and YouTube behind in our living room.

Then, in the morning, I explained to her we were taking a break from devices for the summer. "Don't worry. YouTube and Netflix will always be there for you," I said, "But for now, let's focus on all the other fun activities we have to do this summer. I need lemons for dinner. Can you go to the store and get them for me?"



Rosy's desire for screen time didn't disappear right away. But it faded quicker than I had anticipated. By the second and third weeks, she was zipping around the town by herself. I could feel the vibe in our house shift. It was calmer, more peaceful, and more joyful.

To be honest, I struggled more with the screen-free summer than Rosy, especially on the long weekends when I wasn't working. On Saturday and Sunday afternoons, I felt tempted to suggest watching a movie together in order to squelch my own cravings (or to hide upstairs and scroll on social media in a closet). But I had followed the same three-step protocol with myself: replace, celebrate, and curate. When my cravings cropped up, I headed outside to work in my new garden or to the kitchen to optimize a new bread recipe. Slowly, month by month, I rewired my own brain, too.

At the same time, though, I knew that our success stood on shaky ground. I could feel the pressure of more apps and devices coming into our home. Some of Rosy's friends started playing games online, like Roblox and Minecraft, and they started asking her to play, too. Some friends received phones that summer and coaxed their parents into letting them have Instagram and TikTok accounts.

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The writing was on the screen: If I wanted Rosy to build lifelong habits offline, my opportunity was slipping away, and our family needed to hold tight to a part of our experiment, even during the school year. So, my husband and I decided to eliminate screen time after dinner for good. We made it a priority to find a few friends for Rosy whose

parents' screen policies aligned with ours. And the next summer, we agreed to repeat the screen-free policy.

The second summer proved easier than the first. In many ways, we had accomplished what psychologist Wendy Wood advised: We had learned to like activities that are good for us. Rosy transitioned her biking into a dog-walking business and earned a bunch of money. She also became best friends with two girls whose families both practice a screen policy that's similar to ours. Although she still asked to watch movies and TV when we traveled, she no longer protested at home.

Once our family had a taste of the ease and pleasure that comes with living life offline, we just couldn't go back to the constant struggle of nightly screen time brought into our home. So this summer, we'll go screen-free again.

What does Rosy, who's now 10, think about our summer policy? "It just feels like a normal summer," she told me, shrugging her shoulders. "But I don't want to sit around all day. I want to find a job."



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