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chapter one

screen time: too much, too soon?

Fifteen-month-old Lily sits in the shopping cart, eyes fixed on her iPad. Her mom shops along the grocery store aisle with minimal interruptions. Lily never looks up to see the bright red apples or the shelf where her beloved Cheerios are grandly displayed.

Every weekday, third grader Jason flips on the television after school. The TV stays on for five hours until he goes to bed.

Melissa is a junior in high school. Last month, she sent 3,500 text messages (that's about 110 texts per day).

These are not unusual scenarios. They have become the norm in a child's screen-driven world. No wonder parents consider how to balance the use of technology with everyday life. Moms, dads, and grandparents are asking, "Dr. Chapman, my children are on the phone or playing video games constantly. We don't have family time anymore. When we tell them we're going to do something as a family, they argue and head back

to their screens.”

Remember what life was like before smartphones, flat screens, and tablets? Before the digital age, children went out in the yard and played, creating their own games or engaging in endless rounds of freeze tag or hide-and-seek. Kids learned to interact. They had to deal with winning and losing, getting kicked by a neighbor, and being empathetic to a friend who got hurt. Boys and girls learned how the real world works through playing with one another. Yet most children today are indoors for the bulk of their free time. Children aren't allowed to roam outside as they once were because of the fear of kidnapping and other societal dangers. So they stay indoors, often engaged with a screen instead of a person. Unfortunately, the more a child is involved in screen time, the less time there is for interaction with parents, siblings, and friends.

plugged in too soon?

screen time for children under two

The temptation to use screens to entertain babies and toddlers is stronger than ever. With our homes, vehicles, and smartphones, we are surrounded by media. Not only are screens ever-present, a parent almost feels *obligated* to utilize the latest, greatest educational software.

But research and our personal experience say the less exposure your little one has to screens, the better. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that parents avoid television viewing and screen time for children under the age of two.¹ The AAP believes the negative effects of media use far outweigh the positive ones for this age group. Despite the luminous claims of educational videos and software, little evidence supports educational or developmental benefits from media use by children younger than two years. You'd never know that, based on the glut of electronic educational products geared toward making smart babies and toddlers!

Young children grow by discovering the world. They need to experi-

ence a three-dimensional world of people and things they can taste, touch, see, hear, and smell. This foundational exploration can't happen if a baby or toddler spends a lot of time using electronics. Children are walking at two, which means they are going to get into trouble—that's normal and healthy. They learn which doors are okay to open and which doors stay shut. They're developing motor skills as they walk up and down stairs. During this important developmental stage, screen time hinders more than it helps.

The AAP actually reports adverse health effects of direct media use as well as parental media use (background media) in the life of a young child. Because of their early stage of cognitive development, children under two years of age process information differently from older children. Two studies have found that watching a program like *Sesame Street* has a negative—not positive—effect on language development for children younger than two years.² While you may think a television show or phone app is teaching your baby the ABCs, media use has not been proven to promote language skills in little ones. Young children learn language best when it's presented by a live person and not on a screen.

A study from 2007 reported that 90 percent of parents allow their children younger than two years to watch some form of electronic media.³ Thirty-nine percent of families with infants and young children have a television on at least six hours per day⁴—with negative effects. Studies show that while television may be background noise for the child, it often moves to the foreground for the parent. A child's ability to learn language is directly related to the amount of talk time he or she has with a parent. When the television is on, Mom or Dad is less likely to engage in conversation, resulting in a smaller vocabulary for that child.

Researchers examined twelve-, twenty-four-, and thirty-six-month-olds and found that background television not only reduced the length of time a child played, but it also reduced the child's focused attention during play.⁵ Other studies suggest that background media might interfere

with cognitive processing, memory, and reading comprehension. In spite of these negative effects, almost one-third of children have a television in their bedroom by age three.⁶ It isn't wise for any child, regardless of age, to have a television in her own room (more about that in chapter 11). Many young children use the television as a sleep aid, even though television viewing before falling asleep is associated with irregular sleep schedules and poor sleep habits that affect mood, behavior, and learning.

The best alternative to watching a video with your young child is cuddling up and reading a book. As your child is exposed to books, his or her vocabulary will grow. Becoming a great reader begins with listening, so read aloud and often to your son or daughter.

What if you've allowed your young child to watch television, but now you want to pull back? Melissa, a mother of children ages two and four, wants to do the right thing for her children's development, but she wonders how to get dinner on the table without the help of the television to keep her kids occupied. On the next page are a few ideas to help replace screen time with project time.

It takes effort to switch from the convenience of screen time to an interactive or tactile activity for a child. But the benefits for your son's or daughter's development are well worth it. You will be pleasantly surprised at how quickly your child adjusts to new screen-free routines.

plugged in too much?

Eight-year-old Trevor asked the question for the hundredth time, "Mom, all my friends have a video game player. Why won't you let me get one?"

"Just because all your friends have one doesn't mean it's a good idea for you," answered his mom.

Although Donna had been able to ward off her son's request for two years, she began to wonder if it might be the right time to say yes. After all, Trevor was a good student. She decided to surprise him with a video game console for Christmas.

Scribbling. Place big pieces of butcher paper on the floor and give your child a box of crayons. An eighteen-month-old can hold a crayon and scribble. Scribbling helps your toddler to develop a tripod position of the hand for drawing and writing, a needed skill your child will not learn from swiping a screen.

Cardboard Box.

Keep a large cardboard box your toddler can climb in and out of. Add some crayons if your child wants to decorate it.

Special Cupboard. Fill a cupboard your child can reach with plastic cups and plates, measuring cups, spoons, and bowls. This could also be your Tupperware cupboard. Let your child use this cupboard only when you're making meals to make it a special activity when you're in the kitchen.

Water Fun. If you have a tile floor that can handle it, fill a bowl with an inch or two of water. Give your child some measuring cups or spoons along with a few toys that will float or sink.

MAGIC TOY BOX. Take a plastic bin and fill it with toys your child hasn't played with for a while. Give her the bin with great fanfare. Change the contents every week to add an element of surprise. Your child will actually play with these toys instead of letting them go to waste.

Jumping Beans. This one is messier, but give your child a large pan filled with dry beans, measuring cups, and funnels. Put out a cookie sheet so your child can make designs with the beans.

It didn't take long for Trevor to adapt to having his own gaming system at his fingertips. During most of his free time, he played video games. On the car ride home from school, he gave short answers to his mom's questions about the day, all the while playing his video game. Donna began to wonder if she had made a mistake.

“I didn’t realize it would take away so much of his time,” Donna said. “Now when I ask him to put it away, we get in an argument. It’s hard for him to stop playing for dinnertime or to practice his piano. I regret giving it to him without setting guidelines from the start.”

Trevor isn’t the only one glued to his electronic device. The average American child age eight to age eighteen spends more than seven hours per day looking at a video game, computer, cellphone, or television.⁷ By the age of seven, a child born today will have spent one full year of twenty-four-hour days watching screen media.⁸

The frequent use of video games by children is particularly concerning because of the possibility of addiction. Video games are designed to bring pleasure to the brain. Players accumulate points, get constant rewards, and reach higher levels. Visually, the video game changes constantly to reengage your child. While playing, the brain rewards the child with a squirt of dopamine, providing a feeling of euphoria (more on this subject in chapter 9). The more you play, the more you want to play.

The symptoms of video game addiction are similar to those of addictions to alcohol, drugs, or gambling. Video games begin interfering with everyday life. Personal hygiene isn’t practiced. Assignments, chores, and responsibilities are left undone. Family relationships suffer. Nothing is quite as stimulating or rewarding as playing video games.

For Michael, a senior in high school, video games were his life. His parents hosted a graduation party to honor him. During that celebration with family and friends, Michael lasted about ten minutes before he retreated to his room alone, shut the door, and began playing video games. No one could coax him out of his room. Within an hour, everyone had left the party.

Although extreme, Michael’s story illustrates what can happen when boys are raised by video games and the Internet. In their twenties, they remain in a prolonged adolescence that prevents them from going out into the real world to find jobs, to socialize, and to become independent.

Excessive screen time isn't only a problem for boys. Girls watch television just as much as boys do. Girls in neighborhoods ranked as the lowest third by socioeconomic factors are five times more likely to watch the highest amount of screen time.⁹ High school girls average 4,300 texts a month, while boys trail behind at 2,600 texts a month.¹⁰

So how much daily screen time is too much for your family? The AAP recommends that children older than two years old should get no more than two hours a day of screen time.¹¹ This means if your child is on the computer for one hour at school, they should only have one additional hour at home. With more elementary schools incorporating iPads into the classroom, it's even more important (and challenging) to limit screen time at home. Children need unplugged time to unwind, read, play outside, and talk with parents and siblings.

In terms of how much screen time you allow your child, only you can decide how much is too much. Two hours a day is a good general rule. For many parents, that may not seem feasible. For others, two hours of screen time would be too much. Although each family should use personal judgment on the amount of screen time, every family must set clear boundaries. Children always do better if they have clear boundaries. Screen time requires time limits and parameters, or it will take over your child's free time.

My First Smartphone and Lucy

Believe it or not, I (Arlene) got my first smartphone right before I started writing this book. Why did I hold on to my dinosaur phone for so long? Since I already spend hours on my personal computer at home, I didn't see the need to have my emails and social networking sites handy at all times. But as I started traveling more, I realized a smartphone would be a smart move. Reluctantly, I made the switch.

At first I was enamored. I checked my phone constantly, several times per hour. Did I get a new email? Let me post a picture on Facebook. Who just

messed me? It was ridiculous. I quickly realized I needed to put it down or suffer the consequences of constant distraction. I made a decision to reach for it a few times per day to check it.

Then there was the matter of my four-year-old, Lucy. From time with her friends, she had seen what the little phone could do. She gravitated to it instantly, using her little fingers to push the colorful apps. In a flash of brilliance, I told her, "Lucy, that is Mommy's phone. It is not yours. It's a 'no touch.' If we are in an airplane, I will let you use it." I had not premeditated that response but realized in that moment if the phone became fair game for Lucy, she would ask for it constantly. That was one daily struggle I didn't want to sign up for.

Lucy thought for a moment then said, "I was in an airplane last month to visit Grandma." I laughed and replied, "I know. I didn't have the phone then."

Lucy never touches my phone, although believe me, she is itching to use that camera. The phone sits on my desk, powerless to weave its magic spell on my four-year-old. Making my phone off-limits to Lucy was one of my best tech decisions. Now it's reserved for emergency moments. Plus, it may not be wise to give a four-year-old a "toy" that costs several hundred dollars. Of course, Lucy is really looking forward to her next airplane ride.

plugged in to what?

When my (Gary's) children were little, we didn't have computers, but we did have television. We chose about five programs that were appropriate for our kids to watch. We told them, "You can have thirty minutes a day and watch any one of these programs." This way, our children developed the ability to make decisions within healthy parameters that we set as parents. Both lessons are important: to teach children to make decisions and to teach them to live within boundaries.

The television set of the past used to be a large piece of furniture, planted smack-dab in the middle of the living room and family life. Parents knew which shows were good for kids and which weren't. As gate-

keepers, they were in full control of every program being watched in the home. Then televisions became more compact and affordable. Families began having more than one television set, making it more difficult to monitor what children were watching.

Fast-forward to today: Technology has given us instant information and entertainment on televisions, personal computers, tablets, and smart-phones. We no longer have one television to gather around as a family. The family television of the past is now multiplied in every family member's pocket, purse, or backpack. And even though television wasn't necessarily wholesome then, it's certainly more vulgar, sexual, and violent now.

When your child has easy access to a television or the Internet, a whole world of inappropriate content is waiting to be consumed. I (Arlene) remember going to see the Superman movie *Man of Steel* with my husband. The movie was rated PG-13 for "intense sequences of sci-fi violence, action and destruction, and for some language." I was shocked to see how many children were in the theater seated right next to their parents. Many boys looked like they were seven or eight. There were a few five-year-olds and even some toddlers in strollers. The movie started at 8:15 p.m., and it was too late, too loud, and too intense for young children. PG and PG-13 movies come with a warning to parents for a reason. Superhero franchises appeal to young children, but make no mistake: Most of the movies are not kid-friendly. *Marvel's The Avengers*, the highest-grossing movie in 2012, had a kill count of 964 and received a PG-13 rating, "Parents strongly cautioned."¹²

There are general guidelines for deciding what content is appropriate for your child to watch. Here are four questions to help you decide whether or not it is wise for your child to view a particular program or video game:

What factual data is my child learning from this program? If there is factual data, is it correct? You want your child's mind to be filled with

truth. If the program communicates a distorted vision of reality instead of how life works in the real world, you don't want your child watching. You want your child to be exposed to things that are real and not a distortion of reality.

What kind of character traits is this program seeking to build in my child? Is the main character someone I want my child to copy? If the humor comes from cutting others down, being rude, or showing disrespect to authority, that's a red light. Positive programs will teach your child to care for others, work hard, resolve conflict, or overcome obstacles.

How does this program treat family members? Television sitcoms often degrade men and fathers by making them lazy, fat, or stupid. What messages will your child hear about men, women, marriage, and parents? How is the family represented?

Is this program consistent with our family values? A child is running into all sorts of values during his or her early years. You can't control what your child sees outside at school or other places, but you can control what he or she is exposed to at home. What is viewed on screens should be in keeping with your family values, or it should be off-limits.

It is your job as a parent to teach your children the difference between appropriate and inappropriate content. Do not leave this task to a teacher, pastor, or counselor. In the same way you would not allow your child to eat candy bars for dinner each night, you cannot allow your child to consume screen-time junk food. You are the gatekeeper of your child's mental diet.

oh, how much you miss

My (Arlene's) family was headed to the beach with friends. Our family was in one minivan, and their family was in another. Both vans were close together as we drove down the highway. Suddenly from behind us, three

motorcycles sped up and passed us. Right before our eyes, one of them popped a wheelie. One of the other motorcycles, which had two riders, took the challenge and did the same. We were watching a daredevil show from the comfort of our own minivan! Interstate 805 had never been so exciting! We followed those motorcycles for miles, hoping to see more of the show. We weren't disappointed as they popped more wheelies and finally zoomed off the exit ramp with great fanfare.

When we reached the beach, we excitedly said to our friends, "Wow, that was amazing! Could you believe those motorcycles?" The kids stared blankly at us. They had missed the whole thing. They had been watching a DVD and hadn't even noticed the motorcycles.

Another time, my family went on a whale-watching cruise. When that whale fin finally appeared out of the water, we spotted it. But dozens of children missed it. They were playing with electronic devices inside the cabin.

There is so much to be missed when you are fixated on a screen. It's not just about those special moments like seeing a whale's fin or watching motorcycles pop wheelies. It's about the everyday moments and chances to catch your child's eye and smile. Emotions have to do with relationships. They are the responses to what happens in our lives, both pleasant and unpleasant. Children must learn to process emotions, and none of that is learned in front of a screen but by interacting with parents, siblings, and other people in real time, face to face.

A world dominated by screens is a false, controlled world that revolves around pleasing your child. If your child doesn't like something on a device, he can just move on to the next thing until he finds something of interest. Kids don't have to learn to wait because gratification is instant. What does that teach your child? Real life certainly isn't characterized by endless options, drop-down menus, and constant pleasure.

Parents can miss much as well. Too much screen time robs you of teachable moments with your child, building family memories, and

bonding with your child. It may be easier to allow your child hours of screen time, but have you considered the personal growth you may be missing out on as a parent?

Mandy, a mother of a six-year-old and a four-year-old, was concerned with her daughters' dependence on television. Whenever Mandy gave the five-minute warning, the girls would fuss. When the television was off, they argued and kept asking her to turn the television back on. Exasperated, Mandy would give in, even though the girls had already exceeded their time limit.

But what if Mandy had stayed consistent with her rules? While her daughters would be learning valuable lessons about obeying limits, Mandy would have grown in resolve, patience, and problem solving. When we as parents and grandparents opt for the easy route, we often cheat ourselves out of growing our own character.

is it too late to change?

It's never too late to start doing what's healthy. It's true on the individual level, and it's true in parenting. Any life can be turned around. As long as your children are living in your house, it's not too late to become more actively involved in training your children in healthy directions.

Steve and Tricia approached me after a conference with a question about their ten-year-old son. "Dr. Chapman, our son's a good kid. He's not a straight-A student, but he finishes his homework and does his best. Since he was in second grade, we've allowed him to play video games at home. He used to play for thirty minutes after school, but lately we've noticed he is playing a lot more. We catch him in his room playing after the lights are out. We both work, and we've just let it slide. Last week, we looked at the game he was playing and were shocked to see how violent it was. We want him to stop, but we don't know what to do."

Typically when our children are doing things we don't think they should be doing, we come down on them hard. We are harsh with them,

rather than accepting responsibility ourselves. I suggested that Steve and Tricia talk with their son, saying something like this: “We have not done a very good job in the area of screen time and video games. We haven’t been paying attention to what you have been playing. We deeply regret this. We have let you down in this area. But we’re going to change things. From now on, we are going to help you decide which video games are good and which ones will harm you as you grow up. Will you forgive us for being absent when we should have been here to help you?”

Most kids will forgive parents who are willing to ask for forgiveness. Owning up to your responsibility as a parent is much more effective than accusing your child of poor decision making. In every home, there needs to be healthy communication between the parent and child that is not logistic in nature. Conversations aren’t only about enforcing bedtime or coordinating school pick-up times. Interact with your child about whatever topic might come up, and screen time is certainly a hot topic that can be revisited often.

If you haven’t had this kind of open communication with your child in the past, it’s not too late to begin. As you decide what’s healthy for your family and articulate a clear media game plan moving forward, your family will thrive within the boundaries you set.