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5 Steps for Teaching Your Child to Unplug - Outside - Pocket

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5-6 minutes



Surveys show that teens spend an average of around four hours a day on connected devices, plus another two or three hours watching TV. Photo by Annie Spratt/Unsplash.

Diana Graber's eldest daughter was in eighth grade in 2010 when her school had its first cyberbullying incident. It was nothing major—just some kids being mean to each other on Facebook. But to Graber, who had recently finished a master's degree in media psychology and social change, it was a missed opportunity for a

teachable moment. So she started visiting her younger daughter's sixth-grade class to talk about digital citizenship. Two things became clear to her. First, middle schoolers are woefully unprepared for the addictive nature of smartphones and the complex ethics of social media. Second, with guidance, kids can grow into healthy users of devices and have a positive influence on virtual communities.

Intervention is desperately needed. Surveys show that teens, whose developing brains make them more susceptible to addiction, spend an average of around four hours a day on connected devices—not including schoolwork—plus another two or three hours watching TV. In one Korean study, tech-addicted teen participants had higher rates of anxiety, depression, impulse-control problems, and sleep disorders. But snatching the phones from our teens' hands isn't the answer. Graber points to research suggesting that kids with no access to digital media suffer from some of the same negative impacts on their mental well-being as hyperactive device users—"because they lack that connection with their peers," she says. Thus, she advocates for a modest digital diet, but only after a child has the requisite education. "Kids really need adults to on-ramp them into this world," she says.

Since her experience with her daughter's class, Graber has developed a three-year curriculum called [Cyber Civics](#) that has been implemented by schools in 41 states. It explores issues like cyberbullying, digital privacy, and sexting. Teachers guide students through social-media scenarios and have them analyze the 50-page terms-of-service agreements for popular apps. For parents, her website [Cyberwise](#) provides courses and educational resources. We asked her for the CliffsNotes on a few key topics.

Step 1: Start Slow

It's much easier to teach your tween about smartphone use if they reach middle school with a healthy digital diet. The American Academy of Pediatrics [recommends no screen time](#) for kids before 18 months, just an hour a day until age five, and consistent limits for kids over six. Need to be in touch with your nine-year-old about carpooling? Give them an old-school flip phone.

Step 2: School Yourself

If you're going to be a reliable digital guide, you need to know the terrain. This means trying out ubiquitous mobile games like *Minecraft* and joining platforms like Snapchat, Instagram, and Musical.ly—then spending the time to understand their capabilities and allure. This will also set you up to friend or follow your child.

Step 3: Set Ground Rules

When you're ready to give a kid their first device, establish how many hours a day they can use it (with a maximum of two hours), when they can use it (after homework and chores), and which apps are off-limits (any that facilitate chats with strangers). Tell them you'll have the passwords to the phone and any e-mail or social accounts. Establishing these guardrails up front helps prevent heated arguments later.

Step 4: Delay Social Media

Users must be at least 13 years old to legally use most social platforms—with good reason. “Social media requires ethical thinking,” Graber says. “Do I upload a photo that will hurt

someone's feelings?' A child's brain isn't ready to make that kind of decision before their teen years." Once your kid begins engaging with social media, monitor their activity and talk with them if they post something that makes you uncomfortable. The dialogue will reveal how mature a cybercitizen your child has become.

Step 5: Model Good Behavior

Don't bring your phone to the dinner table. Keep it in your pocket during conversations. Silence it when you're in the woods. Show your children that you can control when and how you engage with your device.