HELPING YOUNG KIDS GET A HEALTHY START WITH DEVICES

Screens and other media are a big part of kids' lives, and they can be a healthy part too. Here are some ways that you can make sure your kids get the best possible start when using media and digital devices.

GENERAL TIPS

Very young kids should spend as little time with screens and devices as possible.

Kids under two don't get any benefit from screens, even shows or apps that claim to be educational. Time with screens also takes away from the things they **do** need, like interacting with other people and exploring the world around them. That doesn't mean that it'll do your kids any harm if they watch a few videos every now and then while you're chopping vegetables – but you make sure that doesn't become a habit.

- It's especially important not to use screens to **soothe or settle** kids: this can make it harder for them to learn to regulate their own moods.

Make screens a part of your family life and routine.

Even very young kids *do* get some benefit from screen activities that are shared with family members – like video-chatting with grandparents or reading an e-book together.

As kids get older, instead of counting hours or minutes of "screen time," set times and places where using devices **is or isn't allowed** – for example bedrooms, meal times, family outings, and so on. It's also helpful to **set a one-screen limit** so kids have to think about what they're doing with their devices.

Be a part of your kids' media lives.

Just like you talk to your kids about their friends and what happens at school, you should have an ongoing conversation about their media lives too. Research shows that what's called **joint media engagemen**t is key to helping kids get the most from media and avoid negative effects and experiences. The good news is that most kids **want** their parents involved in their media lives!

With younger kids, you should try to foster screen activities that **promote engagement with your family**. With tweens and teens, foster activities that promote **real engagement with their friends**.

This can include **co-viewing** media and **doing screen activities together**, like exploring apps, playing games or making videos.

This is not the same thing as **spying on your kids**. Spying on your kids sends the message that you don't trust them, and that if something goes wrong they're better off hiding it from you than getting help.

> "Monitoring our kids gives us a false sense of security, and leaves them poorly prepared for their future without us." Devorah Heitner, author of Growing Up Online

- It's better to **talk to your kids**, to **set rules and guidelines** and to **supervise** them by keeping devices out of private spaces like bedrooms. If you decide you do need to know exactly what they're doing online, **be open** about why you're doing it and tell them how they can **earn your trust**.

Set rules and guidelines.

MediaSmarts' research has shown that when there are rules in the home about how kids should behave online, those kids are less likely to engage in harmful behaviours or to have negative experiences. But as parenting expert Melinda Wenner Moyer puts it, "while some rules and limits are protective, having too many can backfire." So instead of being all about punishment, rules should be a way to share your values and to give kids **guidance** about how to deal with online issues.

Those rules will change as they get older, but **the most important rule** for kids of all ages is **"if something goes wrong, come and tell me right away and we'll find a solution together."**

For more suggestions about rules, see this MediaSmarts tip sheet: https://mediasmarts.ca/tipsheet/family-online-rules-tip-sheet

FIRST CONNECTED DEVICE

When kids get the first device that's "theirs" – a tablet, a video game console, or an old phone with no SIM card – we can use it as a chance to set good habits and routines.

Help them choose good apps and games.

Kids need guidance finding good stuff and avoiding unwanted content. You can help them explore their interests by teaching them **how to use search engines** safely, **curating** playlists on sites like YouTube or even **creating a custom search engine** that will only search sites that you know are safe. (You can search MediaSmarts' list of trusted, kid-friendly sites here https://mediasmarts.ca/trusted-source-search and learn how to make your own custom search engine here: https://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/break-fake-make-your-own-custom-search-engine. For tips on how to search effectively, see https://mediasmarts.ca/sites/default/files/pdfs/tipsheet/TipSheet_How_Search_Internet_Effectively.pdf.)

When you and your kids are choosing apps or games, steer them towards ones that let them be **creative**, that give them **meaningful choices**, and that they can **share with family and friends**. If they are **educational** or get you **up and moving**, even better!

- For educational apps, **less is more**: animations, sound effects, minigames, and other "bells and whistles" mostly **distract** from learning.

Use parental controls – but know their limits.

"When it comes to parental controls, the bottom line is this: they are a gate, not a wall." Dr. Jacqueline Nesi, Professor Psychiatry and Human Behavior at Brown University

Most kids want to avoid content they're not ready for, and they want us to help screen it. Besides the tips above, you can use parental controls to limit what they

can see and access. See the tip sheet *Using Parental Controls* (https://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/using-parental-controls-tip-sheet) for more.

Remember, though, that parental controls won't block everything, so they can't replace household rules and talking to your kids about their media lives.

Help kids limit who can talk to them.

Younger kids (and most teens) aren't interested in talking to people they don't know online. But lots of popular games have chat functions that let them talk with other players. Some platforms aimed at younger kids, like Scratch, also have social networking features. Search for their family centre – you can usually just search for the name of the game or site and the phrase "**family centre**" – so you can find out how to **turn off things like chat and location sharing**. If your kids want to be able to play with their friends online, have them use something like Facetime or Messenger Kids so they can talk just to them without turning on the in-game chat.

Teach kids to recognize advertising.

A lot of the apps, videos and other content that kids enjoy includes ads. By around age eight, most kids can understand that the purpose of advertising is to sell or promote products, but they can't always tell when something is an ad without help. You can use browser plugins and apps like Privacy Badger, DuckDuckGo and Blokada to reduce how many ads they see, but you should also point out when you see ads on their screens and explain how you recognized them.

Talk to kids about downloading apps and online spending.

A lot of apps and games have **in-game purchases**, which can really add up. You can use parental controls to turn off in-game buying, but sometimes it can be hard for kids to enjoy or even play games without it. Make sure your kids know that these cost real money, and think about buying gift cards or prepaid credit cards so there's a limit on how much they'll spend. (You can buy gift cards for most big games, and you can get prepaid credit cards at a Canada Post outlet.)

Talk about when and how you use devices.

This is a good time to **model** the things you'll want them to do when they start using social media, like **respecting privacy and consent**. Get in the habit of **asking your kids** before you post photos of them on your social network accounts. Explain to them what you'll do to limit who sees what you post.

You can **model good screen use** too. As much as possible, **follow the same rules as your kids** when it comes to when and where you use devices. Say out loud **why you're using your phone**, and **correct yourself** out loud when you catch yourself using it when you shouldn't. (Katie Davis, in *Technology's Child*, suggests saying "Oh, look, I've let myself get distracted by my phone! Let me put that away, and let's get back to where we were."