



FAMILY

Who's the Tech Addict— My Kids or Me?

When it was suggested they give up screens entirely, this phone-loving family said LOL. But with help from experts, they developed a healthier relationship with tech.

BY CATHERINE HONG

SLEEPING BAGS, rain pants, permethrin-infused T-shirts, at least 16 pairs of hiking socks. Cha-ching! Cha-ching! “This is all totally worth it,” I told myself as I punched my credit card number into the REI website for the second time in a week. Would my soft, indoor children even enjoy all that hiking and pooping in holes? Who cared! They were going to be off their screens.

It was last spring, and my husband and I were sending our two teenagers to summer wilderness programs—and not merely to give them the opportunity to build friendships and self-confidence in the great outdoors. Sealing the deal was the sweet promise of their forced separation from TikTok and YouTube. The fact that I wasn't getting a vacation myself didn't even bother me; detoxing the kids without hearing their complaints would be happiness enough.

Reasonable people might well wonder, “Why can't you weaklings just set some rules? After all, you're the parents!” To this I have no satisfying response, though I like to think that before the pandemic, we were keeping their screen habits somewhat in check. Back then, during the school day, there was, after all, school. There were also things known as “after-school activities.” A couple of hours before bedtime, I even (usually) remembered to take their phones away from them. But as so many other families did out of necessity during quarantine, we loosened our bossy pants and let our kids gorge on Netflix and Discord.

Teenagers find a way of getting around app limits and blocking software. Ultimately, they need to learn to self-regulate.

Now they were two addicts who careened between lost, fidgety, and enraged whenever we managed to pry away their electronics for more than a few minutes. It was nearly impossible to put either child's laptop in any meaningful time-out, because they could always claim they were "doing homework." At one point I had to lock my son's phone in the glove compartment of my car, then put the car key in my pocket because he had found all my hiding places.

I'm a lifelong book lover, and one of my great sadnesses is that neither of my children seems to have inherited my passion for reading. Previously, I had consoled myself with the thought that they just "hadn't found the right books," but now I feared that their brains were so addicted to constant LCD stimulation that the hoped-for breakthrough would never arrive. I noticed, too, that their attention spans had shrunk so alarmingly that they couldn't even properly focus on a single screen at a time. To wit: When my husband and I got the kids to agree to a family movie night, it was hard not to feel personally insulted whenever they'd scroll through their phones.

Meanwhile, we adults noticed that our own digital habits had also suffered from the ill effects of pandemic sloth. I had gone from being someone who rarely looked at Facebook to a habitual user, deliberating every free knickknack offered on my local Buy Nothing group and spending an unholy amount of time on groups devoted to my favorite old sitcom, *Bewitched*. As for my already robust Instagram usage, I scrolled through

my feed so much that I developed a repetitive stress injury in my thumb. My husband seemed to spend several hours a day after work devouring the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*—then he'd throw his device onto the floor, rub his eyes, and moan, "Get this thing away from me!" Other nights, he might boot up *Civilization VI* on the laptop and disappear until bedtime.

It became uncomfortably obvious that we needed to undergo a family screen-time audit—a clear-eyed reckoning with how much we were left to our own devices.

MY FIRST CALL was to Julianna Miner, mother of three teenagers (ages 13, 16, and 18) and author of *Raising a Screen-Smart Kid: Embrace the Good and Avoid the Bad in the Digital Age*. I called Miner first because, having scoped out her parenting blog, *Rants from Mommyland*, I could tell she wouldn't be too judgmental.

I was right. "When you take away a kid's phone, who's *really* being punished?" she joked. "Every family I talk to is in the same boat." And she could relate to why my daughter was so in thrall with TikTok. "I don't go on it much, mostly because when I do, I know I won't be able to get off," she confessed. "Once I watched cleaning videos for two hours straight. It was bananas."

As the subtitle of her book suggests, Miner likes to remind parents that the internet is more than brain-rotting fast food and candy. "There's a lot of digital broccoli out there," she told me. "If your kids are exploring social issues or learning cooking or dance moves, I wouldn't be as concerned with the time spent."

While my son was indeed playing a lot of online chess, he was also playing a heck of a lot of *Clash Royale*. "Help him to think consciously about his own usage," Miner suggested. Installing app limits and blocking software on my kids' devices would only go so far. "Teenagers find a way of getting around these roadblocks," she said (something I had already discovered). "And ultimately, they need to learn to self-regulate."

I read Miner's chapter on tech addiction with particular interest. As she explains, the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* outlines a condition known as internet gaming disorder. Symptoms include a preoccupation with internet gaming, withdrawal symptoms when not gaming, a buildup of tolerance, and lying to others about gaming usage. Based on that description, my son and maybe every other 15-year-old we knew were definitely addicted. So while it didn't seem like a damning diagnosis, Miner and I agreed that going through the symptoms in the DSM with my kids could be a useful way to open the discussion.

Let your kids see that the goal is balance, Miner explained. “Instead of issuing hard rules about how many hours they spend online, talk to them about looking at how their life is balanced as a whole. How much sleep are they getting, how are their grades, and how are their friendships?” If they insist their usage is fine, ask them to make their best argument about why they think so. Even letting them “fail” a bit could be beneficial in the long run, Miner said: “If they don’t turn in homework or they do poorly in school because they’re distracted, it will let them see they have a problem.”

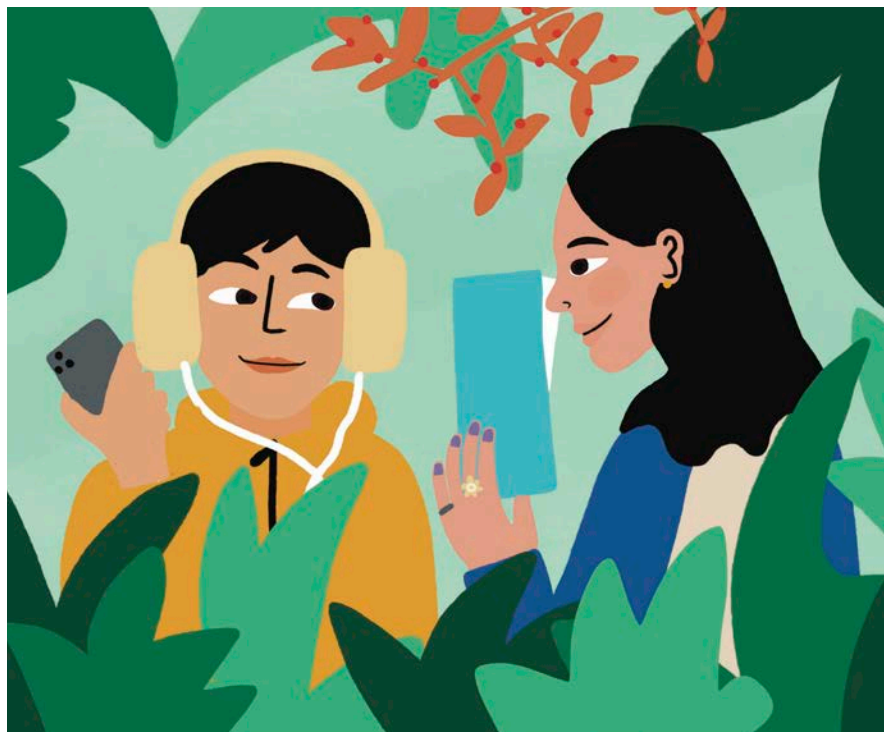
Of course, I was also worried about my own faltering balance, which led me to the very practical *How to Break Up with Your Phone* by Catherine Price. This book, which outlines a compre-

hensive strategy for creating a healthier relationship with tech, is geared not toward recalcitrant teenagers but toward people like me who actually want to cut back on their screen time. Price’s advice is mercifully sensible and concrete: Use a time-tracking app or the screen-time tracker that’s built into most smartphones. Leave your device out of reach, especially at the dining table. Delete your ever-present social media apps and check accounts using a browser instead. Disable distracting notifications, including those for email (she doesn’t advocate turning off notifications for texts and messages, because those tend to be more urgent). And create “speed bumps” that prod you to pause before picking up your device—tie a rubber band around your phone, say, or choose a

lock-screen image that provokes self-reflection. This last suggestion inspired me to swap my old lock-screen image (our family sheepadoodle) for a snapshot I’d taken of my zombielike offspring buried in their phones. It’s a reminder not to be a hypocrite. Because there, but for the grace of God, go I.

As for deleting my Instagram and Facebook apps, as Price commands, I must confess I couldn’t pull the trigger. I use Instagram for work, and the Facebook parents’ group for my town is my version of Pa Ingalls getting news at the general store. However, I did Marie Kondo a boatload of people whose frequent, blathery posts mostly sparked a waste of time. Over a couple of sessions, I pruned more than 100 accounts from my Instagram, half of which I couldn’t recall why I was following in the first place. It felt satisfying, like seeing a frenemy humbled, or popping a giant zit.

“Have you thought about trying a tech Shabbat?” my friend Michelle asked when I told her about my quest. Michelle works for Character Lab, a nonprofit that advances scientific insights to help kids thrive, and she’s always up on the latest self-improvement research. A tech Shabbat, she explained, is a weekly 24-hour period in which you and your family have your phones, computers, and TV turned off (no texts! no social media!). The idea is one that Tiffany Shlain, author of *24/6: Giving Up Screens One Day a Week to Get More Time, Creativity, and Connection*, helped popularize. A filmmaker and the founder of the Webby Awards, Shlain,



along with her husband, a professor of robotics, and their daughters, ages 18 and 12, have practiced tech Shabbat from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday every week for almost 12 years. Unplugging for one full day a week, she argues, will help you slow down, reduce stress, be more present, and regain joy.

The very thought of going a whole 24 hours without the comfort of that warm, friendly phone in my hand made my heart pound—and I shuddered to think how my teens would respond if I told them we’d be trying this gulag-style experiment. “I’m not very good with quitting things cold turkey,” I told Shlain. “Once I tried not to eat carbs for a day and only lasted through breakfast.”

But Shlain was funny and frank, and not at all holier than thou (she’s not religious, by the way). “Don’t think of it as a sacrifice,” she told me. “You’re not taking something away. You’re getting something back.”

For newbies, she explained, the keys to success with the ritual are informing your contacts you’ll be offline for 24 hours (having a working landline for urgent communication is helpful) and thoroughly planning your activities. “Ask each person in the family to think of one special activity they’d like to do, and try to make those things happen,” she said. “It could be napping, playing Frisbee, going thrifting, or eating at a favorite restaurant.” She swears that tech Shabbat saved her family’s sanity during the pandemic. “Having that one day to reset

kept every other day from blurring into the next.” And the downtime has done wonders for her creativity as a filmmaker. “I get all my best ideas on Saturday,” she said.

“It seems a bit extreme. Couldn’t I just cut back a little bit each day?” I asked her.

“You could. But I really think it’s the whole-day-ness of the ritual that makes it work. I promise, it’s life-changing,” she said, encouragingly.

THOUGH I HOPED this project would magically rehabilitate our digital lives, we’re not quite there yet. I haven’t summoned the strength to try the family tech Shabbat, but in the past couple of weeks, I’ve reduced my social media time to half what it was this summer. As for my teenagers, going back to school in person five days a week has forced them to relinquish their illicit TikTokery during school hours. Also, seeing me carry these soberly titled books around the house has made them realize I’m serious. Deep inside, they know they don’t want to end up like the kid in *The White Lotus*.

“I’m not going to play video games during the week now that I’m back in school,” my son recently told me with a straight face. I’m not buying it, but we’ll see. And at the very least, I have summer 2022 to look forward to. I’m thinking that this time they could do six or eight weeks in the wilderness. I mean, why waste all that camping gear? ■



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