



Parenting in the Glow: Reckoning with “Screen Time” Childhood

By [Esther Bennett](#)

PARENTING

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How can tech help rather than harm? When parents are present with their children and set fair rules, they tend to see steadier moods and behavior.

On a recent trip to Cuenca, Ecuador, volunteering with the Orphanage Support Services Organization, I spent a lot of time at an “hogar infantil” (children’s home) with some particularly adorable and naughty kids. For each shift, we packed a bag full of games, art projects, and activities to do with the children. Most of the time, the kids were well behaved, but at this specific orphanage, we had to keep a tight hold on zippers to prevent little fingers from stealing. We spent a lot of time playing, but we also unfortunately spent a lot of time breaking up fights.

I was confused by the difference between this orphanage and the others where I had served. The tías (“aunts” or caretakers) were just as outnumbered, the nutrition was comparable, and they had better resources for play than many of the places I had visited. The homes that these children came from were not significantly different from those of other children.

The most profound difference I noticed was a part of their nightly routine. Around 4:30 p.m. every day, they would go inside for a snack and spend the next hour watching YouTube videos or a movie until 6 p.m., when they would eat dinner. This experience sparked a journey for me of self-reflection, research, and reshaping of my perspectives on parenting in a digital age.

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I was able to identify a clear and increasingly obvious differentiation, along with some solutions supported by emerging research.

Screens Shape Behavior More Than We Think

The connection between [behavior and screen exposure](#) is an emerging field of research in family science, especially with the emergence of a generation in a media-saturated environment. Today’s parents are better equipped to prepare for and handle these additional challenges than any of the past generations, due to our life experiences growing up in the digital age. This, however, is dependent on our willingness to take responsibility for our children’s development—a responsibility affirmed in [The Family: A Proclamation to the World](#).

Studies have shown that there is a vital connection between disruptive behavior and screen exposure. A [recent analysis of kindergarten students](#) indicated that children who were given more than two hours of screen time daily experienced a lower ability to see things through to the end and an increase in atypical behaviors, such as being depressed or unhappy. Even aside from technology, it is no secret that [attention span is on the decline](#). Additionally, I am sure we are all aware of [today’s mental health crisis](#), in which approximately 18.5% and 19.1% of Americans have symptoms of [depression and anxiety](#).

I have witnessed these trends among my peers and even in my own life. Ever since making my first social media account in high school, I have found it harder to concentrate and have struggled more with symptoms of anxiety. Many of my close friends and associates battle low self-esteem, pornography use, and mental health disorders. Although these concerns cannot be solely blamed on the influence of technology, we cannot deny that it has had major negative effects on the way we think, speak, and behave.

Moreover, as I saw in Ecuador, and as the research shows, an increase in time spent watching television or movies is associated with [an increase in several problem behaviors](#) in children, including aggressive behavior, rule-breaking, social problems, more complaints, and even a decrease in sleep duration.

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Strategy 1: Collaborative Restrictions

Unfortunately, it seems that the negative effects of social media and other forms of technology are unavoidable. As early as elementary school, many assignments have been converted to online platforms, and even the strongest parental protection filters cannot prevent negative influences from surfacing in online searches. So, what can we, as current or future parents of young children, do to protect, prepare, and enable our children to succeed? How can we use technology as a developmental tool rather than merely accept it as a necessary evil? I propose an interactive approach to digital parenting involving active mediation strategies, specifically restrictive methods and co-use mediation.

[Restrictive methods include](#) tools such as filters, time limits, electronic tracking software, or even limitations on where in the house devices are permitted (for example, bedrooms and bathrooms). Although the idea often brings up feelings of constraint or authoritarianism, parental restrictions can actually be effective when executed correctly. One recommended strategy is to hold [age-appropriate discussions](#) between parents and children concerning the purposes and dangers of technology and the personality and developmental status of the child, allowing [the child a certain level of autonomy](#) over what restrictions are appropriate.

For example, a conversation might look like this:

Parent: **Explains that technology is necessary for the child's schoolwork and might be used to communicate with friends, but that it can also become a distraction in both academic and social progress. Also chooses to explain or review the dangers and prevalence of pornography.**

Child: **May ask clarifying questions or add observations about their needs and uses for technology as guided by the parent.**

Parent: **Gives suggestions of what restrictive methods may be used and explains their benefits and pitfalls. Asks the child what he/she thinks is appropriate for his/her circumstances**

Child: **Adds his/her input and comes to a conclusion which can either be approved by or further discussed with the parent.**

Research shows an [associated improvement in parent-child relationship](#) satisfaction, an [increase in socioemotional orientation](#), higher-quality parent-child communication, and even [a decrease in time spent watching TV](#) or using electronic devices with the application of this approach when addressing technology use and [other issues facing youth](#) and children.

From personal experience, I suggest a word of caution when using restrictive methods. Adolescents are brilliant detectors of hypocrisy. If parents choose to apply generalized restrictions to the family, they should also be willing to follow these restrictions. Failing to do so could create resentment on the part of the children or adolescents, who may perceive such an action as unjust and refuse to comply.

Strategy 2: Co-Use Mediation

Another research-supported suggestion for encouraging child development through technology is sometimes called co-use mediation or guidance. Some studies even suggest that parental co-use is [the most effective protective measure](#) to avoid or [minimize the negative effects of media](#). Co-use mediation, as the name suggests, involves the use of technology alongside children or adolescents.

This approach could take many forms. For example, a parent might watch an age-appropriate show with their young child and follow it up with a discussion about how the characters behaved and interacted. They might consider both the positive and negative messages of the show and ask questions to help the child understand and apply what they learned. Alternatively, a parent might sit down with their older child to watch a movie or play a video game as [an opportunity to bond](#). Such an activity may or may not be followed up with a conversation about the media. Co-use mediation can be as simple as parents being present while a child uses a device.

Digital tools can amplify positive messages.

I experienced this method first-hand as a missionary for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The standards we were invited to follow included Safeguards for Using Technology, found in *Preach My Gospel* chapter 2, which discusses being accountable to each other as a companionship and only using devices when the screen is visible to both companions (with the exception of personal matters such as communicating with family). Although extreme, I learned from experience the benefits of this program, which changed my habits for the better.

The application of active co-use mediation is associated with [lower levels of aggression](#), risky sexual behavior, and substance use, as well as [increases in parent-child relationship](#) quality and social-emotional connections. Evidently, parental mediation strategies have the potential to benefit both children and parents.

Co-use is also a doorway to redemptive uses of media. Digital tools can [amplify positive messages](#).

Parental co-use admittedly requires much more work and time commitment on the part of parents. I acknowledge that for some families, applying this approach may be infeasible due to the demands of careers and other activities. As a result, these principles may be adapted to fit the needs and circumstances of individual families.

As previously discussed, technology is associated with many negative outcomes, including poor behavior, mental health challenges, and a lower attention span. When considering parenthood, these obstacles can feel overwhelming and impossible to prevent or overcome. However, as we engage proactively with the rapidly developing

research on the subject and practice improving our own habits, I believe we have the potential to positively shape child development and create better outcomes, strengthening our families and communities.

About the author

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Esther Bennett is a student in the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University. She takes particular interest in studying environmental effects on physical, emotional, and social development.