

THE HEALTH PROFESSIONALS' GUIDE FOR A FAMILY DIGITAL DETOX

UNPLUG! to reconnect



HEALTH PROFESSIONALS FOR SAFER SCREENS

This guide has been developed by experts at Health Professionals for Safer Screens, led by Dr Helen Thomas, GP. We would like to acknowledge the support and guidance received from Hilarie Cash, CCO at reSTART Life.



VISIT HPFSS



INTRODUCTION

Increasing evidence shows that smartphones, social media, gaming, and other screen use can harm our children. This harm can impact our whole health:



It even risks their safety through grooming, scams and unwanted pornography.

Reducing your family's screen use, especially smartphones, can feel challenging, as it is currently normal in society to use them for everything, and everything seems set up to keep us using them. The feel-good chemical dopamine drives our device use and keeps us hooked. Finding real-life alternatives for this is how we make the change.

Getting ready

As parents or carers, take time to read through this guide and consider all the options. Consider taking notes on how your family currently uses devices and whether there are any changes you can start making as adults.

Talk openly to your family about your plans and set a date for the family to start talking more and getting on the path.

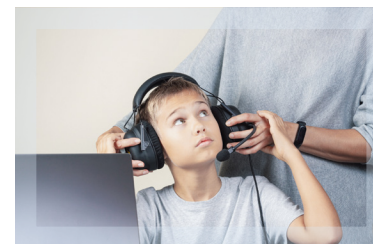
Keep safe

The following information and steps are provided to guide you, but it must feel right and safe for your family. If your child's behaviour feels challenging or reducing their device use triggers strong emotions, then always seek support from your GP or healthcare team.

The best approach to begin this plan is to discuss our concerns with our children.. We should share the information that informs our decisions and, importantly, seek our children's input. It is also crucial for us, as adults, to model these behaviours by demonstrating that we can reduce our device use.

Pathways

We can choose **two paths** reduce device usage for our families. This decision should be based on your understanding of your children, and how they approach challenges.



PATH A

involves replacing small amounts of screen time with real-world experiences. Gradually, screen time decreases as real-life interactions and experiences become more fulfilling.



PATH B

is for the whole family to agree to remove devices, have zero screen time, and slowly, after discussion, add what really matters. It may be some device use returns, but usually, real life comes out on top. This approach is used in inpatient rehab settings; it is more severe but effective in resetting our children's brains.



1. Reflection

Both options start with reflection – thinking and talking about the pros and cons of screen use and what real-life experiences have been lost, and what could be restarted or introduced to replace screen time.



2. Replace



Studies have shown that replacing tech time with rewarding alternatives is the best option to support development and reduce screen time.

Social opportunities such as play dates, especially if they are outdoor and active, really help our children develop healthy

habits and strong social connections and friendships. This, in turn, can improve mental health and communication skills.

Alternatives don't have to cost anything. Activities like football in the park and den building in the woods are great. Even chores, done together or giving independence, can offer tech-free time and development. These activities would vary based on your child's age.

Some families created Phone Free Fundays, where children had tech-free play dates filled with crafts, hide and seek, pizza making and ten-pin bowling. These events became so popular that too many other families wanted to join.

Aim: Make a list of the things your child would like to do instead of being on their device. Start with 30 min chunks and increase every few days, adding in a new idea.



3. Reduce



Device use needs to be reduced both in attention and location.

Screen-free zones: Setting clear boundaries like “no devices in bedrooms” or “no phones during meals” can reduce device time and foster family conversations, sleep, friendships, and creativity. Some families use a box to store devices at home or

during the night to minimise distractions and promote unity. Ensuring the first and last hours of the day are device-free improves concentration in the day and sleep at night.



Reduce the apps: Turn off notifications, noise and non-essential apps. Carefully review the apps on your child's device. Are they safe, useful, or can they be removed?

Build Trust: Encourage your child to engage in chosen activities to naturally reduce device use. Stick to agreed limits, like allowing device time after 30 minutes. Building trust reduces resistance to change. Remember, careful listening and honesty are crucial, as this transition might be difficult for them. And role model usage.

Aim: Look at how much time is spent on devices and where. Agree on allowed/restricted phone zones and chunk the time spent on devices into manageable amounts to start reducing by replacing with fun alternatives.

Could this be screen free?		What could we do instead?
Examples		
Bedrooms	Yes	read a bedtime story
Bathrooms	Yes	have a place to keep magazines, comics, books
Car	Yes	listen to a book or a podcast
Outdoors	Yes	always bring a frisbee or a ball to the park



4. Review

Regular check-ins as a family are important, as talking together has been shown to improve mental health. Are children and adults sticking to the plan? Are there new ideas for replacing device time? What is going well or not so well?

It takes about 3-4 weeks for changes to settle in. Over each week, aim to reduce and replace around 30 minutes every few days.

With the average UK teen spending 5 hrs a day on their device, reducing this down could take a couple of weeks.

As parents, we have the ability to make safe decisions for our children, even if it means changing our minds. Just because we did things one way in the past doesn't mean we can't change our approach. Studies show that if just 25% of a group makes a change, others are likely to follow. Who could you inspire to make a change?



Grab your family's favourite meal or treat and print a Family Plan from HPFSS. Take some time to review where you are while enjoying time and treats together.



5. Reconnect

Hopefully, by now, you notice reconnections for your children.

Have you noticed more time as a family, time with friends and time reconnecting with old hobbies or forgotten passions? Remember, this will take time, so keep making those small changes together.

You may notice changes in how your child wants to be connected online. Check for apps or games no longer in use and delete them. Discuss with your child which ones are important to them.

This plan aims to rebalance the time spent on devices and time spent experiencing real life – how has the shift changed for you?

When our young people spend too long on devices, we know they can feel lonely and anxious. Reducing time on devices is helping our family's well-being.

Aim: Head back to your starting reflections. Have you made some of the changes you wanted? What is the balance now between device use and real life, what new things are you enjoying the most?



Dopamine exists in us to reward success and learn, but it also drives addiction that can interfere with our behaviour.

Social media and gaming plug into our dopamine and hook us in wasting our time and attention, so we miss out on hobbies, friendships and real-world experiences.

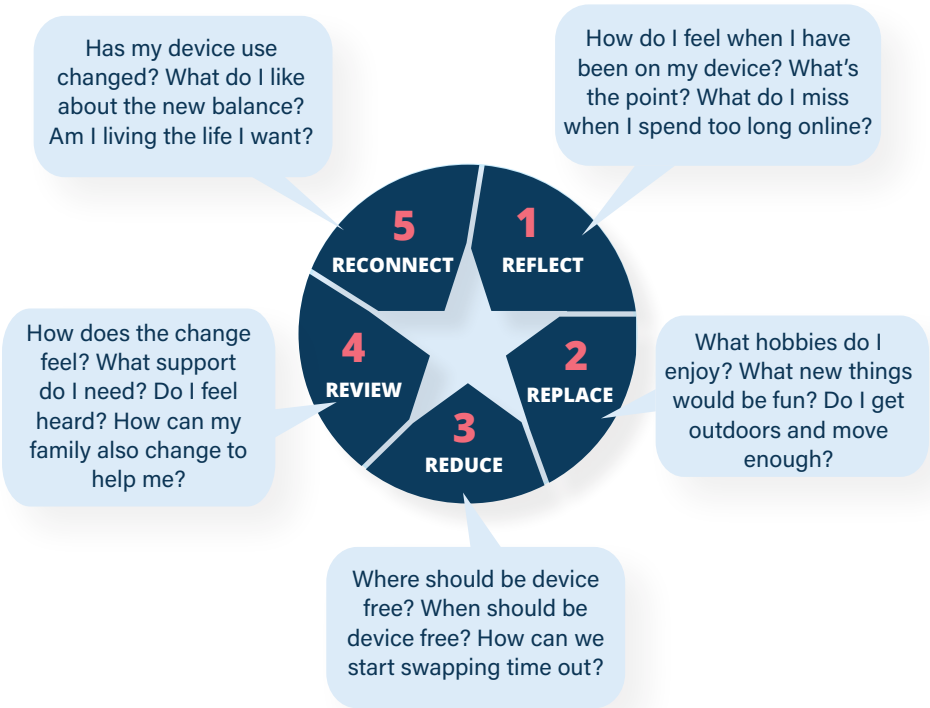
Bringing back real-world dopamine hits can reconnect our children to their childhood, their development and improve their mental health.

We know it's not easy, but these stages can help you navigate starting the change.



Importantly as parents, what do you want your child's childhood to look like?

More guidance can be found online at Health Professionals for Safer Screens including family plans, screen time guidelines and guides for children, young people and families.



References

Firth, J et al (2025). Promoting healthy digital devices usage: Recommendations for youth and parents. World Psychiatry, 23(1), pp1-2. doi:10.1002/WPS.21261

Forrester, D et al (2021). Motivational Interviewing for working with children and families. J Kingsley Publishers.