

A photograph of four teenagers (two girls and two boys) standing against a teal background with horizontal lines. They are all looking at their smartphones. The girl on the left is wearing a yellow shirt and blue jeans. The boy next to her is wearing a red and white plaid shirt over a white t-shirt. The girl next to him is wearing a grey and white striped shirt and grey pants. The boy on the far right is wearing a blue t-shirt and blue jeans, and is holding a yellow cable. The text "Parents' Guide to Technology" is overlaid in the center in a large, white, sans-serif font. The year "2026" is written below the title in a smaller, orange, sans-serif font.

Parents' Guide to Technology

2026

plugged in[®]
BY FOCUS ON THE FAMILY



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A Letter from the Director

Dear Moms and Dads,

Welcome to the 2026 edition of *Plugged In's* Parents' Guide to Technology.

In this guide, we'll give you a look at today's ever-changing technological landscape. We'll explain how technology is changing us, too—how we work, how we play and how we interact with the world at large. And we'll pay special attention to how technology and social media can impact your kids—in both good ways and bad.

But I think of this as more than just a guide: It's a toolbox. We'll do more than point out the problems; we'll propose solutions on how to fix them, too—at least in your own home.

We'll offer tips on how to rein in your children's screen time (and we might gently suggest that yours could use a little curbing, too). We'll advise you on how to navigate the bewildering world of social media—and how to protect your sons and daughters from the dangers therein. We'll even give you a little advice on how to talk about these ticklish topics with your kids. Listen, we know how hard it can be to tell a teenager to put down her phone. But we have a few thoughts on how to make those hard conversations a little easier.

We're pretty proud of the work we've done here. We think this toolbox, if used wisely, can fix many a tech-related breakdown in your family.

But I have a bit of a caveat—and it goes back to what I wrote at the outset: our *ever-changing* technological landscape. Social media platforms come and go. The influence of artificial intelligence is growing exponentially. Shiny new phones can feel old and outdated in a few months. And we know, as well as anyone, that this guide will have an expiration date, too.



Which is why we're committed to offering you an updated (and free) guide every year, giving you fresh information and new tools. And, of course, we always offer up-to-date information and advice at Pluggedin.com.

And here's the really good news: Some things never change. God's love for us. Your love for your family. And *Plugged In's* desire to help you on every step of your parenting journey.

Hope you enjoy this guide, and best to you.

Paul Asay | Director of Plugged In



SECTION

1

Screentime Overload

The Average Teen Spends More Than Half Their Day on Screens

I know what many of you are probably thinking: “Wait, that can’t be right, can it?”

Sadly, studies say that this is true. According to a census conducted by Common Sense Media in 2021, **teens spend an average of eight hours and 39 minutes** using their screens for entertainment purposes. Other sources throughout the last several years have confirmed that **teens are indeed spending an inordinate amount of time** glued to their screens. And nearly half of all teenagers admit that they are online “**almost constantly**.”

So, if we assume that teenagers are getting at least eight hours of sleep each night (although screens are often stealing away that sleep time, too), that means they’re spending more than half of their 16 waking hours in front of a screen—and that doesn’t even account for time spent doing schoolwork.

But what’s causing teens to spend so much time on screens?

Ease of access is certainly one cause: In 2024, Pew Research Center found that **95% of teens had access to a smartphone** at home. However, there’s more to it than that. After all, if having access was the only thing holding back kids, then there’d probably be a lot more adolescents reading their Bibles nonstop. (Man, wouldn’t that be an incredible thing to behold?)

Rather, research is finding other culprits in the screentime battle, such as a lack of screentime regulation, the addictive nature of screens themselves and the perceived benefits—such as speed and simplicity—that screens provide. In the next couple of articles, we’ll unpack each of these three topics, helping you to understand where these problems originate and (hopefully) providing you with answers for how to address them.

Regulating Screen Time

By Adam Holz

Sometimes as parents, we can look at something and say, “Um, yeah. That’s a bad idea.” Like, say, teens car surfing on the hood of a moving vehicle. It’s immediately obvious that something could go wrong and that the consequences could be severe.

Other times, we have a nagging sense that maybe something isn’t the *best* idea, but we’re not as immediately sure why. Like, say, kids having screens in the bedroom at night.

“But, Mom, why can’t I have my phone with me in the bedroom?” our daughter whines.

“Because ... because I said so!” we manage to stammer out.

Turns out that impulse is the right one. There are many good reasons why kids having phones in their rooms at night really isn’t a good idea. So, let’s look at a couple of those reasons, then talk about setting boundaries in this area for your family.

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The Problems With Screens in the Bedroom

It doesn't take a massive leap of the imagination to identify several reasons why kids with screens in their bedrooms is potentially problematic:

Too much screen time. At the most basic level, phones in bedrooms—especially if doors are shut—eliminate almost any accountability with regard to how much time kids are spending on their phones. And for many teens, that might mean an hour or two or *more* of **mindless scrolling before bed**, which eats into the total amount of sleep they get.

Blue-light induced insomnia. And it's not just the *amount* of time they spend on screens, but *how* that exposure right before bed interrupts natural sleep patterns. The **blue, ultraviolet light emitted by screens** of any kind essentially tells our brains, "It's daytime!" That biological reaction can lead to screen-induced insomnia. And what's one of the easiest things to do when you can't sleep? Look at your phone, of course, further reinforcing the problem.

Content concerns. Then, of course, there's the question of *what* our kids are looking at online. If they're tempted by illicit content of any kind, the lack of relational presence in the bedroom simply creates an environment with zero accountability and plenty of opportunity to indulge in whatever problematic material they're drawn to. Internet filters may partially address that concern. However, the more unmonitored screen time your kids have, the easier it might become to circumvent those barriers.

Sexting. This, of course, is the practice of sending and/or receiving visually and/or verbally explicit texts and/or images. If you have a teen who's tempted to send or receive sexually explicit content, a private bedroom paired with a closed door and unlimited access to a phone is a dangerous combination.

Middle-of-the-night texts. Sometimes, it's not even our kids who make unhealthy choices: It's their friends. Our children might be sound asleep ... until that text-alert vibration awakens them at 3:32 a.m. Between curiosity and the desire many adolescents have to respond quickly, getting up to check their phones may be a nearly impossible urge for them to resist.

Establishing Healthy Screen Boundaries

To address the screens-in-the-bedroom issues listed above (and perhaps others you've come across in your parenting journey), we have to set healthy boundaries as parents. Boundaries, of course, help define when, where, why, what and how we engage in—or disengage from—certain behaviors. Here are a few to consider:

Set a healthy example. It's easy to talk about too much screen time or phones in the bedroom as if it were primarily a problem with “the kids.” But in reality, if our kids are on their phones too much, we as parents probably are, as well. To change their habits, we'll most likely need to start with our own—which means setting an example and removing phones from our bedrooms before bed, too. Kids naturally do what they see their parents doing. So if you feel like your family's habits are unhealthy in this area, you'll probably need to start with a self-assessment, changing some of your own habits, patterns and boundaries *first*.

Turn screens off 30 to 60 minutes before bed. Remember how I talked about the way ultraviolet light wakes up our brains if we're looking at screens at night? That's true for both kids *and* adults. Experts suggest a 30- to 60-minute screen-free period before turning in for the night, to allow our brains time to “unplug” from the insomnia-inducing influence of blue light.

Leave screens in their own “beds” for the night. One way we can begin to cultivate screen-free bedrooms at night is by putting our phones “to bed” as well. Some families have a basket or box where phones get “checked in” together for the evening when it’s time to wind down. And the practice of physically relinquishing our phones together, as a family, can help your teens see that it’s not just about them. Rather it’s a habit everyone in the household is developing.

Encourage non-screen-based activities, such as reading or personal devotional time. Sometimes we can see establishing new boundaries such as these primarily in terms of loss, of what we’re giving up. But freeing up time before bed also creates an opportunity to focus on other things. A short list of suggestions could include reading books (**which can help you fall asleep faster**), spending some time in personal devotions or just journaling about the events of the day.

Consider going “back to the future.” Many of us use our phones as alarm clocks, which is no surprise given how convenient they are. But perhaps we should turn back the clock and consider the alarm clocks of yesteryear. These can be a great “analog” way to reclaim space that phones have quietly usurped. Think about it: When you use your phone as an alarm clock, it’s the last thing you handle at night and the first thing you touch in the morning. So consider locating a physical alarm clock to cover this function. You might have one buried in storage somewhere. Thrift stores may also have some cheap options. Or if you’re feeling indulgent, you can even buy a new “old” alarm clock online.

Cultivating a screenless culture in your family. Finally, putting boundaries around the when and where of screens in the evening sends another important message to our teens: There's more to life than what we see online. Our phones don't have to have the last word at the end of the day—or the first word of a new day, for that matter.

Making these changes, like trying to form or redirect any habit, won't necessarily feel easy or natural. But in time, they can pay healthy dividends for our families. As the author of Hebrews noted:

“For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”

- HEBREWS 12:11

Thanks for reading! We hope you've enjoyed this sample.

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