

7 Parent-Tested Tips to Unplug and Play



What does reducing screen time do for a family? Not only does it open more time and space for children to explore, play, and imagine, but it helps families follow smoother routines and discover new hobbies and interests. Plus, it encourages kids to establish healthy habits and helps caregivers reconnect, too!

Not sure where to start? Take some inspiration from these seven Boston-area parents who attended our Healthy Kids in a Digital World workshops and reduced screen time in their homes! Whether you want to go completely screen-free from the start, or try out a couple of screen-free meals every week, read on to see how these families did it and what less screen time meant for them.

7 Parent-Tested Tips to Unplug and Play

- 1 Rearrange the furniture
- 2 Start the day screen-free
- 3 Enjoy screen-free meals
- 4 Encourage sensory play
- 5 Explore the outdoors
- 6 Create activity kits
- 7 Limit your own screen time

1) REARRANGE THE FURNITURE

Turn your living room into a place for family interaction and play by arranging the furniture so the TV is not the focus of the room.

Melissa thought her sons, Azariah (age 4) and Caleb (age 2), were spending too much time with screens. In a typical week, they'd watch three hours of TV on weekdays and two hours per day on the weekend. So, Melissa decided to make some changes to the spaces that her sons usually spent time in.

First, Melissa moved the television from the living room and into the family's office. Then, she turned the old TV stand into an activity table for Azariah and Caleb, where they could play with their toys, use playdough, create artwork, eat snacks, and more.

Melissa was right to think that her sons might benefit from less screen time. Research shows that young children who watch more television show increased aggression,¹ but kids who spend less time with screens spend more time with their families,^{2,3} fall asleep faster,⁴ sleep longer,^{5,6,7} and have more time for creative play.⁸

There were a few bumps in the road at first – but the change was well worth it!

"When we first moved the TV out of the living room and stopped letting the boys watch it, I noticed they were aggressive toward each other. It was like they didn't know how to interact nicely!" Melissa said, "but after a while without screen time, they began to use their imaginations a lot more and learned how to entertain themselves. They still fight sometimes, of course, but they get along so much better now."

Now, Azariah and Caleb aren't getting any screen time and Melissa's husband likes that the living room feels "more like a family room" now. Even better, the family is now spending more meaningful time together, such as gardening when it's warm enough!



2) START THE DAY SCREEN-FREE

Create a morning routine that doesn't involve screens.

Mirei was struggling with getting both 4-year-old Connie and 21-month-old Kai dressed and ready to leave home every morning. Mirei often let Connie watch TV while getting Kai ready, but she wanted to try something new.

So, she removed screens from the kids' morning routine. The results amazed her.

"I thought TV was helping in the morning, but it was really making things harder," Mirei said. And she's right – screen time has been linked to attention problems in children.⁹ Kids who spend less time with screens, however, do better in school^{10,11} and have more time for interacting with caring adults.^{12,13,14}

Without any screen time in the morning, the start of the day is going much more smoothly. Connie plays on her own more and pays better attention. And, Mirei found that they had an extra 15-20 minutes in the morning, which they use to enjoy their walk to the bus stop and observe the birds and the trees on their way!



3) ENJOY SCREEN-FREE MEALS

Make meals a time for your family to talk about the day without distraction from TV, smartphones, and other screens.

Whenever 6-year-old Maya and 20-month-old Andrew watched TV while during meals, they didn't eat well. Instead of focusing on their meals, they would be distracted by whatever was on TV. In fact, Maya would tell her parents that she was done with her food so she could focus on the TV.

Sarai, Maya and Andrew's mom, decided that she wanted them to have less screen time overall. So, she made some changes in her family's habits and routines. Sarai made more art with the kids, decreased her own screen time, and turned off the TV when no one was watching. But most importantly, the family went from having the TV on during 4-6 meals every week to just one meal per week.

Research shows that screen-free family meals encourage healthy eating^{15,16} and children who spend less time with screens eat healthier^{17,18,19} – and that's certainly true for Sarai's family. Now that the TV is off during most meals, both kids are less distracted and eat better. Maya eats until she feels full, and there's more family conversation at the table.

"When the TV was on during meals there was chaos, noise, and distraction," Sarai said. "While mealtime can still be a little hectic with two young kids, it's nice to have more peace, quiet, and focus while we eat. Now during dinner we talk as a family. And after dinner, since the TV is already off, it usually stays that way and the kids play together instead. It's a nice way to end the day."



4) ENCOURAGE SENSORY PLAY

Provide easy play options, like sensory play—which gives children the chance to explore using their sight, touch, and other senses—to engage kids while you get things done around the house.

When Jenny needed to get things done around the house, she frequently used screens to keep her 2-year-old daughter Avery occupied. When Jenny thought about cutting back screen time for her daughter, she wondered if she'd be able to find enough screen-free activities to keep Avery busy. As it turns out, there were!

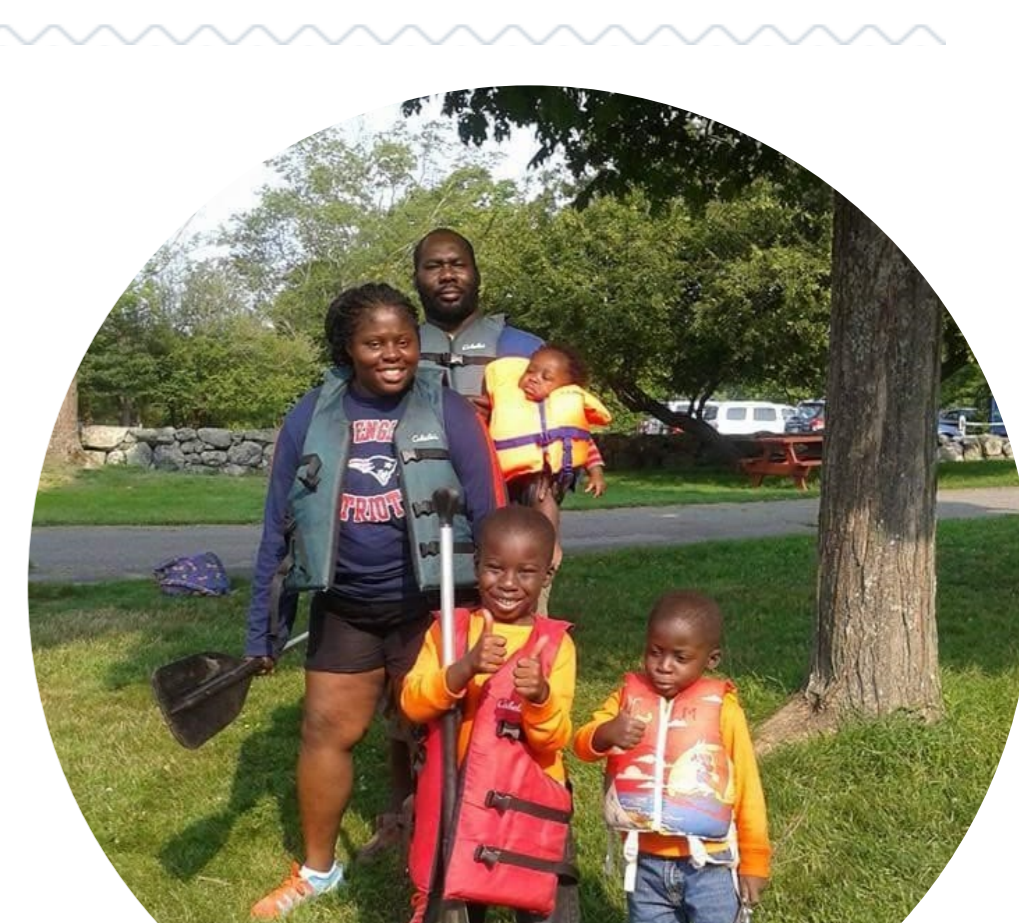
Jenny set up water and toys at the kitchen sink so Avery could engage in sensory play – play that gives children the chance to explore using their sight, touch, and other senses. Because young children learn through exploring with their whole bodies,²⁰ sensory play is a great way to support their development while keeping them busy.

Now, Avery engages in sensory play for long stretches. Jenny is able to get chores done while Avery plays nearby with playdough and art supplies, or with soap and water in the kitchen sink.

"When I had to do chores or other things around the house, I often relied on screens to entertain my daughter," Jenny said. "But sensory play keeps her occupied while I'm busy, and she really enjoys it. We've even been able to eliminate screen time altogether on weekdays!"

Now, Avery keeps herself happily entertained at home and is engaged in much more dramatic play since her screen time was significantly reduced. Avery doesn't seem to miss the screen time and enjoys the other activities more.

Jenny's advice for setting up sensory play is to keep cleanup manageable. She suggests using just a little bit of soap and a few carefully selected toys or safe kitchen items for water play. For art activities, she uses a small table so the mess is contained.



5) EXPLORE THE OUTDOORS

Spend quality time together by planning outdoor activities that the whole family can enjoy.

Since Patrice's family began prioritizing spending time outdoors together, they've been able to make some great memories together. It all started when Patrice asked her husband to spend more quality time with their kids, Isaiah (age 6), Josiah (age 3), and Patric Max (age 1). To do so, he added a slide, swing, and even a camping space to their city backyard.

Spending time in nature is important for healthy child development²¹ and research has shown that it even seems to reduce ADHD symptoms in children.²² Plus, as Patrice's family discovered, spending time outdoors is just plain fun!

The family started inviting neighbors over for bonfires and camping in the backyard, and when the children's grandmother visited from Jamaica, they showed her how to make s'mores. Patrice's family enjoyed their time outdoors together so much that they decided to take a few camping trips over the summer.

On their first trip, the family left their devices at home – and it was wonderful! Patrice and her husband talked for hours together, something they hadn't enjoyed in a long time. As the family traded screen time for more outdoors time, their communication vastly improved. Not only do Patrice and her husband now enjoy more long conversations together, but their children talk to each other more, too!

Camping and exploring is now a big part of the family's life. In fact, Isaiah loves the outdoors so much that he joined the Boy Scouts, and has insisted that he'll set up the tent all by himself the next time the family goes camping.

"The experience the kids are getting now that they have less screen time is so amazing," Patrice said. "The tablets my two older sons had are broken. I'm not replacing them, and they won't even ask for them. We're having so much fun doing other things."

6) CREATE ACTIVITY KITS

Make activity kits using supplies you already have to keep children busy during transitions and other tricky times of the day.

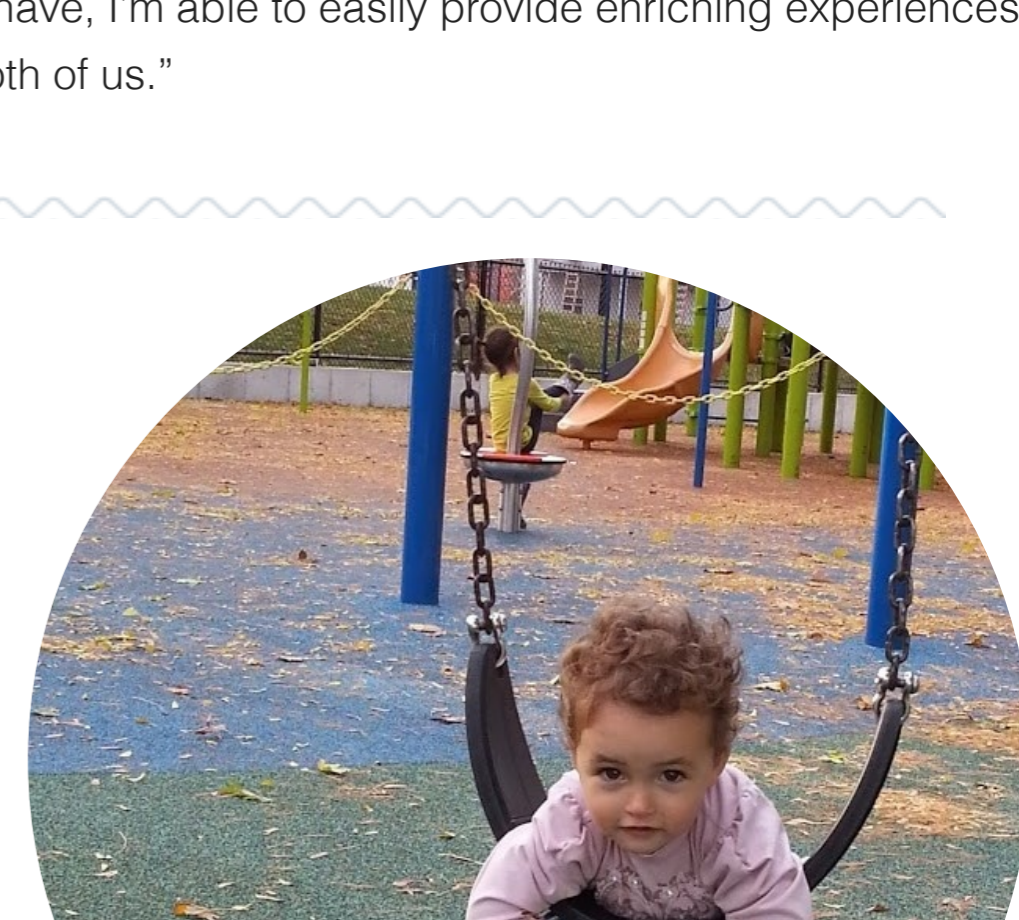
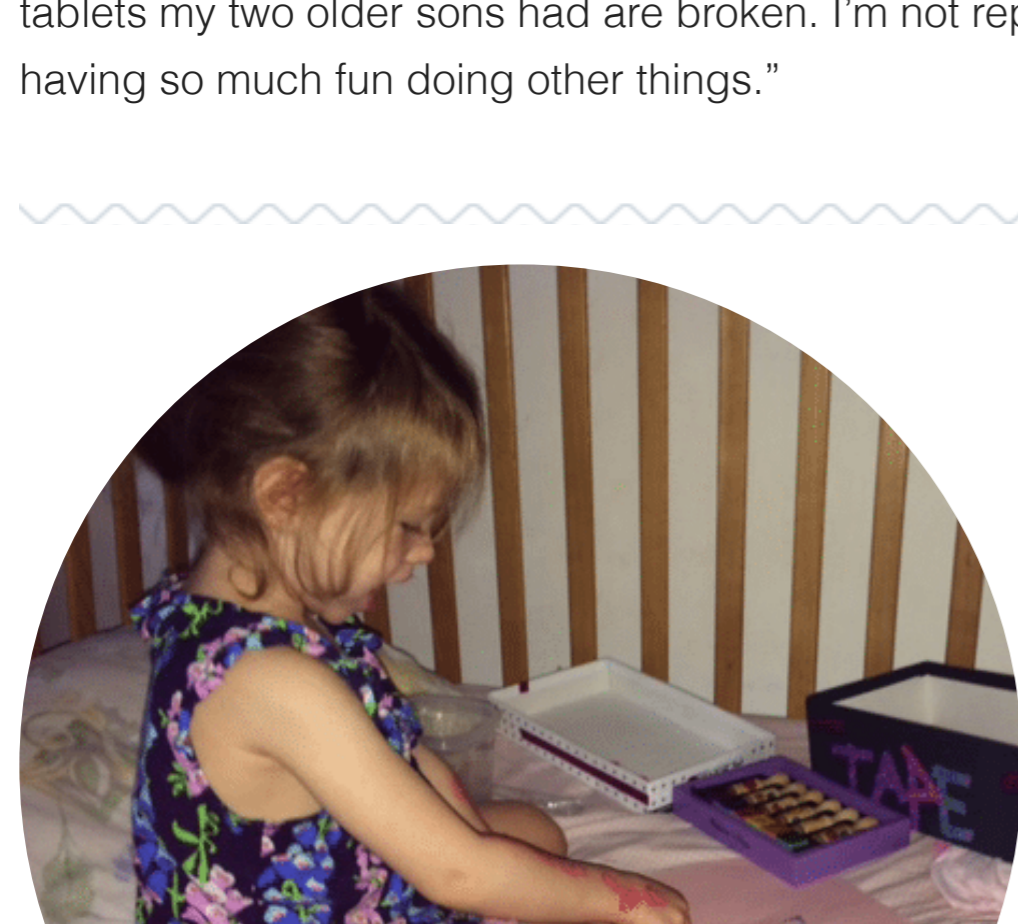
During transitions or lulls in the day, Beverly used to use screens to entertain her 3-year-old daughter Binah. She realized that if she had more ready-to-go activities, though, she wouldn't need to use screens to keep Binah busy. So she decided to make activity kits full of toys and materials that she could give her daughter at any time.

Activity kits help reduce screen time and they can provide an opportunity for children to children as well. Including toys like puzzles, blocks, and shape games in an activity kit can help children develop spatial skills, which are linked to success in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics).²³

Beverly went to a local shoe store and asked for some shoe boxes, which the store happily provided for free. Together, she and Binah decorated the boxes and organized the toys and art supplies into separate containers. Now, instead of reaching for a smartphone or tablet during transitions or downtime, Beverly grabs an activity kit for Binah.

Although Beverly says it was a challenge to get organized and sort all the toys, it was worth the effort. Since she has a system for switching the boxes up, the activities stay fresh and fun for her daughter. Beverly notices that Binah plays more creatively now that these go-to activities replace screen time during the day. And Beverly feels like a more organized, confident parent.

"I found myself using screens with my daughter to get through periods of the day when I didn't have a plan," Beverly said. "Now, using toys and materials we already have, I'm more able to easily provide enriching experiences for her at those times. It's been totally life-changing for both of us."



7) LIMIT YOUR OWN SCREEN TIME

Take a break from your smartphone and other screens during periods of the day to give your child your uninterrupted attention.

Even though Adina's 2-year-old daughter Shana never got much screen time, Adina realized that cutting back on her own screen time would be good for her daughter and their relationship. By modeling healthy screen time behavior, Adina could help Shana form her own good habits.²⁴ Plus, screen-free activities like reading or playing with toys enable higher quality communication between caregivers and children.²⁵

So, the adults in the family started limiting their use of smartphones and other screens in Shana's presence so they could be more present with her and with each other.

After reducing her own screen time, Adina noticed that Shana's behavior and play improved—especially in the evening hours. Having her mom's full attention when Shana was tired kept things calmer and made their interactions much more pleasant.

"Before, when I was distracted by my phone, she would get cranky and frustrated when I wouldn't focus on what she was trying to tell me or ask me. It resulted in unwanted behavior and stressful interactions," Adina said. "But now that I'm paying full attention to her, we avoid that. We focus on each other and have a stronger bond now."

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89 South St. Boston, MA 02111
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