



Over the past few months, as families have been largely quarantined to their homes and as schools have gone online, Americans have increased the time spent on their devices by about **sixty percent**. A portion of that time has been necessary, as we work and learn from home. But it is important to remember that boundaries and limits on technology for parents and children alike are still healthy and appropriate – even during these unprecedented times.

### **Boundaries:**

- Not all screen time is created equal. Think of screen time like calories. There are healthy sources of calories and unhealthy sources. Binge watching six episodes of a Netflix show would be akin to eating an entire carton of ice cream. However, sitting down with your family for a movie night or having a “Zoom Dinner” with a group of friends are healthy screen time opportunities.
- Social media has been a lifeline for many as we have been forced to socially distance from one another, but we need to be conscious of how we are using these platforms. Using social media to stay connected with our friends and families is obviously healthy. Spending hours scrolling through our feeds and consuming every video and article we can find tends to increase anxiety and depression.
- Now, more than ever, we must set personal and professional boundaries when it comes to technology. It is not necessary to always be available to respond to texts, emails, calls, and notifications 24 hours a day, even though you may be working from home. Make it clear to family, friends, and colleagues that there are times when you will not be available.
- Talk to your kids about how they present themselves and behave online. Discuss the potential consequences for how certain behaviors displayed online can impact their present and future. Encourage phone calls, video calls and face to face conversations whenever possible, especially when there is potential for conflict.
- Do not sleep with phones or tablets. Checking social media, texts, and emails right before falling asleep overloads the working memory of the brain, leading to noisy, thought-filled sleep. Set up a family charging station. Before bed, everyone turns their phone on mute or “do not disturb” and plugs into the station.
- Technology issues have to be an ongoing discussion within our families and our schools, throughout and after we come out of this pandemic. Resist simply setting down the rules and forgetting about them. Take time to reflect on behaviors, adjust when necessary, and challenge bad habits when they creep back into the home.

## Risky Apps:

**Snapchat:** Often called “the sexting app,” Snapchat allows users to send a photo or short video that is viewed by the recipient for a maximum 10 seconds, after which it self-destructs. No evidence remains that the photo or video was ever sent. Teens and tweens use this app with a false sense of security for pictures they believe cannot be saved. However, the recipient can capture the images using a screenshot or by taking a picture using another device, making copying and sharing easy.

**TikTok:** This social media platform has become the most downloaded app of 2020. In the last year, the platform has gone from 150 million to 800 million active users. TikTok gives content creators the opportunity to share 15 second short videos with friends, family, or publicly to the entire world. Videos range from funny sketches to lip-sync videos featuring special effects. There are multiple concerns for parents whose children use this app. TikTok has been under scrutiny for inappropriate content and access to online sexual predators.

**PornHub:** Along with these apps, another issue that must be discussed is that of internet pornography. Internet pornography has become widely popular, to the extent that it is now part of our mainstream culture. There are hundreds of pornography websites, with the largest being Pornhub. This site recently launched a “sexual education service” called the **PornHub Sexual Wellness Center**, masquerading as a legitimate sex education site. Internet pornography is free, extremely violent, highly addictive and psychologically damaging. It is the cause of widespread sexual dysfunction, marital problems, depression, and anxiety. Young men come to believe that what they view on internet pornography is what healthy intimate relationships look like, and young women can come to believe that what they see in these videos is what is expected of them. All parents are encouraged to speak to their youth about the dangers associated with viewing pornography.

### Example Parental Control Apps

With the widespread access that youth have to inappropriate content and to all of the potential dangers that exist online, it may be necessary for parents to install monitoring software on their devices. The installation of this software should always be made clear to the youth on whose device it is being installed. There is no need to do this in secret. The purpose of these apps is not to snoop or to spy, but rather to keep kids safe online. If monitoring software is something that your family is considering, these are two of the top-rated apps on the market today. It should be noted that there are privacy concerns with all monitoring software. Utilizing these services allows these companies access to the content of any device on which the software is installed.

**Mobicip Safe Browser with Parental Control** works with Android and Apple devices as well as computers. It is a cloud-filtering system that helps create a safe internet environment. Parents can adjust the internet filter and monitor browsing history on multiple tablets, smartphones, and computers remotely from any computer or mobile device. There is also a YouTube filter provided with this service. It uses an algorithm to analyze content of YouTube videos, and will block inappropriate videos. This service also restricts which apps can be downloaded, and parents can set time limits on individual phones and devices. It is a Parent’s Choice Award and Tech & Learning Award of Excellence winner.

**Bark** is an app that monitors texts, chats, emails and social media platforms for serious issues like cyberbullying, pornography, sexual predators, profanity, and suicidal remarks. Parents receive text/email alerts when something problematic occurs on their child’s device. These alerts do not provide full access to everything on the phone, instead it shows only what has been flagged as problematic. Bark claims to use advanced machine learning and statistical analysis techniques to recognize potential problems. The company states that it goes beyond using simple keyword analysis. For example, Bark claims to know the difference between “This homework makes me wanna die,” versus “I am thinking about suicide.” They also state that they keep up on the latest “teenage slang.”