

# Less Screen Time, More Active Time

Television isn't the only thing competing with exercise for children's time and attention these days. Computers, video games, handheld devices... youngsters are easily drawn into anything with a screen.

Try these suggestions for limiting screen time and encouraging active fun for the whole family.

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## Less screen time

Experts recommend no more than 1–2 hours of screen time a day for children. Here are ways to help your youngster cut down.

**TV journal.** Keep a notebook by the TV. Each time your child watches a program, have her write down the title, the time, and a one-sentence summary. She'll get writing practice, and you'll have a way to track how much—and what—she's watching.

**Activity scale.** Does your youngster spend more time in front of a screen, or more time being active? Help him make a scale to find out. He can use a permanent marker to label two sandwich bags: "Screen Time" and "Active Time." Clip the bags to opposite ends of a coat hanger, and hang it on a doorknob.



For each 15 minutes he spends in front of a screen or being active, he drops a nickel in the appropriate bag. At the end of a week, have him see which bag weighs the most.

**Button jar.** Consider setting a screen-time limit (say, an hour a day). On Sunday nights, set out a jar with 14 buttons, an empty jar, and a timer. Each button is good for a half hour of TV, video game, or computer play time. Tell your child she can use 2 buttons per day. When she watches a show or plays a video or computer game, help her set the timer for 30 minutes.

When it rings, she moves a button into the screen-time jar. This system lets your youngster know when her time is up and also tracks her daily screen time.

**Limited access.** Make screen time a little less convenient, and you may find your child naturally cuts back. For example, stash the remotes. Don't put a TV in his room—bedroom TVs are linked with a higher risk of obesity. And consider cutting down on the number of sets in your house. (*Idea:* Donate an extra TV to a homeless shelter or youth center.) If you have a laptop, keep it in one location. Open it when you use it, and close it when you finish so it's not constantly in use.

**Talk time.** Have meals at the table, not in front of the TV, and turn the set off while you're eating. Also, you might make it a rule that no one brings handheld games or cell phones to the table. Instead, build family bonds by using mealtime for discussions. Ask each person to tell the best or funniest thing that happened that day. Or put a "conversation salad bowl" on the table. On slips of paper, write conversation starters such as "If I could live at any time in history, it would be \_\_\_\_\_." Here's why," or "My favorite animal is \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_." Take turns picking a slip, and get the conversation rolling!



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