

8 Simple Steps to Strengthen Family Connections Every Day

How do we begin to reboot our tech habits so we don't have so many mini-moments of disconnect on the home front? Based on couples and family relationship studies, what we know about child development, and what kids tell me matters most to them, these simple steps can make a big difference. Parents find these do-able and sustainable. The positive effects become a persuasive payoff for all.

1. 'No Fighting No Biting' Create a Family Media Use Contract- Create your own Family Responsible Use Contract that is posted on the fridge or by the computer with rules and guide lines about what when, how, and where and for how long different screen activities are ok. With each new game, device or app, be sure you use it with them and talk about what is ok and what is not ok. Some guidelines to consider: No phones, screens or TV at meals for anyone, no tech or TV in the bedroom, all devices spend the night charging in the parent's bedroom closet, no screens 30-60 minutes before bed time, play outside or off line for an established amount of time before you can play a screen game or watch TV, exercise at least an hour a day, no tech in the car for short rides. For more examples go to [How To Make A Family Media Use Plan](https://www.healthychildren.org/.../family.../Media)
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2. Up and at 'em—a little earlier! Get up 30 minutes earlier to check your email and tend to your start-of-day online tasks before you wake up your children. Plan ahead so that from the time they awake until they are out the door, it's screen-free time for *everyone*. In these transition moments throughout the day, kids need to feel you're calm and fully present to them, not distracted. They pick up on the sharp-edged "don't bother me now" tone in our voice if they interrupt us writing an email, compared to the friendlier response more likely if we're making breakfast or packing their lunches. If your children need to check online for notes from teachers or coaches, make that a simple on-and-off part of the routine.

3. Drive-time is no time for phones or screens. That goes for everyone. We have so little time together, let this be time to chat or sit in the surround sound of family quiet and daydream, which can be creative, calming and synthesizing time for children. Kids hate listening to grown-ups on their phone, hostages to half a conversation. "It feels bad and sad to be ignored in the car," young children told me. And it can be stressful. "When I hear my parents fighting, I worry that something bad is going to happen and then I can't concentrate at school," a teen confided.

4. Perk up for pick-up. Stash your smartphone when you pick kids up. Nothing says "you don't matter that much," or "everyone and everything else is more important than you," than having a parent or caregiver pull up for pickup but hardly look up from a call or texting. Children like and need to be

greeted by someone who is happy to see them. Make eye contact with your child, greet and genuinely connect with them. You can't be fully present to them if you're texting or talking to someone else. It can wait. This goes for the kids in the car, too! Once you allow your kids to text or play on screens in the car, you dilute the likelihood that you'll have the kinds of conversations that offer the social-emotional weather report from their day. They'll be texting that to their peers instead.

5. Down time is prime time. When your children come home from school, have snack and talk, hang out, play outside, play inside but don't punctuate coming home with screen time that isn't for homework. Children need to play in the three dimensional world, to interact with people and manipulatives—try Legos, puzzles, arts or crafts, or cooking. They need to pace themselves, relax and not get sucked into mesmerizing, stimulating screen games or TV. Make social media and screen time a part of life but not the backdrop for it. Create your own Family Responsible Use Agreement and post it on the fridge or by the computer with understandings about what, when and how long it's okay to be engaged in these activities.

6. Leave it at the door. Parents need to come home from work and transition well, too. Whatever the weather, finish your call or texting before you walk in the door. When you come home you need to connect with the people you love most in the world and show them that they matter to you by being present to greet them with your full attention. Prepare for your own transition home by letting co-workers know you won't be available at certain times. And don't walk in the door with the expectation that you'll fake it with a two-second "hi!" and then disappear to "just check" what's happened in the last 30 minutes since you left the office. Nobody is fooled. Remember: It Can Wait. Try to stay off line until little ones are asleep/

7. Make mealtimes matter: take tech off the menu. No screens or phones at the table—this includes you! Family meals are critical time to nourish our bodies and our family connections. Tell the stories of your days, help each other solve problems, stay away from stressful topics and have a clear 'no talking or playing on devices at the table' plan. Kids hate hypocrites. So do partners. You may be surprised to find how quickly cell-free meals are habit-forming.

8. Let bath and bedtime be quiet, cozy, unplugged times. At the end of their day, and our day with them, our children need to know they are precious to us and matter more than anything to us. Nothing spoils the magic of a bedtime book or chat more than a parent checking a text. The same tech-free breather goes for parents, too. No screens in the bedroom!