

TECH STRESS

REDUCING RISK AMONG KIDS

Children are predisposed to be curious and to explore, which is how they learn. This innate drive allows them to grow and mature, which they can do naturally when they are having new experiences, when they are outside in a natural environment, and when they are playing with friends. However, in the United States, kids tend to stay inside once they get home from school. Confined to the house, the child quickly becomes bored, and the only options left to fill their time and their curiosity are video games, television, or social media.

Promoting Balance in Our Children's Lives

Excessive duration of gaming, TV, or social media has been found to increase several concerns:

- potential for a lifelong habit of sitting while being physiologically aroused
- accompanying risk of diabetes and heart disease
- loss of opportunities to develop other physical skills
- social isolation due to reduced interpersonal time
- potential for effects on brain development that are not yet fully understood

Risk of ADHD. Just as too little stimulation reduces neural growth and development, excessive stimulation also reduces neural growth and development. Researcher Dimitri Christakis and colleagues published a study in 2018 describing the effects of overstimulation by media. This team found a close association between excessive stimulation and symptoms commonly associated with ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder).

Prediabetes. Excessive sitting is clearly associated with an increased risk of diabetes. Among American teens, one in five is now prediabetic. Among young adults in the United States, one of every four is prediabetic. These young people have high blood pressure, increased abdominal fat, and insulin resistance, all symptoms of elevated risk of heart disease. Gaming and digital media use contribute to these issues, but are not the sole cause: commercial interests also have a major impact on these problems via the marketing of fast food, sugar, and other high-carb foods.

How to Do It:

We cannot ask children to have voluntary control, since their response patterns are activated by the evolutionary traps that have allowed our species to survive. Thus, it is up to us to promote lifestyle strategies that optimize our children's health. If you have young children, now is the time to shape lifelong habits by emphasizing non-screen activities and role-modeling to reduce screen-time behaviors. This means spending time together that is totally free of digital media.

After gaming, include a cooldown period. Since gaming tends to promote excessive stimulation, and a sense of hypervigilance, afterward it's helpful to include an opportunity to unwind. (Hypervigilance is managed by the sympathetic nervous system, the same system that implements fight or flight.) This could mean five minutes of free weights, of push-ups and pull-ups, or simply taking the dog for a walk.

Dine together. To maintain and deepen your relationship with your kids: (1) don't use your phone or other devices during meal times; (2) be truly present with your child; (3) converse with them, encourage them to share what they did during the day, and share your own world with them as well. Talk about things that interest you both, on subjects that they care about.

TECH STRESS

Invest your time. As much as possible, do activities with your child. When possible, include their friends in these activities. At times, this will be more work for you than if your child were playing video games, watching TV, or hanging out on social media. However, your investment in creating enriched experiences and emotional memories will provide the foundation for their future health and growth.

Be physically active. When feasible, encourage your child to balance time spent gaming with physical activity such as skateboarding, riding their bike, running, martial arts, baseball, basketball, or gymnastics. (We no longer encourage soccer because of the known risk of concussion when players do headers.) Take your kid to the gym once a week, or swimming—whatever you and they like to do. When running errands, create as many opportunities as possible to walk (exercise in disguise), like parking at the farthest end of the lot, and taking the stairs instead of the escalator or elevator.

Provide stimulation. Build enrichment into your child's life and expose them to multisensory experiences and opportunities for learning: travel together, explore new places, go to science centers, museums, and art studios, hike together, go to the beach, and visit national parks.

Build skills. We want our kids to develop useful skill sets, to have the opportunity to create as well as consume. Share your own skills with your child, especially if they're gifts they clearly have as well. Whatever you enjoy doing, do it with them—that could mean animal care, doing chef duty together, learning a musical instrument, conversing in another language, working on the car together, teaching them chess, or making art or any type of craft. If your kids are young, this means reading to them and having them read to you.

Make sense of cultural issues. In the United States, we have moved from country life to urban living in fewer than a hundred years. Physical activity was always an aspect of country lifestyles and farm work, and food grown without chemicals was a given until recently. However, despite the fact that mass migrations to American cities began more than 70 years ago, we still haven't established the social structures that would make this transition from farm life to urban lifestyle a success.

If we want to live successfully in a city environment, we need to recreate communities that include key aspects of the lifestyle that enabled our ancestors to survive and thrive.

Understand learning by imitation. As parents, we need to role-model healthy behavior, set boundaries for our kids, and offer them enriching environments.

Children are hardwired to learn and grow—our role is to provide a range of emotionally satisfying options so they can have quality of life, living on a human scale, interacting with their friends and their family without digital distractions. This means:

- role-modeling smart use of smartphones
- having digital-free time at home
- providing opportunities to be in nature
- allowing your child to become “bored” periodically, giving them the opportunity to become creative
- creating social opportunities to play and engage with friends without digital media