

Molly DeFrank

# DIGITAL DETOX



THE TWO-WEEK TECH RESET FOR KIDS

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## For Dad

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# Introduction

“MOM, THANK YOU so much for taking our screens away,” my ten-year-old daughter said out of the blue, a few months after our digital detox.

I nearly spat out my LaCroix. *Seriously?* is what my brain said. My mouth had the wherewithal to say something else. “Sweetie, you’re welcome. . . . Can I ask why you’re thanking me?”

“I just . . . feel happier. I read so many more books, I play outside more, I play with my siblings more. Also, my eyes and head used to hurt after I played video games.” My nine- and seven-year-old sons were standing nearby and nodded in agreement.

I couldn’t believe my ears.

My Minecraft-loving, LEGO Star Wars–battling, tablet-tapping children were *thanking me* for depriving them of their formerly favorite hobbies? My husband and I had noticed behavioral and mood improvements in our kids immediately when we began our family’s detox. But I wasn’t expecting the kids to *thank us*. Especially considering that when we broke the news to them initially, they practically rent their garments.

But after the screen daze was removed, the kids enjoyed more positive interactions with each other; they weren’t in fight-or-flight

mode every day. They spent more time honing real-life skills like piano, drawing, writing, biking, football. With those skills came confidence, stoking their desires to further hone their talents. What started as a two-week screen break turned into a complete technology overhaul in our family with five kids under ten. The simple decision to unplug and reset changed our lives in the best way.

I initially chose two weeks arbitrarily. Mostly because I thought it was all I could handle without requiring five nannies, remembering that we cannot afford five nannies, and then settling for breathing into a paper bag. I assumed that cutting out screens would create an impossible amount of work for me, that I'd be thrust into the role of entertainment instructor, court jester, or camp counselor. Richard Simmons meets Jojo Siwa.

This turned out not to be the case. But I didn't know that on Screen Detox Eve. Two weeks turned out to be just enough time to see how kids behave without the technology haze that infects their sweet personalities. It was enough time to observe the refreshing benefits of detox mode and decide that we would continue it, with the kids' blessing, for months. With newfound clarity, we then created a long-term plan that allowed for the best parts of tech and cut out the parts that were morphing my darlings into swamp creatures.

Before we started our detox years ago, I'd read exactly zero books, guides, or studies on the topic. I don't advise taking this route—unless you enjoy off-roading while blindfolded. In other words, we've made tremendous discoveries and progress, mistakes and recoveries along the way. In the years since, I've asked and searched for the answers to every question: Why did the detox work so quickly? Why were screens causing a problem in the first place? I've read the studies and books and talked with doctors, teachers, parents, and therapists from across the spectrum. I've taken what we've learned and used it to coach several families through their own detoxes. Some friends, some strangers. One hundred percent of these families were thrilled with the results of their detox.

These are actual responses from real parents who have used my tips and guidance to digitally detox their kids:

“My eight-year-old finished nine chapter books during our detox! My older boys have fallen in love with a new sport, basketball!”

“Before our detox, our kids were always so focused on phones. They were on their minds constantly. Their first words when we saw them were usually ‘Can I use your phone?’ They would choose the phone over a beautiful day—but not after our detox.”

“Fighting is at an all-time low, no complaints about being bored, all my kids are reading more without me asking.”

“My mom watched them for the first time since the detox yesterday, and she could not believe the change.”

“There aren’t enough words for how this has changed the entire climate of our home!”

“My girls have stopped asking for their iPads and started doing other activities.”

“Because of the detox, we have so much more time to connect as a family.”

“This was so much easier than we thought it would be, and I can’t believe how quickly we saw results.”

“Our kids’ behavior was so much better during our detox that we kept going. A year later, we have made easy and permanent changes that have noticeably helped our kids.”

“Molly . . . I have different kids!”

The digital detox and the home environment created by its implementation have proven life-changing for honors students and high achievers as well as for children from trauma, drug-addicted teenagers, and your normal pizza-obsessed, video-game-loving

nine-year-old. In short, the digital detox is for everyone living in today's tech-saturated world.<sup>1</sup>

What began as off-roading without a map ended when we stumbled into a promising and refreshing oasis. In the pages ahead, you will find tips, tricks, and a route for your own successful two-week digital detox and beyond. This book is the practical guide I wish I had when we started. The pages ahead will show you the way and help you navigate hazards, leading you to your ultimate destination: A home that no longer feels bogged down by too much screen time. A healthy relationship with the best that tech has to offer. A home where tech can be used to enhance real life, not supplant it.

### **The path forward: the detox**

If you cared enough to pick up this book, I bet you are a loving parent, feeling the weight of digital entertainment overload. You've always been mindful to set limits, but you're still unsettled by bad moods or upsetting behaviors. You don't have a perfect handle on balancing your kids' technology.

You want your kids to enjoy but not gorge, to cultivate healthy habits with screens.

But you're nervous to take the leap toward anything drastic.

You have big-picture ideals for your kids' tech use, but aren't sure how to get from the status quo to your end goal.

You are not alone.

The path from the status quo to a tech-healthy home doesn't cost a cent. It is simple, and easier than you can possibly imagine. The fighting, grumpiness, and out-of-control behavior can be reversed, almost immediately, through a simple detox combined with some good old-fashioned parental redirection.

That path forward is in the pages ahead. And as Dad and Mom, there's no one on the planet better suited to guide your kids.

## **How to use this book**

I recommend you read the first half of the book (through part 1, “UNDO the Tech Trance,” which outlines the steps of the detox) before starting your detox. You will also want to refer back to it throughout your fourteen-day detox. All you’ll need is this book, a basic notebook or journal, and parental resolve. The first two you can find on Amazon. And the third in the bottom of a strong cup of coffee.

I recommend you read the second half of the book (part 2, “Now What? Sustaining Your Results”) toward the end of your detox. This section will help you create a long-term plan that reincorporates just the right amount of digital entertainment for your family.

If you are an overachiever, you can read the entire thing before starting. But I don’t recommend beginning your detox before finishing the first half of the book.

Ready? Let’s go!

# Parenting Challenges for a New Generation—The Problem

I wake up in cold sweats every so often thinking, what did we bring to the world? . . . Did we really bring a nuclear bomb with information that can . . . blow up people's brains and reprogram them?

TONY FADELL, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT, APPLE

We didn't sign up for the digital lives we now lead. They were instead, to a large extent, crafted in boardrooms to serve the interests of a select group of technology investors.

CAL NEWPORT, *DIGITAL MINIMALISM*

MY FIVE KIDS were home with the babysitter. I don't remember my exact errands that day, but as a stay-at-home mom of many, it didn't matter. I would've welcomed the relative calm of a root canal appointment as if it were a trip to a resort in Cabo San Lucas.

Well, that Cabo vacation/root canal high came to an abrupt halt as soon as I arrived home, greeted by a child's most annoying question: "Can I play on your phone?"

I'd been away for hours, and when I stepped through the door, I didn't hear "Hi, Mommy!" or "I missed you!" Instead, it was straight-up, "Hey, gatekeeper of electronics? Gimme a fix."

My brain pulled a quote from *American Idol*'s Randy Jackson: "That's gonna be a no from me, dawg."

My husband and I had already noticed negative behaviors from the kids—extra sibling arguments, slowness to obey, difficulty concentrating, bursts of anger, general grumpiness. And heaven forbid when it was time to transition from a screen to not-a-screen . . . Yikes.

We would enforce consequences for these outbursts, but our kids' responses seemed almost primal. Something was changing internally. As if their little minds were shifting into fight-or-flight mode, completely different from their bright, spunky selves. The behaviors would come and go intermittently, so we wondered if it was an inevitable part of this wild ride we call parenthood.

We had no clue there was a deeper cause. We thought, *Hey, maybe acting like rivaling WWE wrestlers is normal for their ages.* We wondered if we needed to cut sugar out of their diets. Did they need more sleep? Less gluten? Boarding school? Holy water? We couldn't be sure.

We just knew that we didn't like it, and something had to change.

When my baby greeted me as if I was an electronics vending machine, that was the last straw. I called my husband at work.

"Babe. We need to pull the plug. The kids need a screen break."

"Awesome," he said. "Let's do it."

We broke the news to the kids that night at dinner. My husband made the announcement.

"Okay, kids. Until further notice, we are turning off all screens. There will be no Netflix, YouTube, Nintendo Switch, iPad, computer, Minecraft, Xbox. None. This is not negotiable. Do not bother asking us to play or watch anything screen related. We love

you, and this is a change we are going to try out together. We need to unplug and reevaluate. We'll keep you posted.”

Then we all hugged and celebrated a new beginning. Together, we made vision boards that forecasted a simpler time of family cultural enrichment, spending lazy days on the lawn, honing our basket-weaving skills.

Just kidding.

The kids immediately went into a state of mourning. You would have thought we told them our dog died. Tears abounded. For five minutes. Then we all moved on to the next topic.

But internally, I still feared what the next day would bring. I prepared for the worst—the children dressed in head-to-toe black, singing longingly, “Nobody knooooows the trouble I’ve seen. . . .”

What actually happened blew me away. The kids did not ask for one screen that day. They knew the topic would be a nonstarter. So instead, they played with the toys on their shelves. They played with each other. Lo and behold, they were already starting to act happier, more obedient, kinder, and overall, less addict-like. It was as if we had flipped an actual switch. As if we’d discovered some kind of miraculous parenting hack. I got my kids back. For us, it was that simple.

I hope that your detox is as simple as ours was. But be encouraged to know that if it isn’t, you’re not alone. I’ve helped coach many families through their own detoxes. Dual-working households. Homeschooling families. Foster families. Stay-at-home parents. Work-from-home parents. Big families. Small families. Of course, every family encountered unique levels of stress, complaining, and difficulty. In later chapters, you will hear many of their stories, trials, and triumphs. One family’s first detox attempt failed a few hours in. But with some coaching and a new plan, they committed to a second try. And guess what? They were thrilled with their results. More on them in chapter 11. Of the families who used my plan and reported their results back to me, *100 percent*

*experienced a dramatic and positive change by the end of two weeks.*

Am I guaranteeing that your journey will be easy? Not necessarily. But with some setup on the front end, it can be simple. And the obstacles you might encounter will be worth the momentary struggle. Guiding your kids through a digital detox is simple. And while it might not be easy, it will absolutely be worth it.

This decision will transform the culture of your home. You will be shocked that something so simple could change your family so profoundly.

At this point you might be wondering, how is it possible that digital entertainment is having such an enormous impact on our kids? How is this happening to amazing kids with great parents—especially if you are only allowing an hour or two of TV, tablets, and video games per day?

## **A totally different childhood**

Today’s parents feel the weight of an unprecedented amount of technology in the home, and the change has been gradual. It’s not like a dam burst; it’s more like our boats have been slowly taking on water. Another holiday brings a new console, a new iPhone, more video games. Another friend’s parents allow a new app, and we feel the pressure to follow suit. These well-intentioned “gifts” are burying our kids in entertainment. We look around and see that everyone else seems to be parenting the same way. *Everyone can’t be getting this wrong. If all kids are playing the games, if they’re all on social media, then the status quo must be fine, right?* we wonder, as our boats continue to take on more water. Our kids are disengaged and ornery. Parents are frustrated. Our boats are sinking.

Seventy-eight percent of parents say that raising kids today is more complicated than when they grew up.<sup>1</sup> Eighty-five percent of parents are worried about the amount of time their kids are spending in front of a screen.<sup>2</sup> If technology is supposed to be so

helpful, why is it stressing out parents and bringing out the worst in our kids?

From waking to bedtime, there's an app or a screen to fill the silences, the lulls, the boredom. And from a parent's perspective, it seems kind of great. Need to take a call? Hand over the iPad. Need a few minutes of peace and quiet on the long drive? Flip on a movie and hand the headphones to the back seat. But if you've been at this parenting gig for a few years and have taken advantage of these new options for kid entertainment, it doesn't take long to see the emotional and behavioral problems. Parents wonder, *Why does my child seamlessly transition from LEGO to puzzles, but the end of screen time turns her into a cave troll?* What is the cost of all this cheap and convenient entertainment?

We can't look to grandparents and great-grandparents for answers on this one. It's a massive, brand-new social experiment, and our kids are the guinea pigs.

## **Everything has changed**

Yes, we all use technology daily for both productivity and diversion. But if you're reading this book, you probably spent the first decade-plus of life learning how to be a human without screens (except television and movies), to be bored and troubleshoot and knock on the neighbor's door to find a friend. You had your feelings hurt and hurt someone else's. You learned how to make it right by apologizing, hugging it out, and moving on. You spent years honing the foundations of being in relationship with other people. With the extent technology is available to kids in our homes today, there's a diminished incentive for them to interact in real relationships.

There's no opportunity for the benefits of boredom. Easy entertainment is available to children in shiny rectangular boxes throughout the house. Why go outside? Why risk rejection by knocking on the neighbor's door? Why troubleshoot the uneven

couch fort support mechanism? Why build anything? Why hone any skill? That would involve effort and setbacks. Why attempt any of the character-building, mind-forming activities that their parents' and grandparents' childhoods were built on?

So the kids don't. Not to the extent their brilliant little minds need. How can we blame them? If we grew up with the same diversions, we'd be doing the same thing. Some days we are. Parents get sucked into the entertainment vortex too.

The problem, it turns out, is that kids (and adults) are using screens as substitutes for face-to-face conversations. If you grew up in the 1980s and '90s like I did, then you remember. We built our middle school friendships over drippy Otter Pops and daisy chain necklaces. We endured conversational lulls required in any friendship worth building. We didn't have another option. And we reaped the relational fruit by investing time in the kids around us. We listened to friends confide about their parents' rocky marriages or their silly pets. We postulated how the world works from our weird ten-year-old brains. How will I escape when I inevitably fall into a pit of quicksand? (The greatest threat of childhood, according to third graders in the 1990s.) We strategized and wondered together, troubleshooting and laughing at inside jokes we created along the way. Our communication wasn't hindered by character limits. We had to interpret real body language and facial expressions, not ambiguous one-dimensional emojis.

We subconsciously understood that thousands of micro-interactions were the building blocks of budding relationships.

But now? Kids stare at screens. And the effects are starting to show in dramatic ways in the classroom, at the dinner table, at bedtime. Kids aren't developing the way they have for thousands of years.

### ***How are screens putting my kids in a bad mood?***

Ellie is fourteen. She had always been bright, fun, and friendly. But now she is exhausted all the time. She's often moody and

lonely. When sad or bored, she picks up her phone and scrolls social media. “It helps me connect with my friends!” she tells her parents. They assume she is right, that this is how modern friendships work. They know that social connection is critical for teenagers, but Ellie still seems sad. In her social media world, Ellie scrolls through endless photos of flawless filtered teenagers. Why can’t she look like them? Her “friends” tease her on group text about her crush. Someone screenshots their conversation and sends it to the target of her secret affection. Ellie is mortified.

In years past, she went to the kitchen and talked with Mom. Now she puts on her headphones and numbs out on TikTok. Two hours later, it’s time for dinner and she hasn’t started her homework. She comes to the dinner table feeling dejected and ugly, but Mom and Dad see it as “typical teenage attitude.” They haven’t seen Ellie all day and want to hear how she’s doing, but she’s moody and snaps at them when they try. Ellie heads back to her room to scroll social media in front of the blank Word document that is supposed to be her history paper. It’s ten p.m. Mom checks on Ellie to see her headphones on and history book open, and concludes that kids are under way too much pressure at school these days.

Data shows that teens are more anxious, depressed, and suicidal than ever before. As one high school teacher told me, “Parents assume that if a child is quiet and in their room, that must mean they’re okay. . . . But they’re not okay.”

### ***What about younger kids?***

Ever turn off the tablet or video game only to watch your precious angel morph into a deranged lunatic? There’s more going on than a simple tantrum.

Video games, smartphone games, tablet games, social media platforms—they are all deliberately designed to trigger the release of dopamine, a chemical in our brains that makes us feel good.

“When dopamine rises and falls suddenly . . . the child can become weepy, impulsive, or angry. It’s as though the sudden fall in dopamine causes the brain to short circuit; every little demand on the child becomes stressful. Since dopamine is needed to execute tasks, when it’s suddenly low, every task becomes overwhelming, setting the stage for a meltdown,”<sup>3</sup> explains child psychiatrist Dr. Victoria Dunckley. Aha! Your child isn’t *trying* to impersonate Linda Blair in *The Exorcist* when the iPad timer dings. Science shows us that electronic devices are chemically priming our kids’ brains to respond with the rage and furor of a scorned Real Housewife.

***Is sleep actually affected by screen usage? Even if it is, does that really matter?***

Cynthia noticed that her three young kids were moody and irritable—almost daily. She wondered if this was normal for their ages—three, five, and seven. She was a conscientious mother who limited her children to two hours of video-game play per day. Cynthia had no idea that her kids’ game play was interfering with their sleep quality. As soon as she digitally detoxed her children, their moodiness problems nearly vanished.

Toddlers, kids, and teens who use tablets, video games, and social media during the day take longer to fall asleep and have more disruptive nighttime sleep.<sup>4</sup> Poor sleep quality then creates a terrible cycle: tired kids are moody kids. They can’t focus, they are more stressed, and in turn, they can’t sleep. And then they crave even more stimulation. Studies have also shown that teens who use their phones after lights-out have significantly increased risks for mental health problems, suicidal feelings, and self-injury.<sup>5</sup>

One psychotherapist says that 80 percent of his patients’ issues are a result of excessive screen use. Dr. George Lynn describes this as “a personality syndrome that comes from basically unbridled, uncontrolled recreational use of screen media during the day and at night. . . . Most doctors, family doctors, even psychiatric

practitioners are not hip to the obvious fact that a kid might be only getting two to three hours of sleep at night if that. . . . And that causes personality problems.”<sup>6</sup>

***How much time are kids actually spending on screens?***

Almost half of two- to four-year-old children and more than two-thirds of five- to eight-year-olds have their own tablet or smartphone.<sup>7</sup> Five- to eight-year-olds are using screen-based entertainment more than three hours per day.<sup>8</sup> Eight- to twelve-year-old kids are using six hours of media entertainment per day. Recreational screen time for twelve- and thirteen-year-olds doubled over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, from nearly four hours per day to nearly eight. This, even after kids returned to in-person learning.<sup>9</sup> Thirteen- to eighteen-year-olds are spending *nine hours per day* consuming entertainment media.<sup>10</sup> This does not include screens used for schoolwork. *That is the majority of a child’s waking life.*

***My child seems extra focused when he uses his tablet. Doesn’t that mean it’s teaching him how to focus?***

On the outside, it might appear that kids are laser focused while tapping away. “Look at my little Einstein!” Mom beams. The truth is that digital entertainment is eroding your child’s ability to concentrate. Instead, it’s overstimulating him with novel distractions. Shiny object! Bright colors! Loud sounds! Screen time often thrusts our youngest kids into a continuously hyperattentive state. Their brains are soaking in cortisol and adrenaline, the fight, flight, and stress hormones. This results in our kids “first passively receiving and then . . . actively requiring” excessive levels of stimulation.<sup>11</sup>

When your child appears quiet and calm in the glow of his device, his brain might be in fight-or-flight mode. No wonder he snaps when you tell him screen time is over.

***What if my kids only spend an hour per day on screens? Is that okay?***

Let's say you limit your child's screen use to one or two hours per day. Sounds reasonable. . . . But think of the proportion of free time that those two hours comprise. A ten-year-old wakes up at seven a.m., gets dressed, and goes to school until three p.m. From three to four he has baseball practice. From four to five he finishes his homework. He eats dinner with his family from five to six, helps with dishes until six-thirty, then plays Wack a Mole Simulator from six-thirty to eight-thirty. This typical child has two hours of free, unscheduled time during his weekdays before bedtime, and he is spending 100 percent of it playing a video game. Do we want our kids spending a majority of their free time consuming digital entertainment? That would leave exactly zero time for riding bikes with friends, building tree forts, reading for pleasure, watching planes fly overhead from the trampoline, interacting with the neighbor kid, shooting the breeze with Dad at the kitchen table. Even if our kids are spending an hour per day, there are substantial opportunity costs.

***But we grew up watching TV and playing Nintendo in the '80s and '90s. Isn't today's digital entertainment the same thing, but for the next generation?***

Not even close.

The kind of digital entertainment available to our kids is like nothing we've seen in generations past. Neurological experts have closely studied the way that the brain releases dopamine as a response to pleasurable experiences: a hug, smelling a flower, riding a bicycle. Tech engineers have used this research to bake dopamine release points into their apps, video games, and social media platforms. They have studied the frequency and type of rewards that hook people to their products. It's the same tactics casinos use. Experts are paid to keep kids scrolling and playing. And they're

Studies continue to demonstrate that children are susceptible to health, behavioral, cognitive, and developmental problems related to certain types of digital media use. Those risks include

- delayed language development
- difficulty processing emotional signals
- internet/gaming addiction
- reduced memory capacity
- depression
- anxiety
- sleep disorders
- reduced level of text comprehension
- ADHD diagnoses
- lower empathy
- lower literacy abilities
- lower executive function
- hampered deep-reading abilities
- aggressive behaviors
- lowered levels of prosocial behavior
- difficulty storing relevant facts
- irritability
- impulsivity
- reduced social skills
- difficulty with solitude
- vision problems
- underdeveloped emotional regulation skills
- avoidance of social interaction

incredible at it. Hundreds of the world's top software engineers and addiction experts are on the other end of your child's device, coordinating their efforts to keep it in your child's hand. What chance does a child have against a team like that?

As if that weren't enough, the constant dopamine surges in kids' brains are so huge that dopamine receptors are numbing out.

Now these little ones need even more dopamine in order to feel the same amount of pleasure they previously enjoyed. Bearing this level of arousal in mind, we can understand why simply looking at how many hours your kids are on screens is not the whole story. Dopamine is flowing like Niagara Falls in those young minds. The combination of parental permission and tech availability is creating tech-hooked kids. The long-term effects of excessive screen use include increased risk of depression, anxiety, negative thinking, coping difficulties, lack of resilience, and even heart disease.<sup>12</sup>

This is not 1980s Pac-Man games and *Little House on the Prairie*. This is new technology, brilliantly engineered to suck your kids in. One hour of today's screens is not the same as one hour of Saturday morning cartoons when you were a kid.

### **New health problems**

So what does this have to do with your first grader's tantrums? Occupational therapists are observing more children who exhibit autism-like behaviors but are not, in fact, autistic. They are calling this "virtual autism," because it is caused by too much screen use and not enough sensory play.<sup>13</sup> Increased screen time in young kids impairs language development and mood, and induces autistic-like behavior, including hyperactivity, short attention span, and irritability.<sup>14</sup> Does this sound familiar?

ADHD diagnoses are on the rise. What are symptoms of ADHD, according to Mayo Clinic? Hyperactivity, impulsivity, short attention span, avoiding tasks that require effort, appearing not to listen, becoming easily distracted, fidgeting. Parents, does this sound eerily similar to a seven-year-old coming off a two-hour Fortnite bender?

Child psychiatrist Dr. Dunckley believes that a common environmental stressor is to blame for this explosion of so-called diagnoses. In fact, she has named a new disorder as the culprit: Electronic Screen Syndrome (ESS). It makes kids unable to control

their moods, attention, or excitement in a socially appropriate way. ESS can create or worsen ADHD, depression, oppositional defiant disorder, and anxiety. Signs of ESS include irritable, depressed, or rapidly changing moods, excessive or age-inappropriate tantrums, low frustration tolerance, poor self-regulation, poor sportsmanship, poor eye contact, and learning difficulties.<sup>15</sup>

## **Educators on the front lines**

George Petersen is an accomplished principal of a Blue Ribbon School and was recognized as one of the nation’s top ten principals in 2019. I was interested to hear what he was seeing on the front lines at his local school.

What he shared with me was fascinating and alarming.

“More students are struggling with normal social situations. In the classroom, students appear to be less resilient with academic rigor and more frustrated with collaborative learning. They are more easily distracted and less likely to take risks,” he said.

What’s to blame for this noticeable decline? Socioeconomic status? Nope. The problem educators are seeing “cuts across demographics,” according to Mr. Petersen.

So what’s the problem?

“As my staff and I intervene with students who struggle, we are finding a common theme: ‘I play on my tablet four hours a day,’ ‘My parents allow me to be on YouTube when they’re not home,’ ‘After school, I play video games all afternoon.’ Earning points by blowing up a building on a computer screen will produce a greater dopamine release than solving a math problem. When children live in isolation, self-absorbed in the world of technology, they do not practice how to socially, emotionally, and verbally interact with one another in a healthy manner. Taking turns with play equipment and listening respectfully to a partner in a group have become extremely difficult tasks for many students. Students fall further behind when their home lives are absorbed by a screen.”<sup>16</sup>

**DID YOU KNOW:** Internet-use disorder or internet gaming disorder/internet addiction has officially been added to the International Classification of Diseases by the WHO.<sup>17</sup>

I'd been reading about these situations and had already noticed worrisome behaviors from my kids at home. But now one of the country's top principals confirmed it—ours was not an isolated incident. It's happening everywhere.

Screens are impacting all of our kids in the worst ways. Mr. Petersen wasn't only talking about "difficult" children or uninvolved parents. He was talking about all kids. Kids from strong families. Great kids with great parents, navigating the world where digital entertainment is everywhere. We are all trying to parent through difficult behaviors, without realizing that an external component has a hold on our kids. We can't compete with the way screens are affecting their brains. This isn't the kids' fault. They are simply human beings responding to stimuli that were designed to keep them playing, watching, using.

The impact of their screen time is going far beyond screen time. It's changing the way kids think, interact with peers, respond to teachers. It's changing their ability to connect with other humans.

### **What does the future look like for kids raised on excessive digital entertainment?**

What happens when kids replace face-to-face, human-to-human connection with screens? Parents today have a unique vantage point. The first generation of kids who grew up with a smartphone in hand has graduated college and begun their work in the real world. Employers report that this generation is coming to work with new phobias and anxieties. "They don't know how to begin and end conversations. They have a hard time with eye contact.

They say that talking on the telephone makes them anxious,” according to MIT professor and psychologist Sherry Turkle. “It is worth asking a hard question: Are we unintentionally depriving our children of tools they need at the very moment they need them? Are we depriving them of skills that are crucial to friendship, creativity, love, and work?”<sup>18</sup>

### **So what should we do?**

That’s it. We’re becoming Amish. (Can you still color your hair and use a curling iron if you’re Amish? No? Okay, scratch the Amish thing.)

We see what screen time is doing to the kids. But do we need to summarily dump every form of technology because some of it is harmful? Is there any way to harness the best parts of screens and tech without the kids morphing into *The Walking Dead: Kindergarten Edition*?

The answer is absolutely yes. There is a way. And it looks different in each household. The good news is that you’re the parent, you know your children best, and you get to decide what your family’s relationship with screens is going to look like in your own home.

We don’t have to move off the grid and grow all of our own food and throw out our curling irons. (The horror!) Used rightly, technology can serve us as a helpful sidekick on this wild and crazy life. Rather than banning all of it forever, we want our relationship with tech to be like maintaining a healthy diet.

A lifetime of twice-a-day Twinkies and Dr. Pepper will nearly ensure chronic health problems. Similarly, decades of tech for entertainment will stunt our kids’ emotional, intellectual, and social development. Just because the grocery stores are filled with processed foods and sugar doesn’t mean we should buy it. And just because our kids have access to endless screens for entertainment doesn’t mean they should use them.

Cheap tech for entertainment has flooded into our homes so quickly over the last decade, we haven't had a chance to catch our breath. We haven't stopped for a moment to say, "Is this best? Does this further our family's purpose? Do all these toys further our vision for our long-term parenting plan? Do we even have a long-term parenting plan?"

### **How does tech fit with your family's purpose?**

On a bad day, in the midst of tantrums and carpool, it can feel like we're mustering every ounce of effort to survive until bedtime. On those days, we view screens as a momentary respite for Mom or Dad, despite knowing the long-term effects on our kids' behavior. But I don't want to "survive" until the kids move out. What a waste of years with our beloved children. What is our destination? Let's clarify that, and then decide how technology fits into our household from that thirty-thousand-foot view of parenthood.

What do you want to accomplish with your kids during these short years? Step back and decide. These will be your family's guiding principles.

For example, here are our family's guiding principles:

- We teach our kids that our first priorities as a family are to love God and love people.
- In a world prioritizing individual comfort and ease, you will have to reject both—often—in order to love God and love people.
- If we want our kids to believe this is true and worthwhile, we need to model this as parents every day. Some days we fall woefully short, and that leads us to the next point. . . .
- When we mess up, we own it.
- Each person is wired a little differently with gifts and quirks. How can we discover our kids' gifts and help share those with others?

- Over the lifetime of your relationship with your children, you will both be adults for the majority of those years. You'll share an adult-to-adult relationship from your kids' early twenties on. There is plenty of time for that kind of mutual relationship. But for now, for these few years, our job is to discipline and train up kids, creating loving and firm parameters. We are seeing the fruit of this with our older kids, watching our roles transition from authority to coach. But in order to best love our kids as they grow, we are not their BFFs. We are their parents.

How would you answer your big-picture goals for your family? What are your guiding principles?

They don't need to be fancy. Picture having lunch with your future eighteen-year-old child, the day you are moving him into his dorm room, sending him out into the world to make his own choices. You ask him, "Looking back, what principles guided our home? Based on how our home operated, both what we taught you and how we lived?" In your detox journal, write what you hope he would say. This is an important first step that sets the foundation for the digital detox, which I will guide you through on the pages ahead.

### **We have our guiding principles. Now what?**

When you come out on the other side of this thing, you will have a clearer understanding of how to partner with technology so that it is a household tool. We are no longer okay with feeling like our kids are enslaved to tech. With your family's purpose and goals in mind, let's wade through the deluge of technology for kids. How should we proceed on a daily basis?

**Now it is time to step back. For two weeks, in a digital detox.** An elimination diet. A reset button. This is easier than you imagine and will yield better results than you could hope.

You might be thinking, *Wait a minute, I thought you said that some screens were okay.* Yes! After the detox, you will make a long-term plan for your kids and your home, and I would guess that plan will include family movie nights and more. But right now, your kids need some space from screens to rekindle nonscreen interests and redevelop their boredom-negotiation skills.

As you follow the four simple steps to a successful digital detox, you'll read about fellow parents' successes, hurdles, and tips along the way. I'll share our family's long-term technology plan and the long-term plans of several other families, and help you create your own, specifically tailored for your unique family.

You are not in this alone, and the path forward is surprisingly simple. It all starts with two weeks, and four simple steps:



### UNDO THE TECH TRANCE

**U**nplug cold turkey.

**N**otice your kids' interests, talents, opportunities for growth.

**D**evelop a list of screen-free fun together.

**O**pen the books!