

# For Kids, Free Time Equals Screen Time— So Parents Fight Back

**In the digital age, a backlash against unstructured play has families making lists of 100 things to do offline**

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Children whining about being bored is an annoyance as old as time, but fewer parents these days are willing to push the kids out the door and yell, “Come back at dinner time!” The new parenting advice: Structure your child’s unstructured time.

It’s a backlash against the advice that started bubbling up a decade ago to let children have unfettered downtime.

The idea then was that boredom is a good thing, that it fosters in kids imaginative ways to fill the time. But that was before phones and “Fortnite” became ubiquitous. We all know now that when left to their own devices kids will, well, turn to their devices.

“Downtime has become synonymous with technology. I certainly don’t believe in overscheduling kids with activities. What I’m advocating for is a different kind of scheduling,” said Elyssa Ackerman, a clinical social worker in New York. “Schedule boredom but give kids ideas for what they can do with their boredom.”

Melanie Hempe learned the hard way what happens to kids who fill their downtime with technology when her oldest son, now 27, was a teenager.

“The big thing then was ‘Don’t overschedule your kids,’ so what we did was we let them have too much unstructured time. We were like, ‘Well I guess it’s okay that he dropped out of baseball and piano.’ In our case, he ended up loving videogames more than anything,” said Ms. Hempe.

After struggling to get her son to stop gaming so much, she founded Families Managing Media, an organization to help others in the same predicament.

“I like to tell parents that by not structuring their kids’ downtime, the structure for them becomes a screen,” she said.

A popular idea that’s spreading among digital media-experts now is to make a list of 100 things kids can do IRL (that is, “in real life”), then post it in a prominent place. When kids say they’re bored, parents can point to it. This system is more effective for the 12-and-under set but can also work for teens.

Lisa Honold, an online-safety advocate, recently began sharing the list she developed with her three children, who range in age from 10 to 15. Among the ideas: bake homemade bread, make slime and collect items from neighbors for a canned-food drive. She encourages parents to tailor the list to their children's preferences and to enlist them in the process.

Ms. Honold admits the list invokes some eye-rolling among her older two but that it works. It also helps stave off her irritation when the kids complain they're bored. "Anytime parents can pre-plan, we're a step ahead."

When Regina Janicik struggled to get her 16-year-old daughter off her phone, she turned to Ms. Ackerman, who advised her to limit her teen's screen time, create more structure around everything from bedtime to curfew and develop a list of offline things to do.

Dr. Janicik, an internist in New York, said her daughter suffered from anxiety, which was exacerbated by monitoring her Instagram account. "She had 1,200 Instagram followers and she felt like she needed to constantly check what her friends were doing and not miss things," she said.

Her 12-year-old daughter didn't have as much trouble with social media—she tends to binge-watch television shows—but Dr. Janicik instituted the same rules for both.

"There was a week this summer when neither had camp, and before we left in the morning we said, 'You need to have an activity in the morning and one in the afternoon,'" she said. There were consequences for not carrying through, such as having to do extra chores.

"It's hard with teens. You have to not make it all about them. We're all struggling with this," said Dr. Janicik, who said she and her husband also now track their phone usage and openly discuss screen-free activities they want to do. "It's a family value that we're not all going to be dependent on our phones."

She said her older daughter is doing much better now and is busy most of the day working as a camp counselor.

The idea of structuring downtime led one entrepreneur to open a play space designed specifically to give children and adults offline time. Sarah Robinson, a mom of two in New York, would take her now 3-year-old son to play gyms and notice that all the parents were on their phones while the children were playing. The former marketing executive decided to create a phone-free playspace for kids where adults can play along or have uninterrupted conversations with other adults.

She opened The Wonder, which requires an annual membership, in New York's Tribeca neighborhood, in May. While there is a workspace where adults can plug in to get work done, phones aren't allowed in the play area.

Some parents are finding that structuring downtime is just as important for them as it is for their children.

Rebecca Orlov, a single mom and marketing executive in Las Vegas, said she was filling so many idle moments scrolling through her phone—she would even check Facebook in her car while stopped at red lights—that her 5-year-old daughter, Sophie, would tell her to put her phone down. She said Sophie was often acting up, trying to get her attention.

“I was like, ‘I have to change my behavior,’” she said.

While attending a trade show last year she saw a company that made plastic containers to lock phones in and thought that was a sad commentary on life in the digital age. Then she decided to copy it, using a basket. She began bringing out the basket after dinner and putting her phone in it. Her daughter places her Amazon Fire tablet in it, too. For 30 minutes to an hour, they focus on making crafts or playing outside.

“I’ve seen a huge change in us together,” Ms. Orlov said. “It’s made a big difference in our relationship.”

## How to Help Your Kids Unplug

**Schedule a family meeting.** Gather everyone and make your list of 100 things to do without screens. When children are young, it’s easier for parents to structure their time, but as they get older, Ms. Ackerman said, it’s important to give them a say. “If your kid says, ‘I really want to play ‘Fortnite,’ put it on the agenda,” she said. “Asking them how they want to spend their time helps them start to figure out their balancing act and how to prioritize. It’s a segue for them to be able to do that with a teacher or employer.”

**Come up with a plan.** Take a look at all of the things that need to be done in a day—homework, activities, chores—and tally up how much downtime your child has after all the necessities. If there are three free hours, divide them up in a way everyone can agree on. Maybe it’s one hour of screen time and two for doing activities from the list. The plan and the items on the list don’t have to be rigid—they can evolve over time as your kids’ needs change.

**Establish a bedtime routine.** When we hear “bedtime routine,” we tend to think of babies. But teens and even adults benefit from them, too. Sleep experts recommend avoiding screen time one to two hours before bed, depending on the kid’s age and their ability to settle down. Hadley Seward, a pediatric sleep consultant in New York, said getting teens to read before bed can be hard, because they tend to associate reading with schoolwork; so she suggests having them listen to audio books, podcasts or guided meditations. Adult coloring books are also a great way for older kids to unwind, she said.