

Opinion: Kids don't need a cellphone; they need a digital diet

By Naomi Schaefer Riley, Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.10.18

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A media diet is just like a regular diet. If you're not consistent in the first few weeks and months, you will fail. Photo by Sebastian Czapnik/Dreamstime/TNS.

A recent survey by the toy company Melissa & Doug says 70 percent of parents want their children to spend less time watching electronic media and 62 percent want them to spend less time on electronic devices. They are right.

Studies show that screen time is associated with health problems. It can lead to higher levels of being overweight, shorter attention spans and more mental problems, including depression, or sadness that lasts for some time.

The new year is as good a time as any for parents to rethink their rules and come up with a media diet.

So What's A Media Diet?

A media diet is like a regular diet. If you don't stick with it in the first few weeks and months, you will fail.

Parents can lay out a couple of exceptions for kids ahead of time, such as car rides longer than two hours. But if they start with a no-screen-time rule on school nights and then make an exception because they need to do some work, they should expect that kids will ask for screens the next night. If parents let kids play on their phones in line at the supermarket, they will expect screen time when they have to wait anywhere.

But parents cannot simply remove the devices and offer nothing in return. When they take away phones and tablets, they have to give kids other things: more time outside, more low-tech toys or more time with parents.

Think Carefully About Planning Screen Time

A temptation of technology is its portability. In a widely read opinion in the Washington Post, Amanda Kolson Hurley wrote about our culture of "snackism" for kids. "We walk around with trail mix and Sun Chips stuffed in our bags like we're mobile, no-fee vending machines." The same is true of our digital devices.

Kids used to sit too long in front of the TV. But at least once they got out of the house, that was the end of it. Now the TV can be on perpetually and parents can share movies and video games like mobile, no-fee theaters. Snackism means children eat when they're not hungry, and on-demand screen time is no better for them.

Too often our diets are ruined by impulse buys. If we go to the grocery store with a list and stick to it, everything goes well. But confronted with a plate of snacks or brownies, we give in.

When parents give out the devices after planning kids' screen time and thinking carefully about how much time and what kinds of activities children should do on screens, things go well. But when parents feel pressured into handing over a phone or granting permission to watch or play something on the fly, they don't.

Parents shouldn't give kids their own phone lightly or for the sake of convenience. The McDonald's drive-through is a more convenient option than cooking at home, but that doesn't make it a good choice.

No Phones Until Eighth Grade

A group called Wait Until 8th is suggesting parents hold off on kids' phones until they're in the eighth-grade — and even then offering a flip phone, not a smartphone. The group points to research suggesting that having a cell phone interferes with sleep.

Parents confirm that 9-year-olds are regularly texting into the night. Other studies suggest phones affect relationships, as taking them away for even a few days seems to increase children's abilities to read faces accurately.

Mobile phones also are a distraction from schoolwork. And that's not even considering the potential content that kids can be exposed to, including cyberbullying.

Doctors say that a number of parents have given their children their old phones. Some parents just want to make sure their children are connected to them at all times. "What if my daughter gets upset at a birthday party and needs to come home?" the mother of a 9-year-old with an iPhone asked.

Parents don't have to be available all the time. Kids can be given a watch and a time to meet after swim practice or gymnastics. If they need to leave an event early, kids can ask the adult present to contact their parents. This has the added advantage of teaching them independence.

Different Rules For Parents, Kids

It's OK to be a hypocrite about your own phone use versus theirs. You don't give your kids alcohol or the keys to the car. Why should kids have the same access to devices that parents have?

Most adults know what they should be eating, and they don't substitute candy bars for vegetables. They also know the pleasure of shutting off distractions to read a good book or to spend time with friends and family. But if you never experience getting lost in a good book all afternoon or enjoying time outside without worrying about checking your phone, will you be able to create these experiences as an adult?

Kids would no doubt prefer a Milky Way to a salad, just as they'd like to do and see what they want on a parent's phone or, better yet, their own. Don't budge, parents.

Quiz

1 Read the list of sentences from the article.

1. *It can lead to higher levels of being overweight, shorter attention spans and more mental problems, including depression, or sadness that lasts for some time.*
2. *The group points to research suggesting that having a cell phone interferes with sleep.*
3. *Other studies suggest phones affect relationships, as taking them away for even a few days seems to increase children's abilities to read faces accurately.*
4. *Doctors say that a number of parents have given their children their old phones.*

Which two sentences, taken together, provide the BEST evidence to support the idea that too much screen time hurts kids' health?

- (A) 1 and 2
- (B) 1 and 4
- (C) 2 and 3
- (D) 3 and 4

2 Which selection from the article BEST explains why it is NOT necessary for kids to have a phone all the time?

- (A) A media diet is like a regular diet. If you don't stick with it in the first few weeks and months, you will fail.
- (B) In a widely read opinion in the Washington Post, Amanda Kolson Hurley wrote about our culture of "snackism" for kids. "We walk around with trail mix and Sun Chips stuffed in our bags like we're mobile, no-fee vending machines." The same is true of our digital devices.
- (C) Parents don't have to be available all the time. Kids can be given a watch and a time to meet after swim practice or gymnastics. If they need to leave an event early, kids can ask the adult present to contact their parents. This has the added advantage of teaching them independence.
- (D) Kids would no doubt prefer a Milky Way to a salad, just as they'd like to do and see what they want on a parent's phone or, better yet, their own. Don't budge, parents.

- 3 How does the author develop his or her own perspective in the article?
- (A) by providing statistics about parents' concerns and showing how screen time relates to numerous health problems
 - (B) by comparing a food diet to a media diet and explaining how parents can take an active role managing digital device use
 - (C) by including the critical opinion of another writer and providing additional details to support that viewpoint
 - (D) by describing how a media diet works and highlighting problems associated with an unhealthy diet
- 4 Which answer choice BEST explains why a parent's perspective may differ from proponents of Wait Until 8th?
- (A) Some parents think that having a phone will make kids more independent.
 - (B) Some parents do not think it is important to monitor how kids use phones.
 - (C) Some parents think that phones offer many advantages to their kids.
 - (D) Some parents want to make sure their kids can reach them at any time.