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Dismantling the Question of "How much screen time should my kid have?"

Abstract

"It feels like there is so much at stake when it comes to our kids and media usage, especially since most of the related headlines are negative."

Posting about parenting wisely regarding technology from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/dismantling-the-question-of-how-much-screen-time-should-my-kid-have/>

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 inallthings.org/dismantling-the-question-of-how-much-screen-time-should-my-kid-have/

Kayt Frisch

April 19, 2018



Title: *The Art of Screentime: How Your Family Can Balance Digital Media & Real Life*

Author: Anya Kamenetz

Publisher: PublicAffairs (January 2018)

Paperback: 288 pages

Price: \$15.00 (Hardcover)

ISBN: 9781610396738

My husband and I have a reoccurring disagreement about media consumption – particularly how much our children should use technology and (the more contentious one) how much we should use devices when our kids are present.

This topic is a common source of concern and self-guilt for many parents. It feels like there is so much at stake when it comes to our kids and media usage, especially since most of the related headlines are negative. But we keep doing it anyway, because if we're honest, it's a lot easier to cook dinner while the kids are distracted with a movie.

So, what's a parent to do? This is the question that Anya Kamenetz takes on in her book “The Art of Screen Time: How Your Family Can Balance Digital Media & Real Life.” The book is a well-researched look at screen usage and children, and the work itself is organized around three major themes: negatives, positives, and parent usage.

Kamenetz dives into the current research (in so far as it exists) to discuss the most well-established negatives connected with media use, and also some of the more speculative associations. Her coverage of the negatives is open, honest, and fair, but probably somewhat familiar (if you read news articles about kids and tech). What most parents will find refreshing - and reassuring - about her book is the discussion of media's potential positives.

Kamenetz is not a positive-tech crusader: she does not believe that technology will solve all of the world's problems (and as the lead digital education correspondent for NPR, she's seen her share of attempts in the education field). She is, however, a parent of two preschool/early elementary-age children, and thus she wants to find a way to help her daughters learn to interact well with media, particularly as critical consumers and active creators. She calls her approach "positive parenting with media," and laces her arguments with examples of real parents who have been able to positively blend media and engaged play with their kids. She then synthesizes the examples and research into practical guidelines. For example, she recommends "sponsoring" a kid's interest in tech just as one might an interest in soccer (being a "Minecraft Mom/Dad" like some are a "Soccer Mom/Dad"). She also advocates finding approaches that use media to facilitate communication and closeness within the family and in the broader community.

The final theme, parent usage of media in front of and about their children, is a source of guilt for many parents. Kamenetz focuses on culture-shaping aspects of device usage, touching on the psychology of distraction, our children's (future) privacy, and "the public performance of parenthood." Again, there are practical suggestions and concrete examples throughout the chapters. One particularly sobering reflection relates to distraction while driving (spoiler: PUT YOUR PHONE AWAY—distracted driving is statistically the most likely way to kill your primary school-aged child).

Amid this smorgasbord of considerations, the one I find most reflection-inducing is "mommy blogging," probably because this is the rabbit warren in which I often find myself wandering during odd moments. Blogging and social media allow us to find community, but they also raise the risk of de-contextualization and public shaming. Furthermore, the media that we consume (and create) typically sells fictionalized versions of our lives, which leads us to compare our real lives to unrealistic standards. My ten-month-old often screams in protest when I leave for work, so this morning I shared a video of that on my "grandparent's blog." This is real life for me.

The overarching and refreshing theme of this book is that healthy use of technology is about the relationships that it enables—whether those are with our kids or with other parents. Ultimately, Kamenetz observes, screens aren't going away any time soon, so she proposes we adopt an adaptation of Michael Pollen's food mantra: "Enjoy screens. Not too much. Mostly with others."

Personally, as the parent of an almost-three-year-old, the book calms much of my fear about exposing my children to screens and provides practical guidelines for how to make the most of that media time. We've already started to implement some of these ideas: for example, letting our almost-three-year-old look at (related) pictures on our phones during family devotions. "The Art of Screen Time" is a good read for parents of kids of any age, though Kamenetz herself, having two young children (three- and six-years-old, respectively), is reflected a bit in the book.

As a family, the things we've learned from this book will shape our conversations about media use for years to come. How might they shape yours?