

The Screen Time Problem Doesn't End When Kids Start School

Screens are woven into almost every part of your child's school day. There are laptops at school. Phones on the bus. YouTube after school. Gaming with friends. Group chats pinging throughout the evening. And homework that genuinely requires a device. (They're always "just doing my homework" when we see them on a screen, right?)

Despite Australia's under-16 social media restrictions, my conversations with parents in schools suggest social media remain a significant issue for many families. Data is clearly showing that the kids haven't given up their social media accounts, and Facebook hasn't kicked them off.

So what can we do about it?

Ask what the screen is replacing

We often focus on screen time as a number. "How long have you been on that thing?"

A more interesting question might be: **What didn't happen because you were on it?**

Did your child get enough sleep? Did they move their body? Did they spend time with friends face-to-face? Did they talk to anyone in the family? Did they read, create, play, practise an instrument, kick a ball, walk the dog, or simply experience boredom long enough to figure out what to do next?

Screens have an opportunity cost.

Don't let screens become the default

Screens promise cheap dopamine (which allows us to feel good), and something researchers call "digital soothing".

Bored? YouTube.

Stressed? TikTok.

Awkward moment? Grab the phone.

Can't sleep? Scroll.

Nothing happening for 30 seconds? Check notifications.

(And we, as adults, are often just as bad.)

Change the environment, not just the rules

Telling a 14-year-old to "use your phone less" while their phone sits beside them buzzing with notifications is asking them to exercise extraordinary, impossible self-control.

Make the environment do some of the work. Keep phones away from bedrooms overnight. Create screen-free mealtimes. Have somewhere devices can live when they're not needed. Encourage homework to happen with unnecessary tabs, apps, and notifications switched off.

And importantly, make some of these family rules rather than "kid rules".

It's difficult to convince our children that phones shouldn't interrupt dinner while we're checking ours under the table.

Give them something worth putting the screen down for

Your child might protest. They might tell you everyone else is allowed. They might be spectacularly unimpressed with your decision.

That's okay.

Set boundaries around screens, then fill the space you've created with something better.

Food around the table. A lift to see a friend. A basketball hoop. A dog walk. Music. Books. Cooking. Conversation. Family movie night.

Our kids don't simply need less screen time.

They need more life away from it.



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