

Digital Parenting and your Autistic Child.

Part 3: Introducing Boundaries & Embracing Unplugging



Family
Online Safety
Institute

Table of Contents

Intro: Perseverating & Tips for Autistic Brains	p. 4
Teaching Self-Regulation Skills	p. 6
Navigating the Mine Field of Social Media with your Child	p. 9
Apps vs. Social Media: Usage, Warnings & Etiquette	p. 11
Keeping Your Child Safe	p. 12
Transitions, Triggers and Tantrums: How to Avoid a Digital Meltdown	p. 13
How to Create an Unplugged Bedtime Routine	p. 15
Digital Detox Checklist	p. 17
Digital Contract for Your Family	p. 18

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Introducing Boundaries & Embracing Unplugging

In today's world, it is difficult to break away from constant digital connections. The need to unplug from technology is increasingly important, especially for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. By reading this guide, you'll have a greater understanding of your autistic child's digital tendencies and how unplugging can benefit their lives.

Perseverating & Tips for Autistic Brains

In the real world, to communicate you have to read body language, social cues, understand and provide feedback, and engage in back and forth volleys of conversation. That's hard work for people with autism. It's much easier to connect with a screen, including talking to people online instead of in person.

Children on the autism spectrum often seem to get 'stuck' on certain topics or interests, and in today's digital world, it's often around video gaming. When kids get fixated on something it's called 'perseverating'. It's when their brain gets stuck on just one topic and they can't seem to get off of it.



Perseverating & the ASD Brain

Whether it's playing a game, talking about a topic, or asking for something they want, they cannot get it off their mind and tend to only discuss that one interest. They get hyper focused on one thing and are just stuck there. Perseverating is very common with children with autism and sometimes other children as well. Often children get stuck on their games because it's fun and easy for them to play and they don't have to try hard to interact like they do in real life.

Avoid Addictive Entertainment

Because of its addictive nature, gaming should be limited. Children that are addicted will not want to get off the games, may even soil themselves to avoid getting up to use the bathroom while gaming, or refuse to eat unless it's at their computer desk. They may refuse to interact with peers and make friends because they only want to play video games. This can become a detriment to them in the long run, because it's important to learn how to communicate and socialize in order to survive in our world. While it's okay to spend some time in fantasy games, it's even more important to learn life lessons and social skills.

Set Limits

To help reduce the addiction of screen time, set limits on the time the child can play games and watch TV or YouTube. Also limit what they are playing or watching.

Encourage Social Play

Encourage more social play. To start, have a friend over to play the games with them – for a limited amount of time, and also have them spend some time playing interactively with other toys/games, outside play, etc. Enroll the child in activities, even if they are resistant at first, that encourages teamwork, social interaction, and communication/play.



Expand Offline

If your child likes Pokémon video games, have them play Pokémon cards with a peer or join a Pokémon club at school. If your child likes Lego games, have them build with actual Legos, and join a social group that plays with Legos (many libraries, toy stores, and even schools offer these groups).

Tailor Activities

Even if your child is resistant to anything non-gaming related they likely will eventually participate/enjoy other activities if you insist on it, firmly but nicely. Maybe the child can earn a reward such as if they participate in soccer practice today, then they can have an extra 10 minutes on the computer, for example.



Teaching Self-Regulation Skills

If your autistic child is often getting very upset about little problems they likely are suffering from poor self-regulation skills. Most young children need help with this, but some kids just struggle more than others— especially when trying to disconnect from their favorite electronic devices, like their iPad, gaming system or smart phone. This may be why your child has a meltdown over not having ice cream for dinner, or falls apart when they have to stop using their iPad, Kindle or other electronic toy. It's very important, however, to teach your child how to regulate their emotions and reactions, so they can manage their feelings and function more successfully without their iPhone or tablet.

Name Their Emotions

First, help your child just identify how they feel. One way is to name their emotions, and then get them to say it too. For example, if they are yelling and stomping you can say, "It looks like you are angry. Can you say, 'I'm angry!'"

Name Your Emotions

Another way to help autistic children be more aware of their feelings is to name your own emotions. For example, you can say, "I feel sad when you hit me." Name positive emotions too, like:

- "I feel happy because you listened right away & turned off your iPad!"
- "We are so excited because we're going to the playground!"



Get some feelings flashcards (you can find some for free online), and feelings children's books and have the child name what emotion is showing on the face. Make faces showing various emotions (frown=sad, smile=happy, etc) and have your child name the feeling. Have your child also do it and make you guess. Most kids love to be silly, so encourage them to make silly faces or silly guesses too.

Use Stories and Scenarios

Make up some scenarios and include some your child may have experienced and ask your child how they think the person in the situation would feel.

- "Maria was playing her favorite game on her tablet, and then her brother Johnny took it from her and broke it. How would Maria feel?"
- "You couldn't wait to go on a picnic, but then it rained and it was cancelled, how would you feel?"

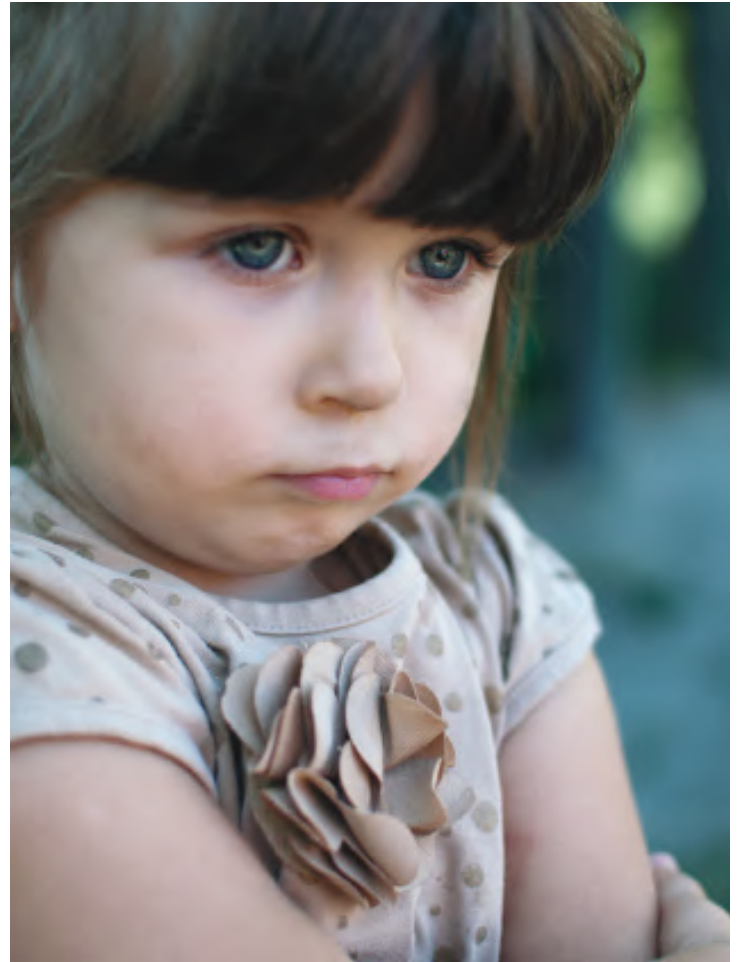
There are many books that address this topic as well which may be helpful. The movie "Inside Out" is helpful for children to understand feelings. After your child is able to understand emotions, encourage them to name their feelings when they are upset.

Manage Feelings

Next, you want them to learn how to manage that feeling. Like the examples listed earlier, have the child identify in a scenario how someone would feel, and then have them respond how they would handle the situation. You can throw in situations that have happened to your child as well.

“Justin’s sister pulled his hair and called him an idiot. How does he feel? What should he do about it?”

Encourage the child first to come up with the answer and if they struggle, then give them some suggestions. A sense of humor can make this game more fun like giving some silly/wacky responses and having the child pick the right one among the funny reaction choices.



Avoiding Meltdowns

Before an autistic child has a meltdown, if you can anticipate it, remind them what a good response would be, and encourage them to make it. For instance:

“Honey, I just learned that baseball was cancelled today because the coach was sick. I know you will be disappointed. Let’s think of a good way to respond to this problem...” and see if the child can come up with a response.

Also after a child has had a meltdown, talk to them about how to handle it better next time.

“Sweetie, you were very upset when your brother kicked you. You screamed and hit him back. What would’ve been a better way to handle this problem next time?” Then, if possible, act it out/role play the positive solution at that time so the child can remember how to do it the next time.

Asking your child questions will help them be more aware of their emotions and how they handle situations while teaching them how to make better choices and feel better about things too. Try these:

- “What were you feeling?”
- “What were you thinking about when this happened?”
- “How could we solve that problem?”
- “What would be a better choice that would get you what you wanted in a better way?”

Employ Critical & Positive Thinking

If the child is old enough for some critical thinking, try to get them to identify those thoughts that led to the feelings. For example:

“If someone called you a mean name you are likely thinking ‘They don’t like me. They think I’m stupid,’ perhaps, which leads to you feeling sad.” Teach your child to change their thinking to something more positive such as:

“They are just trying to make you mad. Or they are having a bad day,” and then you don’t feel so upset, you can shrug it off easier.

If you can change your thoughts to more positive and realistic things, or at least to thinking you can handle the negative situation, then you will feel better, and your behavior will result from that too. All behavior occurs as a reaction from feelings which are caused by thinking. **If we target changing the thinking, the rest will change automatically.** If we just focus on changing behavior, it still doesn’t help learn how to manage those thoughts and feelings which still require regulation.



Navigating the Mine Fields of Social Media With Your Child

Navigating the in-roads into your child's life is like navigating a mine field. As a parent of an autistic child, you may notice that your child prefers spending time generally online browsing the internet, rather than engaging socially online or chatting in apps with friends. However, if they do have a social media presence, it's important to have guardrails in place for expectations of good behavior.

Social Media Can Make Private Things Public

We work hard as parents to help our kids understand that privacy is important. But we also need to teach our children the boundaries for privacy in the digital world. Passwords that are kept PRIVATE are helpful to keep children safe—just like a key to their front door.

Staying Safe is Normal

Treat social media safeguards as you would any other safety device—seatbelts in the car, locking the front door at home, wearing helmets while riding bikes, being careful of strangers. Putting safeguards on their game systems and phones (if they have them) is a good idea for everyone to do—even parents. Choose safeguards as a family for all devices—including your own.

First Things First

Ice cream for dinner and vegetables for dessert may sound like heaven but for many of us, it will lead to sour stomachs and poor nutrition. Such is the case with screen time. Too much screen time robs children of interacting with friends or siblings face to face, limits their learning to collaborate on a project or a game and replaces exploring the outdoors. Especially with the ASD's child ability to fixate on various tech, it's crucial to moderate how much time is spent

on devices and to have a clearly communicated plan of what to do when screen time is done for the day.

Create Boundaries and Limits

Set examples of boundaries with your whole family — no cell phones at the dinner table; charge phones at a family charging station outside of the bedrooms; limit phone use; be conservative about posts.

Passwords

Unlike adults who might try to write them down in a reasonable spot, kids keep changing them to keep adults out of their business. It is OK to make a deal — “You can use the internet if I have your password” or “In order to have the privilege of using your phone, I need the password.” Here is where we need to be honorable — snooping just to snoop is not honorable. Checking up on our kids because we are concerned about their safety is called parenting.

Establish a Village

Parents learn a lot from other parents. Inviting YOUR peers to be part of your village is a good idea. Some parents have “intel” on what parties are going on, what kids are likely causing trouble, Rely on your village to be watchful and keep you informed when something concerning seems to be going on.



Parent Reflections:

1. What conversations about social media safety have I had with my children? What should we discuss?
2. What software safeguards am I prepared to put in place for my kids and what do I need for myself?
3. What do I need to learn about the digital world to make myself aware of my child's world? How will I go about learning this?
4. How can I language my concern or frustration in a way that is more caring and sensitive to my child's developmental phase and builds bridges rather than walls?
5. What is the age limit for social media sites and when is it appropriate for my child to access them?

Apps vs. Social Media: Usage, Warnings & Etiquette

There are a number of unique issues for parenting an autistic child in a digital world, and with each, there are a variety of ways technology can exacerbate the issues or aid in the solution. It is important to monitor screen time for yourself and your kids, and especially important for kids on the spectrum, as they have an increased risk of developing a technology addiction.

Apps & Websites

Not all screen time is created equally. To simplify, there are two classes of apps and web sites: **educational** and **entertainment**. Reports show that kids on the autism spectrum are prone to spending long hours engrossed in internet use and video games.

Social Media

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat are omnipresent in our world. These are the most popular social platforms among teens and tweens at the moment, and etiquette on them is nuanced and sometimes difficult to understand. For example, it can be perceived as distasteful or “weird” to like or comment on the same person’s posts too often, or to contact the same person too many times without response, and **for those on the spectrum understanding these limits can be difficult**. Parents should understand the basics of the social media platforms their children are using and restrict computer use to a common room in the house for moderation.

Create a conversation checklist for social media etiquette.

- Would my parents or teachers be happy if they saw this post?
- Is this post or message free of personal information, such as phone number, address, school name, etc.?
- Have I liked or commented on this person’s posts less than three times this week?
- Do I know the person I am talking to?



Keeping Your Child Safe

We need to educate our children – especially those with Autism Spectrum Disorder – and provide them with the necessary tools and strategies to successfully manage any communications they may receive. Because communication and reading emotional cues can be difficult for children on the spectrum, they may not realize something’s inappropriate. Here are some important tips to consider as you prepare your child:

Start the Conversation

Don’t hesitate to talk with your child about online predators. In an age appropriate manner, explain to them what they are, what their motives are and reinforce they are not to be trusted. Use short sentences and clear thoughts to help them best understand.

Educate About Grooming Tactics

Make sure your child understands the “red flags” of grooming. Talk through examples with them on what things they may hear in an online chat. Some of these things may include:

- “Let’s chat privately.”
- “I’d love to meet you. Where do you live?”
- “Where do you hang out?”
- “What do you like to do with your friends?”

These are all tactics to gain a young person’s trust and create a vulnerable situation where they may become a victim.

Minimize Shame

Above all else, it is vitally important that your child trusts you and feels they can turn to you if they feel unsafe or question an online interaction. While explaining the risks, be sure to also reinforce you are there to help them navigate this online world.

Monitor Online Activity

Keep the family computer and your child’s devices in a neutral space in the house where everyone can see online behavior. Set screen time limits on the amount of time your child spends on line or in apps. Use a parental control software to receive alerts about inappropriate activity on content.

1 in 5 U.S. teenagers who regularly log on to the internet says they have received an unwanted sexual solicitation via the web. **Only 25% of those told a parent.**

Transitions, Triggers & Tantrums: How to Avoid a Digital Meltdown

Children, especially those on the autism spectrum, often struggle to transition from preferred activities to non-preferred activities, for obvious reasons: **no one enjoys stopping something they like to do in order to something they don't want!**

Kids who struggle with flexibility preferred and preferred activities can be difficult. For example, if a child is playing with a toy (preferred) and parent says it's time to go to the playground (preferred) the child may still resist and meltdown. This is because they cannot rationally think 'Oh this new activity will be fun' or 'I can come back to my toy later', they only think 'I like what I'm doing now and I don't want to stop it.' **This is why it's so hard to transition between activities.**

Struggling with Electronic Devices

All children seem to struggle to get off their electronic devices because they really enjoy playing with them. **Children with autism have a hard time interacting socially with others, it's less stressful and easier for them to interact with a game, than with real live people.**

It's especially important for children on the spectrum to have regular, in-person conversations or interactive play involving thinking about the other person, looking at them, eye contact, coming up with conversation topics,

and having to regulate yourself to accommodate others. With electronic games and online interactions, you don't have to worry about any of those th

Interventions for Smooth Transitions

Rigid children are going to resist transitions and often meltdown over them because they don't have the ability to think logically and reasonably and adjust their thinking. However, they can learn how to do these things with some basic behavioral and social skills interventions and with caregivers adjusting the way they handle their child's transitions.

Visual/Picture Schedules

Use a picture schedule for routines, such as the morning routine, school schedule, bedtime routines. Children need routines and the action of 'changing the schedule' is the expected activity between each and every transition.

Set a Timer & Give Reminders

Set expectations by telling your child, "You have 5 more minutes on that game, and then it's time to go." Then, set a timer and when it beeps the child needs to get off the device. Now the child may still fight about it, **but it's harder to argue with an inanimate timer than with a caregiver.** "Sorry the timer went off; the game is all done."



Explain Expected Behavior

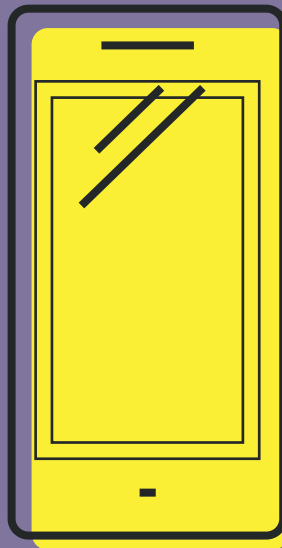
Be clear on the expected behavior you want to see beforehand and teach the child the flexible thought by explaining the consequences of their actions. For example, the parent would say, "Okay in five minutes, the game is all done. If you throw a fit when it's done, you don't get to play for the rest of the day. If you get off nicely, then you can play your game later." This teaches the child how to think reasonably, use logic, and learn the skill you would like them to learn. While some flexible kids will just naturally understand this, more rigid children will need to learn this type of thinking.

Follow Through

If your child starts to get upset, you could give a little reminder: "Oh, I hope you can hand me the toy nicely without crying and then you can play it later. Hmm, I hear some whining, remember, that means no more game for the rest of the day. Let's make a good choice." If the child does continue the tantrum, then take the game away, and later remind them they lost their game privilege due to the meltdown but they can try again tomorrow. If they did a good job, praise them significantly saying, "Thank you for making a great choice! Because you listened and got off your game nicely, you get to play it later! Good job. I love that you can listen to me and be so flexible!" Later, when they get to play the game, remind them of their good choice they made earlier to reinforce the lesson.

Do Not Negotiate

If the child has a tantrum over a game being over, calmly take the game, turn off the TV/computer, and ignore the meltdown. **Don't try to rationalize or negotiate.** The child is not in a presence of mind to understand logic at that point. They cannot grasp it, and any lecturing or discussion is completely futile.



Wait until they are calm and then discuss how the child can make a better choice next time. Later, you can explain why they had to transition, and that if they are calm when told all done they are more likely to get to play it later, but if they throw a fit, they won't get to play it later.

Try to acknowledge the child's feelings so they feel heard. You can say: "I know it makes you sad to turn off the game, it's really hard to stop playing your favorite activity." "It's okay to be upset about it but we need to make a good choice." **The calmer you are, the more likely your child will behave calmly.** After they've learned the consequence of losing the game

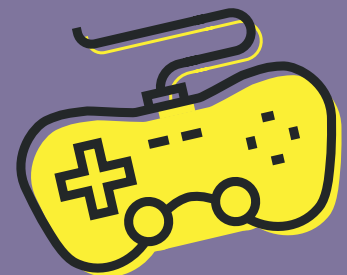
privilege later they will (hopefully) remember this the next time they are in this situation and make a better choice.

You can also remind them of this and say: "You know yesterday when I said computer time is over, you screamed and didn't get to play the whole day. That was no fun, right? Let's remember that now, so we can make a good choice. Then you get to play again later!"

Limit Electronics

To prevent meltdowns, try to not let the child on their preferred electronics before homework time, right before going out somewhere, or right before bedtime. For children that may physically fight over handing the parent the game or keep turning the device back on after you've turned it off, just take the charging cord or turn off the Wi-Fi. You can also change the password later, so when it's time for the consequence they cannot access the game- this works well if you know your child will just sneak onto the device again later. Make sure the password isn't easy to guess. (Don't use the pet's name!)

If the child's behavior continues or worsens, consider having them see a behavioral therapist to work on these problems, or talk to their teacher to work on this behavior in school.



How to Create an Unplugged Bedtime Routine

When it comes to bedtime, what's the best routine for your child? Children on the spectrum respond well to set rules and routines – and a bedtime routine is no exception. Ensuring a good night's sleep is important for all kids, but even more so for ASD, ADD or ADHD households.

Are Wireless Signals Affecting Your Child?

After a study by the US National Toxicology Program linked radiofrequency radiation in rats to carcinogenic growths, the American Association of Pediatrics updated their recommendations for cell phone exposure to children. Each time a call, text or data is used from a device, small amounts of radiation are emitted and can potentially be harmful for children, if exposed to prolonged use. While there needs to be more extensive research on this subject, parents should be aware of this updated recommendation and err on the side of caution.

“The AAP reinforces its existing recommendations on limiting cell phone use for children and teenagers. The AAP also reminds parents that cell phones are not toys, and are not recommended for infants and toddlers to play with.”

Parents of autistic children should be especially cognizant of how the wireless radiation and electromagnetic fields can react with their child's brain. According to Martha Herbert, a pediatric neurologist from Harvard Medical School's findings regarding autism and electromagnetic fields, she recommends that parents taking precautionary measures.



Establish a Bedtime Plan

All of these factors can roll into an unhealthy night's sleep for your child, which only increases the need of a well-planned nighttime routine. Here are some tips you can use to help establish a strong sleep pattern for your child.

Check for Food/Environmental Allergies

Gastrointestinal intolerances and issues are more common in persons on the autism spectrum and can prevent your child from getting an undisturbed night's sleep.

Check for Medication Side Effects

Some medications may have side effects that prevent your child from falling asleep or staying asleep through the night. Check with your doctor for any possible side effects that may arise.

Identify any Parasomnias or Sleep Disorders

According to the National Sleep Foundation, parasomnias are classified as any unusual sleep behaviors, outside of sleep apnea, that could include: nightmares or sleep terrors, sleepwalking, or sleep aggression.

Survey the Sleep Environment

A quick temperature check is an easy way to see how your child is most comfortable at bedtime. If they are too hot or too cold, it could stimulate them to stay awake. Take note of their preference and work into your nightly routine. Also consider the noise level inside and outside of your child's bedroom. Sounds of traffic, weather or other factors outside of your home could cause them to stay awake.

Apply Some Pressure

Children with autism or sensory disorders could respond well to weighted blankets or bedding that provides pressure, providing a sense of calming while they sleep. Other tactile things to consider are your child's pajama preferences. Not only is it safer for your child to have a bedroom without a computer, television, tablet or smartphone, it's conducive to sleep. In addition to removing screens from the bedroom, you'll want to enforce screen-free time **one to two hours** prior to bedtime.

Try Soothing Activities

Bath time, coloring, and a calming back rub can go a long way. Lorna Jean King, the founder of the Children's Center for Neurodevelopmental Studies suggest, "If a bath or shower is an evening activity, follow with five minutes of a towel "rub-down," being sure to use downward strokes in the direction the hair grows. A rub-down with lotion may be used to add to the length of this activity. Pressure touch is calming. After the child is in bed, a back-rub may also be soothing. Again, be sure to start with the neck and go down to the base of the spine. Use slow, rhythmic strokes; when one hand is at the base on the spine, start at the back of the neck with the other hand."

Be Consistent

Set a bedtime that allows enough time to unwind through routine and allows the minimum number of recommended hours of sleep for your child's age. chart for quick reference. Keep in mind that ASD children can exert more energy than a neurotypical child, so may need more sleep to recover each night. Instituting a visual schedule for bedtime tasks can also help your child learn the steps in the bedtime routine you create.

Digital Detox Checklist

Young kids growing up on the Autism Spectrum have brains more vulnerable to tech and screen addiction. Bad habits with destructive effects can develop quicker and easier than you think. Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder often seek solace in the predictable and isolated nature of computers and video games, and parents will notice screen time quiets some of their disruptive behaviors, so they are not always inclined to interrupt. But the line between seeking solace and forming a dependence is paper thin. It can be difficult to differentiate the two when everything that happens seems to happen online.

A digital detox is one way to take back control of technology use in your life and in your household. It may be difficult, especially for a child on the spectrum that is used to the peaceful time spent on screens, but taking an extended break from digital devices will reveal the potentially harmful habits you may not know you and your family have formed, and help bring them to an end.

Detoxes should last a **minimum of 24 hours**, but the longer it lasts, the more it reveals and potentially repairs. This digital detox checklist will help you take an important step to fighting screen addiction.

1. Plan in advance. Find a time that everyone in the family can shut down their devices for at least 24 hours.
2. Write down a mission statement. Put into words the reason you are detoxing to remind the family why the detox is important.
3. Keep the family's devices stored together during the detox period. It will make it easier to keep track of potential rule breakers.
4. Let people know you'll be offline. Tell anyone who regularly contacts you of your detox plans so they understand you will be away from your devices.
5. Plan activities to keep everyone occupied and enjoying time away from devices. Idle hands are the devil's workshop... maybe that's too dramatic, but idle hands certainly gravitate to smartphones. Enjoy the time away from the digital world. It will teach your child that he can find peaceful spaces and fun away from screens.
6. Prepare to log back on. There will undoubtedly be a barrage of notifications and alerts. This may be overwhelming and overstimulating, so be patient and take it step by step.
7. Schedule a regular detox. Monthly, bi-weekly, weekly, whatever interval it may be, a regular detox will help cleanse the mind and give structure to an otherwise disruptive event.

Digital Contract for Your Family

Tablet Computer/Laptop Phone Game Console Connected Toy

You Agree To:

- Only watch videos/visit websites that my parents approve.
- Not download anything without permission first.
- Only spend _____ minutes on the tablet/phone/computer/game each day.
- I can use the devices between the hours of _____ only.
- Tell a parent if I see something that makes me feel uncomfortable.
_____ rooms are off-limits for using any device.
- Ask permission before purchasing anything online.
- All devices should charge overnight in _____.
- I promise not to use any devices during breakfast, lunch or dinner.
- I won't let screen time distract me from homework and my favorite hobbies, like _____.
- Not share any personal information or photos without approval.

We Agree To:

- Watch along with my child & interact while they view videos and apps.
- Keep family meals unplugged.
- Be a good digital citizen and teach my kids to do the same.
- Not text and drive.
- Review privacy settings with the family.
- Keep all device passwords.
- Turn off all screens _____ minutes before bedtime.

(Parent/Guardian Signature)

(Child Signature)