

Families & Screens

Protecting the Early Years
Thriving and Surviving in the Later Years

Dr. Hilarie Cash

hilarie.cash@restartlife.com

www.restartlife.com

1 (800) 682-0670

The Job of Parents

- Love
- Protect
- Teach

Love Is Attachment

"Attachment lays the foundation for cognitive, physical, and social/emotional health."

How Attachment Develops

- Attunement with the child
- Consistent attention and appropriate responsiveness

Why the Early Years Matter

- Birth–6 years: rapid brain development
- Experience shapes the neural architecture

Screens in Early Life

- Digital devices are pervasive in adult life
- AI toys are being developed
- Children of all ages have developmental needs that have nothing to do with digital media or AI toys

Screens & Attachment

- Digital media (screens and AI toys) interrupts face-to-face interaction
- They reduce caregiver responsiveness
- They reduce limbic resonance

Inadequate Attachment Outcomes

- Attachment disorders
- ADHD
- Autistic-like symptoms

Caregiver Responsibility

Protect children's development as well as their safety

Developmental Needs

- Attachment
- Play
- Movement

- Sleep
- Nutrition
- Nature

Evidence: Screen Exposure 0–3

Associated with cognitive, social, and emotional disruption

Attachment Impacts

Lower quality caregiver–infant attachment with higher screen exposure

Brain & Language Effects

- Atypical brain development
- Language delay
- Poor executive functioning

Behavioral & Emotional Effects

- Increased emotional reactivity
- Decrease in self-regulation
- Autistic-like symptoms

Sensory, Motor & Sleep

- Atypical sensory processing
- Reduced motor skills
- Reduced sleep quantity and quality

Caregiver Device Use: Technoference

- Evokes stress responses in infants
- Reduces adult–child verbal interaction

Background Media

- Distracts play
- Reduces language learning
- Increases oppositional behaviors

Learning vs. Screens

Infants learn less from screens than from in-person interaction

Design of Children's Media

- Intentionally designed to hold attention
- Not developmentally aligned

When Screens Can Help

**Video chatting can support relationships
when in-person contact is not possible**

Screen Time Reality

Most children under age 2 exceed screen guidelines

Older Children & Families

Family Dynamics When Screens Become Addictive

- Screens shift from tool to emotional regulator
- Power struggles replace guidance
- Family routines become screen-centered

Changes in the Family System

- Boundaries between adults and children erode
- Conflict avoidance increases screen use
- Short-term calm replaces long-term emotional regulation

Attachment and Parental Authority

- Screens displace caregiver soothing
- Children turn to devices for regulation
- Parental authority and confidence weaken

Emotional Dynamics in Children

- Screens used to manage distress and boredom
- Frustration tolerance decreases
- Emotional avoidance and reactivity increase

Impact on Parental Mental Health

- Exhaustion and learned helplessness
- Guilt and shame around limit-setting
- Screens increasingly used to cope

Coercive Cycles

- Child dysregulation → screen access
- Screen removal → escalation
- Dependence unintentionally reinforced

Parallels With Addiction

- Loss of control
- Escalation over time

- Continued use despite harm
- Family accommodation maintains the behaviour

Gaming Disorder — ICD-11 (WHO)

- Impaired control over gaming
 - Increasing priority given to gaming over other activities
 - Continuation or escalation despite negative consequences
- Significant impairment in personal, family, social, educational, or occupational functioning
 - Typically evident for at least 12 months

Why This Matters Clinically

- Intersects with attachment trauma
- Complicates emotional regulation
- Undermines treatment engagement and family recovery

Guidelines

- Most nations: no screens before age 2–3 (except video chat)
 - France and Spain: no screens before age 6
 - Growing movement in the USA and elsewhere to not allow smartphones in schools
- Between age 2 or 3 to 6: max 1 hour non-violent, with co-viewing
 - Wait Until Eight
 - Australia and others: no social media before age 16

Closing the Knowledge Gap

Parents reduce screen use when informed of recommendations

What Helps

- Educate caregivers
- Support responsive caregiving
- Encourage screen-free play
- Teach healthy, age-appropriate boundary-setting

Healthcare Role

- Prenatal and well-child guidance
- Supportive, non-shaming conversations

Community & Policy

- Screen-free childcare
- Safe play spaces like playgrounds

- Toy lending libraries
- Screen-free schooling

Government's Role

- Industry regulation (e.g., Kids Online Safety Act)
- Public education campaigns

Mental Health Context

- Caregiver stress increases screen reliance
- Support mental health to reduce screen use

Prevention Message

Prevention is the solution

Take-Home

- Early relationships shape lifelong mental health
- Screens can interfere — prevention protects development