AutismONTARIO | Signature Series

Setting Healthy Screen Time Boundaries for Neurodivergent Children and Teens

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Meet the speaker

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What’s on the agenda?

- **Technology and Neurodivergence**
- **Using Values as Your Guide**
- **Setting Healthy Limits and Boundaries**



Technology & Neurodivergence



Technology is a Tool

- Tools are not good or bad.
- Their value comes from HOW we use them.
- Depending on HOW we use it, technology can help or harm us.
- HOW questions:
  - HOW do I or HOW does my child use technology?
  - HOW does it help me/them and HOW does it harm me/them?
  - HOW can I make changes to reduce harm or use technology more in ways that help.

The Double Edge Sword

Technology can:

- **Support accommodations → OR facilitate avoidance**
- **Connect → OR isolate**
- **Regulate → OR dysregulate**
- **Support executive function → OR erode it**
- **Strengthen engagement and focus→ OR be a distraction**

Two Types of Harm

Displacement, Interruption, distraction

- Sleep
- Embodied social connection (family & peers)
- Time in nature
- Exercise
- Risk taking and overcoming challenges
- Boredom & creativity
- Learning
- Attention and focus (attention fragmentation)

Exposure to Harmful Content

- Cyberbullying
- Extreme or polarizing
- Sexualized or violent
- Predatory individuals
- Dysregulation
- Exacerbation of obsessions, tics, distress
- Addictive design

Two Important Questions

The question isn't only:

"What are they doing online?"

It's also:

"What are they not doing in the real world that is necessary for health, wellbeing, independence?"

Neurodivergence & Technology

Online spaces can support autistic youth by offering:

- **Social communication that feels easier (Mazurek, 2013)**
- **Greater authenticity and reduced masking (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2014)**
- **Deep exploration of special interests (MacMullin et al., 2016) — linked to competence, joy, and identity development**
- **Facilitate communication, accommodate learning differences, or support executive functioning challenges**

Neurodivergence & Technology

At the same time, research shows:

- **Higher cybervictimization risk (Fisher et al., 2012)**
- **Increased vulnerability when loneliness is high (Deckers et al., 2017)**

Increased Vulnerability

Autistic individuals experience:

- Strong preferences for predictability and sameness
- Loneliness
- Sleep disruption
- Co-occurring ADHD, anxiety and OCD

Digital platforms offer:

- Predictable rules
- Immediate feedback and reinforcement
- An escape from social or anxiety provoking situations
- Intense dopamine hits

(**Deckers et al., 2017; Cohen et al., 2014; Leitner, 2014;** MacMullin et al., 2016; South et al., 2014

When Should You Worry?

- You or your child cannot disengage without extreme distress
- Lack of motivation or refusal to engage with offline activities
- Sleep is consistently disrupted
- School refusal
- Mood is highly dependent on access
- Online identity is replacing real-world identity
- Consuming extreme, polarizing, or developmentally inappropriate content
- New or worsening obsessions, tics, rituals, or reassurance seeking
- Body image and disordered eating
- Tech is the only coping or leisure strategy
- Withdrawal from in person relationships or preferred activities

Using Values as Your Guide



Using Values as Your Guide

Tip: More information about ACT is on the Resource List.

What kind of person do you want to be?

How do you want to engage with life?

What kind of family are you trying to build?

What skills or virtues do you want to have or teach to your child?

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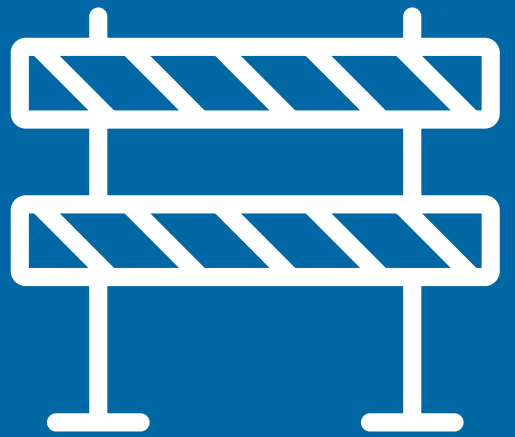
Using Values as your Guide

Does the way you or your child use technology support, facilitate, or move you and your family towards your values or away from them?

- **Which Apps, Games, or online activities are interfering or causing harm?**
- **What would you like to have more time for in real life?**

What limits can you set to make your technology use more aligned with your values?

Setting Healthy Limits & Boundaries



What to Stop Versus What to Limit

Stop, delete, do not allow activities that:

- Are unsafe
- Cause severe dysregulation or anxiety
- Are developmentally inappropriate
- Provide no benefit

Limit activities that are enjoyable, but:

- Distracting from activities of daily living (ADLs), learning and relationships
- Interfering with gaining skills, independence and growth
- Misused
- Waste time

Ask yourself, is the ONLY reason I do this or allow this to avoid meltdowns or to escape?

Examples of Limits

- **Less time**
- **Less privacy**
- **Less portability**
- **Less intense or rewarding**

What Caregivers CAN Control

You can't control your child but you can control:

1. **What you BUY**
   What you buy, you will battle.
2. **How you BEHAVE**
   Model what you want to see.
3. **Your BOUNDARIES**
   What you allow and do not allow.

Tips for Setting Limits and Boundaries



Make contingencies and limits both predictable and consistent

Timers, social stories, when- then, visuals, priming



Use technology to facilitate both access and transitions

Tips for Setting Limits and Boundaries



Expect, tolerate, and support during meltdowns or distress (4 ATES)



Follow through - Lectures are NOT limits

Tips for Setting Limits and Boundaries



Your home is not a courtroom. Talk WAY less. Let the boundary teach.



Offer autonomy and choice

Tips for Setting Limits and Boundaries



Consider and plan for safety



Saying no means saying yes to
joy, fun, connection, passions, special interests, curiosity, excitement, contribution,

Q&A

Your feedback matters. Share your thoughts!

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