

Less Screen Time, More Active Time

Television isn't the only thing competing with exercise for children's time and attention these days. Computers, video games, handheld devices... youngsters are easily drawn into anything with a screen.

Try these suggestions for limiting screen time and encouraging active fun for the whole family.



Less screen time

Experts recommend no more than 1–2 hours of screen time a day for children. Here are ways to help your youngster cut down.

TV journal. Keep a notebook by the TV. Each time your child watches a program, have her write down the title, the time, and a one-sentence summary. She'll get writing practice, and you'll have a way to track how much—and what—she's watching.

Activity scale. Does your youngster spend more time in front of a screen, or more time being active? Help him make a scale to find out. He can use a permanent marker to label two sandwich bags: "Screen Time" and "Active Time." Clip the bags to opposite ends of a coat hanger, and hang it on a doorknob. For each 15 minutes he spends in front of a screen or being active, he drops a nickel in the appropriate bag. At the end of a week, have him see which bag weighs the most.



Button jar. Consider setting a screen-time limit (say, an hour a day). On Sunday nights, set out a jar with 14 buttons, an empty jar, and a timer. Each button is good for a half hour of TV, video game, or computer play time. Tell your child she can use 2 buttons per day. When she watches a show or plays a video or computer game, help her set the timer for 30 minutes.

When it rings, she moves a button into the screen-time jar. This system lets your youngster know when her time is up and also tracks her daily screen time.

Limited access. Make screen time a little less convenient, and you may find your child naturally cuts back. For example, stash the remotes. Don't put a TV in his room—bedroom TVs are linked with a higher risk of obesity. And consider cutting down on the number of sets in your house. (*Idea:* Donate an extra TV to a homeless shelter or youth center.) If you have a laptop, keep it in one location. Open it when you use it, and close it when you finish so it's not constantly in use.

Talk time. Have meals at the table, not in front of the TV, and turn the set off while you're eating. Also, you might make it a rule that no one brings handheld games or cell phones to the table. Instead, build family bonds by using mealtime for discussions. Ask each person to tell the best or funniest thing that happened that day. Or put a "conversation salad bowl" on the table. On slips of paper, write conversation starters such as "If I could live at any time in history, it would be _____." Here's why," or "My favorite animal is _____ because _____." Take turns picking a slip, and get the conversation rolling!



continued

More active time

Kids need 60 minutes of exercise a day. Use these ideas to boost active time.

Family sports. Does your child like to watch sports on TV or play sports-themed video games? Suggest these games instead:

- Set up a bowling alley in your basement or outside. Try to knock down 10 water bottles with a ball.
- Head to the driving range, or play a round of miniature golf.



You can also make your own indoor or backyard course. Help your youngster make “holes” by laying empty boxes and cans on their sides. Using a broom as a golf club, gently sweep a small ball toward the holes.

- Have a race. How many ways can your child think of to cross a yard or a room? Brainstorm ideas, such as hopping, skipping, walking backward, or jumping like a frog. Then, take turns picking one of those ways to race.

Active volunteering. Make your active time even more worthwhile by using it to help others. Contact your local United Way, Red Cross, or place of worship to find out what you can do. You might take wheelchair-bound seniors on walks, volunteer with Special Olympics, or participate in walk-a-thons to raise money for good causes. Also, find out



how you can help sick neighbors or busy parents with babies (walk dogs, do yard work).

Stay-fit field trips. It's harder to watch TV if you're not home, so get everyone out of the house for an active family day. You might pick peaches or berries at a nearby orchard or go rock climbing at an indoor center or a sporting goods store. Play Ping-Pong, air hockey, or foosball at a community center game room.

New ways to exercise. At the library, have each family member check out a how-to book about a different type of physical activity (martial arts, yoga, swing dancing). Together, learn a few basics of each one. When you find something everyone enjoys, consider signing up for a class at the YMCA or through your parks and recreation department.

After-dinner walks. The end of the day is a “danger zone” for too much TV—it's tempting to relax in front of the set from dinnertime until bedtime. Instead, leave the television off, and head out for a family walk. Vary the routine by mapping out different routes in your neighborhood. *Idea:* Take a “left-turn walk,” where you can only make left turns until you get back home.

Home projects. Keep everyone busy, and they won't even think about turning on a screen. You might clean out a closet and use it for balls and other sports equipment. Register at www.freecycle.org for free items to add to your family's collection (badminton set, tennis rackets). *Other ideas:* wash and wax the car, paint a room, flip your mattresses, wash all the windows in your house.

Five-minute fitness

Try these five alternatives to TV that can be done faster than you can say “commercial break”:

1. Choose a poem from a volume of children's poetry, and act it out.
2. Take turns calling out addition problems (2 + 3, 5 + 1). Everyone does a combination of exercises based on the equation (2 sit-ups + 3 push-ups; 5 toe touches + 1 lunge).

3. Put on upbeat music, push back the furniture, and dance.
4. Have a headstand or handstand contest. See who can stay up the longest.
5. Press down a line of packing tape on your basement floor or on the sidewalk, and pretend it's a balance beam. Play Follow the Leader: the first person does a move, and everyone else copies it (turn, kick, jump, leap).



Editor's Note: Nutrition Nuggets is reviewed by a registered dietitian. Consult a physician before beginning any major change in diet or exercise.

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