

What We Can Do as Parents

Digital-Free Family Vacation

A fourteen-year-old boy I know was furious at his mother for taking over a week to replace his broken cell phone. In the course of that time, his girlfriend broke up with him because he failed to respond to her texts. It's worth noting that the kids go to the same school and live in the same neighborhood. Disturbed by their son's addiction to his phone, the parents came up with what they thought was a radical idea. They took a family vacation and took only one phone with them. With their phones taken away, their two children became agitated and short-tempered. It's safe to say it was starting off looking like the worst family vacation ever. Then, after a few days, something changed. They started to talk and laugh and really bond. It ended up being the best vacation they've ever had together.

Sign the Contract

Cell phone companies make us sign contracts filled with terms and conditions to have our phones, so why shouldn't our kids have to sign a contract to have theirs? Delany Ruston is a psychologist and filmmaker who produced a great documentary called *Screenagers*, in which she tackles whether or not to buy her young teenage daughter a cell phone. In the film, she demonstrates a unique and effective idea—if their daughter wanted the smart phone, she had to sign a contract and agree to certain conditions. I've heard of other parents trying the same thing, too. They are writing up contracts that include terms such as:

- The phone can never be used or even kept in the child's bedroom.
- The child cannot have the phone at any meal table.
- If friends come over, ALL the children have to forfeit their

phones while they are together. (If the friends' parents complain, saying they want their kids to have their phones on them at all times, call those parents and give them the house number to call if they need to get hold of their kids at any time.)

- Restrict the times when they are allowed to use their phones.
- If any of these terms are violated, the child loses their phone for a week.

Spin the Password

One family I met would change the password to the Wi-Fi every day. Only when their kids had completed their chores or their homework would they be given the new password. And even then, it was only enabled for a limited time before being disabled again.

Lead by Example

I frequently hear from parents complaining that their kids are constantly on their phones. However, I also hear from kids that their parents are always on their phones. If we truly believe that our families are more important than our work, we need to prove it. I have met too many parents who actually tell me that they have to have their phones at the family dinner table in case of work calls or e-mails. Unless you're an emergency surgeon on call to save someone's life, unless you're a first responder who has to run out the door at any moment, you need to question whether you *really have to* have your phone at the family dinner table. We can make our kids feel that we don't care about them as much as we say we do simply by having our phones out at the dinner table.

Being a Parent Is Hard Work

It breaks my heart when I go to restaurants and I see entire fam-

ilies on their devices. I was in a restaurant recently where I noticed a mom and grandmother with heads down in their phones. One kid, probably around six or seven, was playing a game on another phone and another kid, probably around nine or ten, had headphones on watching a movie. I saw them while I was eating a few tables away. Over the course of my dinner, nothing changed. When I finally got up to leave, not a single one of them had changed positions.

Another time I was out for brunch and was seated next to what looked like two or three families all out for brunch together. The parents sat at one table and all the kids, six or seven of them, all sat at an adjacent table. Not a single adult had a phone out, but every single kid had their own device and was head down for the entire brunch. I understand the temptation. Sometimes it is so nice to take a little vacation from our kids. But not every time. I honestly believe it would do less long-term damage to a kid to put them up for adoption than to hand them a device every single time we don't want to deal with them. Kids are annoying and loud and they fight and distract us from the things we like doing. That's because they're kids. And being a parent is hard work. Find shortcuts, take breaks from them, put them in front of the TV now and then. But don't fill them up with so much dopamine as impressionable children that you end up doing serious damage to them as adults. If you do let them engage with you or each other more often, you'll find that they say really funny or profound things that remind you that all that annoying stuff is really worth putting up with.

There is an entire section in the bookshop called "self-help." What we really need is a section called "help others." If we all agree to practice even some of these suggestions, we will be pioneering the help-others industry together. Inspire on!

—SIMON SINEK
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