Creating a Family Media Plan

What is a family media plan?

A family media plan is a tool that supports purposeful, healthy use of screens within households. Together, parents and children determine how digital media and devices will be used inside and outside the home. Along with social media, this includes computers, smartphones, tablets, video gaming, television and web sites.

A family media plan is intended for children and adults. Like learning to drive, understanding the responsible use of digital media and technology is a skill that builds over time. Your family plan should be customized to meet each family member's needs, considering age, traits, interests, personality and background.

Some families may prefer to create an online plan while others may choose to use paper. Regardless of the form, what's important is ongoing, non-judgmental communication about this technology among family members.

"[A] metaphor for adolescent digital media use we can consider is learning to drive a vehicle. We as a society acknowledge that this activity can be dangerous but also understand it helps adolescents get where they are going. It is recognized that there needs to be a period of time of education, supervised use, and boundaries in learning to drive. These approaches can also apply to digital media use. It is also recognized that safety equipment in cars such as air bags, seatbelts, and backup cameras are important to protect young drivers. There are likely analogous safety features in the digital world that could benefit youth that we need to discover, test, and implement."

(Moreno, Megan A. et al., Journal of Adolescent Health, Volume 73, Issue 2, 227 – 229)

What is the goal of a family media plan?

The goal of a formal plan is to provide children with important skills so that when they use media on their own, they are ready and able to handle the challenges and consequences of a technology-driven world. A family media plan creates boundaries while also promoting child self-efficacy, self-regulation and digital literacy.

How often should a family media plan be revised?

A family media plan should be revised as often as needed, such as at the beginning of each school year, during summer and holiday breaks, and especially as children age, acquire new devices and become more independent. Welcome this chance to collaborate and discuss how each family member uses and enjoys media and what may be done differently, thereby setting expectations that work for everyone.

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Helpful topics to think about before developing your family media plan

First, identify your family's values, activities and goals. Other things to consider may include digital citizenship, social media pros and cons and online safety. Gather input from each member of the family. As you get started, here are some thought provoking questions from Boston Children's Digital Wellness Lab:

1. **Time** - How much time should each member of the family be off screens? Does the time they use screens differ by day of the week or by what else is going on? (After homework is complete? After breakfast and chores? After playing outside?)
2. **Activities** - What activities do we value as a family? How often should we engage in those activities? Rather than just focusing on reducing screen time, think about what you want for your family, such as quality time together, more sleep, listening to music, playing board games or time outdoors.
3. **Location** - Are there places and times when screens are off-limits, such as the dinner table or before bedtime?
4. **Content** - What types of content are healthy for the child at this age?
5. **Mindfulness** - How can technology be used mindfully?
6. **Online Interaction** - How is your child expected to interact online with respect for themselves and others? What does this look like?
7. **Support** - How can your child bring you questions, concerns or fears that arise from their own or others' experiences online?
8. **Safety & Monitoring** - How will parents monitor their children's media use? When will children begin to self-monitor? Does your child know how to tell if a website is trustworthy? Clarify who children can engage with online and ensure that privacy settings are enabled. Depending on the child's age, explain the importance of critical thinking, recognizing that not everything on the internet is accurate and that data may be collected to send targeted ads or to make money.
9. **Accountability** - What happens when someone breaks this agreement? What will the consequences be?
10. **Differing Expectations** - What rules will all family members follow? How and why might expectations be different for adults and children of different ages?
11. **Young Adult Children** - What rules will they be expected to follow when they are back in your home? Are there expectations they'd like to hold themselves to within their new home setting?

Be a Role Model!

Children notice how and when adults use digital media in their daily lives. Their frame of reference is built around the actions of those close to them. Be mindful of what your children see you doing. Set a good example with your own safe and healthy screen habits. If one of your rules is no screens during family meals, then that applies to mom and dad too!

Resources

The American Academy of Pediatrics offers a tool to help households customize a media plan. For additional resources, please visit **bchd.org/youthtech**. Here you will find more options, sample agreements, tip sheets and conversation starters.

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