

The 30 Day Screen Challenge

Face it: Screens are a part of life. You have a computer on your desk at home and at work. Your kids have homework that requires a computer. Events and parties are scheduled and coordinated through social media. Conventional activities from banking to shopping to reading books have migrated from the physical to the digital world. Our entertainment has followed suit, and we watch our kids dive deeper and deeper into their online lives starting at earlier ages with each passing year.

Sometimes, we just want to step back, find our way out of our screens and reconnect with our family and friends.

My eBook, *The 30 Day Screen Challenge*, follows my family on our practical journey toward decreased screen dependence. You will learn insights into finding screen alternatives, tips on enticing pre-teens and teens away from their screens, and workarounds for the inevitable pitfalls encountered during the disengage process. Additionally, the questionnaire and action plan included allow you to plan a challenge of your own.



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The 30 Day Screen Challenge

I recently came to the sudden and shocking realization that I don't know what I enjoy outside of my computer screen any more. I had been depressed, filled with anxiety and frankly, disassociated.

Then I looked around my house. I saw my daughter wrapped up in Minecraft, chatting on Skype. I saw my son watching an episode of Pokémon that I know he had seen at least a dozen times. My husband was on yet another play-through of Mass Effect. A quick survey of my household brought to light the fact that we own sixteen Internet-capable devices. That's four per person.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to change the Wi-Fi password. We did change the Wi-Fi password. There was much indignation and even a few tears shed.

That was when I remembered a family vacation we took in 2011. We drove up the California coast to the Redwood Forest. During that trip, we made a deal with the kids – and with ourselves – that electronic devices were fine for Interstate travel, but as soon as we turned off onto more scenic roads, the car windows would become our “screens.”

At first, the kids grumbled over the lack of DS game action. Then we saw the pair of zebra munching lazily in the shade of an oak tree right in front of a big, red barn. The kids were hooked. What would we see next? Can we stop at the roadside fruit stand? Why does the road in the middle of nowhere have a giant line and the words, “Now leaving the United States” painted with what appears to be spray paint?

The most important question, of course, is, “If we had been reading on our e-readers, or playing games on a hand-held system, would we have even noticed these quirky, fun and unexpected sights?”

Life Is (Not) a Highway

I looked at the growth chart on the wall a few days ago and realized that both my son and my daughter have grown nearly a foot since we moved into our house a little over three years ago. Aside from constantly buying new shoes, and despite the photographic evidence, I don't remember that change in them. My brain has a difficult time processing just how much we've all evolved over the last nearly-11 years since my daughter was born.

Sometimes, I'm fairly certain I'm going to blink, and I'm going to miss something really important.

Other times, I set down my phone and realize I already have.

At this point in the evolution of our society, it's customary and ever-more accepted to reach for a hand-held device even while engaging in face-to-face conversation. I'm not here to discuss whether or not I think this is right or wrong. But I am here to say that in my family, we were all treating life like the Interstate, when it's much more like that back road with the yard full of zebras.

"Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it."
- Ferris Bueller's Day Off

What's more important is that my husband and I were modeling this behavior for our children, and we were teaching them that it's normal to live life with one eye on the screen at all times.

Skype Is Not Interaction

A recent [study by UCLA](#)¹ suggests that "Children's social skills may be declining as they have less time for face-to-face interaction due to their increased use of digital media."

I'm starting to see this in my children, and I'm feeling it within myself. In order to live and function in this world, interaction and empathy with others is crucial. Children learn by doing. Watching kids play together in a movie is not a substitute for social interaction. Talking on Skype introduces [a level of anonymity](#)² that allows harsh words to be spoken and glossed over.

I took it upon myself to discuss the idea of cutting back on screens with my family. My first talk was with my husband. He gave me that sidelong look of skepticism, but then agreed that we should be doing something about the household screen dependence. My next talk was with my ten-year-old daughter. She gasped, mortified that I'd take away her socialization avenue. My nine-year-old son didn't have a response for me beyond a blank stare.

The realization set in; a family-oriented, rah-rah, *let's-do-this* screen challenge was not going to happen. My family would smile and nod and Mom's half-baked idea, and then they would go right back to their games and shows. That didn't stop me.

Encouraging Family Play Time with Tweens

My children are on the cusp of their tween years. Much of what once worked is no longer effective; bribes, persuasion, promises and threats just don't carry the weight that they used to. Tweens and teens are on a [constant and tireless search for autonomy and self-reliance](#)³. The trick, I realized, was to coax my children from behind the glass while making them believe it was their idea and decision.

But how?

It dawned on me – quite literally – at 4:30 AM. Because: insomnia.

I had recently started one of those 30-day fitness challenges, where each day introduces a gradual increase of crunches, push-ups, dreaded planks, squats, running, etc. The first day of these challenges always seems pointless, with 10 minutes of calisthenics and tiny bit of cardio. But each increase builds both fitness and confidence. In these challenges, every few days is a day of rest. You revert to your old ways and indulge your inner sloth.

The challenge is founded in the positive, persuasive principle that incremental change over time leads to fundamental shifts in both behavior and ability. Additionally, the challenge serves to remind us that perfection is not the goal. Days off are ok, and even desirable.

At the end of 30 days, you are stronger, fitter and healthier. You look back over those 30 days, and you've exercised more often than not, and you've not hurt yourself in the process.

Why not do the same for the screen challenge?

How, you ask, does this make the pre-teen believe he is self-driven in his quest to bust the screen time? It doesn't. That's where the 4:30 AM ah-hah moment comes in.

The night before my revelation, as I was squatting away with my exercise ball, my son watched with interest. He asked if he could do some squats, too. I set him up against the wall with the exercise ball, and helped him get his posture right. He did a set of squats. Then we went on to do crunches, push-ups and planks together.

I was off the screen and doing something that piqued my son's interest. By accepting his desire to participate, we spent time exercising together.

That's when I realized the path my experiment needed to follow; my children had to be drawn off the screen by enticing, exciting activities that interest them more than what's flickering across their devices. My son's interests include sports, games and Legos. My daughter is passionate about art and writing. Both of them love music. They were also in desperate need of lessons on how to truly play the Pokémon card game beyond their [made-up rules](#)⁴ so that they could participate in tournaments at ComiCon later that month.

The 30 Day Screen Challenge

Introducing – The 30 Day Screen Challenge. That should be screen-free challenge, shouldn't it? Or maybe screen-*lite* challenge. I knew better, even at the onset, than to assume we would go entirely screen-free for 30 days.

The fact that I needed to plan this challenge out was somewhat depressing, but I devised a table for a month of decreased screen dependence. The kids never saw this schedule. I didn't tack it to a wall, nor did I mandate it as *the plan*.

Let's be honest – pre-teens run in terror from planned family activities. However, if I sneak up on one of them with a Nerf gun and pop them in the shoulder, then it's on! If I put on my swimsuit and go jump in the pool, I know they'll follow.

This chart was my idea well. By setting it out ahead of time, I was able to know what I was doing before the day begins. I prepared supplies so that we weren't spending those precious after-school hours with tons of setup.

I blame the necessity of this chart on my own schedule. Working while raising two children is draining; it sucks the creative life out of parents and children alike. By planning, we simply *did*, rather than attempting to think up activities after a long day of work and school.

It was all just planned suggestions. It was the last month of school. We had projects and homework that took precedence. We put laundry away, cooked dinner and cleaned up afterward. The household chores always take such an excessive amount of time! But I knew it could still work.

My scientific mind requires success metrics for any experiment. I never expected a screen-free life after 30 days, nor to even accomplish every single item charted. I hoped for a solid 85%, though. With any luck, the activities would be interesting enough to attract the kids willingly.

By the end of the month, my hope was to have established some new habits and engrain a new idea of leisure, not just for my children, but in my husband and myself as well. It was time to take the reins back from the Internet and learn how to be social again. It was time to find out what we really enjoy beyond the screen.

The Basics

Who: Myself, my husband and two unsuspecting children.

What: A 4-week challenge to decrease screen dependence and increase family connectedness and social interaction.

When: Started Monday, May 4th (May the Fourth be with us... always), 2015.

Where: Our home, away from our TVs, computers, phones, e-Readers and gaming systems.

How: A set schedule, sheer force of will, a little conniving and lots of positive reinforcement.

Why: To build some better family habits!

Week 1 - Wobbles

For better or for worse, week one went into the books.

It didn't go off exactly as planned, but then again, I have children. When does anything ever go as planned?

In the States, we celebrate Mother's Day on the second Sunday in May. My kids were with their father the weekend prior, so my husband bestowed an early present upon me: A dungeon-crawler style computer game called Pillars of Eternity.

I won't lie, I spent the entire weekend before our challenge kid-free and pinned to my screen, indulging in the story, the graphics and the adults-only jokes.

However, I'd committed myself to this challenge. My husband, being totally on board, agreed – we were starting our screen-alternatives on Monday whether we had awesome new games or not.

Initial Success – We Started Strong

We started with Pokémon. I picked my son up from school and we made a surprise stop at the store to get starter decks for my husband and I. My son knew exactly what we needed. We picked out two decks and headed home – me, not quite knowing where this was headed, and my son, positively giddy that we had taken this unexpected interest in playing the Pokémon card game.

I let my kids follow their normal screen routine during dinner. While we ate, my husband and I slyly brought up the impending ComiCon in conversation and told them it was time for them to learn the real rules to Pokémon. That's when my son put two and two together and realized I was serious about playing.

After dinner, as a family, we sorted cards, built decks and battled!

We had an absolute blast. It took me back to the mid-90s, before the age of the computerized, quest-based game, when I used to play Magic: The Gathering. My husband even admitted that he didn't miss his screens when we had such a fun game to play!

We were doing well! I had hope in spades.

The Sudden but Inevitable Betrayal of Life

Monday night, life threw me a [curve ball](#)⁵. I didn't sleep. We decided on Tuesday evening to switch up our plan and have a family movie night. My daughter still hadn't seen Guardians of the Galaxy, so we decided to rectify that problem. She needed to understand us when we said, "I am Groot."

I didn't sleep Tuesday night.

We still managed to play some Pokémon after dinner on Wednesday. My daughter had a ton of homework, which became her primary focus of the evening.

I didn't sleep Wednesday night.

Thursday was a hazy, zombified blur. By then, I didn't care. I took half the day off work, wrapped myself up inside a digital, brain-dead paradise and played Pillars of Eternity while the kids and husband did their thing in separate rooms.

I figured it was just one night. With any hope, I'd sleep on Thursday, and we'd pick up where we left off.

We had a problem. I slept just fine on Thursday, and woke Friday feeling mostly refreshed. Nevertheless, we had, in just a couple days, relapsed back to our old ways.

Friday after work, we all did our own thing. On Screens. No communication. No happy faces having fun together.

Saturday, I spent most of the day in front of a screen playing Pillars of Eternity. I felt guilty, but I kept playing. I told my husband I felt guilty. He assured me the kids were busy and happy.

By Mother's Day Sunday, my family had fully reverted, and I felt like a giant ball of failure.

I sat in my office and I cried. I literally shed tears. I'm not sure what I'd expected, nor do I have any idea what I could have done differently. In truth, the exhaustion of a week without sleep still cut trenches through my waking thoughts and affected my ability to function. I'd scheduled an appointment with my doctor to help determine why I go through these insomnia bouts.

But the failure.

The abject failure!

Screen Reduction – It's a Process

Failure is a harsh word. It's not a failure if you realize the *how*, *what* and *why* and attempt to correct your course.

On that Sunday, I sent the kids off to take their showers early, which earned me a couple of sidelong stares, and I set to work putting out a board game for us to play before bed. When they saw the game – Descent – all ready to go, their faces lit up and they eagerly joined my husband and I at the table. They didn't even ask to return to their screens, and we played until bed time.

I knew the challenge wouldn't be easy, considering just how screen dependent we'd become. I looked again at my initial hypotheses: The best method for engaging the kids in non-screen activities is to disengage myself and create a fun and inviting environment – in all demonstrated instances from the first week, that postulate held firm. It did work. It does work!

Maybe it was just Mother's Day.

Or maybe it wasn't such a failed week after all.

Week Two – Finding Balance

The word of week two was *balance*.

As parents, we always expect the unexpected, and we have to flow with whatever comes our way. During week two, we were surprised with not one, but two school projects that my son had to start and finish during the week. I'd also forgotten about my daughter's last Girl Scouts meeting – and that I'd volunteered to be the awards announcer for said meeting.

Being insanely busy does help cut the screen time to a minimum. However, it also makes those veg moments in front of a game or movie even more enticing. The allure of the screen calls to us, and the second week was about knowing when to fight the urge, and when to give in.

Balancing Acts

When one child has two projects that threaten to usurp an entire week's worth of after-school time, the question in the screen-dependent household becomes obvious. What do we do with the idle child while we're helping the other with schoolwork?

We faltered with this problem over the course of the week, and chose to look the other way. My daughter happily played her computer games while chatting on Skype as we turned my son into John F. Kennedy for his social studies project. I also know that my son enjoyed a few too many episodes of Pokémon while I was at my daughter's Girl Scouts meeting.

However, these moments were not fully representative of the week. There were hours spent playing board games. I read an entire novel, and the kids did some reading, too. My daughter worked on shading techniques in her sketchpad, and my son spent some time enjoying unseasonably cool weather playing outside. We went to the park, enjoyed our ice-skating Saturday and even got to visit with some friends.

Once again, the week drove itself by force of life, and my carefully-charted schedule of plans got tossed like yesterday's news.

I considered the week successful, though I still thought on options for encouraging choices outside the screen when one child is commanding our attention. The more I pondered this thought, the more the answer became clear, and goes right back to the original idea for this challenge: Lead by example.

Setting an Example

I deactivated my Facebook account.

You heard that right. It got disabled.

I uninstalled the application from my phone, moved my web browser off my main app screen, and went into my computer and removed all references to the Facebook links from my browser history and quick links.

I realized that my Facebook use had become a [compulsive habit](#)⁶. What's worse is that it brought me little joy. In fact, after a week without Facebook I could unequivocally state that the site had become a significant source of stress in my life. Moreover, it not only filled my otherwise-idle moments – it consumed my thoughts. When I realized just how invasive it had become, I knew it was time to cut the cord.

My daughter asked why I disengaged from Facebook, and I told her it took too much of my time. She asked if I'd miss the interaction with my friends. My answer was no, because I still interact, just in different and much more personal ways.

However, I still felt the pull in quiet or stressful moments. For example, I waited in the car while my husband ran into the store, and I wasn't quite sure what to do with myself in those few moments.

I settled on doing absolutely nothing. I watched people wander in and out of the store. My kids laughed in the back of the car, and I giggled along with them. We made silly jokes.

The funny thing was that they were on screens!

I thought maybe they should put them away, but they were in a heated battle of Crossy Road – who could score higher. In observing, I realized that they were interacting. We were on our way to a picnic in the park, and I knew they'd be without screens for several hours. I chose to allow them those few minutes of screen-assisted, goofy fun.

We spent our day at the park eating and playing with friends. They never once asked for screens. Even on the drive home, we talked and laughed about our day.

Little Successes Add Up

The slow disengage from the screens proved to have an effect. Both of my kids eagerly anticipated our rounds of Descent and our planned Pokémon battles. I witnessed my kids choosing toys over screens here and there, more than before. They asked to play games, or draw. There was more communication happening.

It was subtle. It was slight. But it was noticeable movement in a positive direction.

The goal of week three became screen disengagement on a personal level, including journaling and breaking out the art supplies.

I can honestly say that I was neurotic about this challenge at the beginning. Would I really disengage? How much was enough? What if the kids don't follow my lead? How far do I really have to take this?

Much of that worry was gone by the end of week two. There are times when screen use happens. Then there are those moments when we find and enjoy our alternatives. I feel the pendulum swinging in that latter direction, and I went into week three excited with anticipation!

Week Three – Finding Sanity

Kids. They love to make you question your sanity.

During week two, I felt like we made strides in our screen challenge.

At the onset of week three, we lived up to the word *challenge* again. My son looked at me and said in point-blank fashion, “I love my Kindle. If I could, I’d only ever just play on it all day long!”

Insert major *facepalm* here.

Shortly after that random exclamation of screen love, I sat down on the couch next to my husband and lamented. He continued playing his video game. I told him I was feeling mighty unsupported in the whole screen-challenge thing. His response was, “You know this is what I love to do.”

To his benefit, he did get off the game – might have had something to do with my death glare – and we pried the kids off their screens. We made a night of doing other things.

By other things, at this point, we’re talking about playing board games. They came running when we’d say we were about to play another round of Descent. I’m not complaining, though. I love that game. And it fully worked them into tabletop roleplaying in the long run. I’ll take that win!

However, much of my planned activity list was a wash. The artistic endeavors interest them enough for them to ask me what I’m doing. When I made the offer for them to join in, they’d shrug and wander off. Other, more physical activities (Nerf wars, Legos, etc.) held their interest for a short time, but we could feel their desire to go do their own thing. Even mid-game, when we took a break to pull our pizza out of the oven, my son would flip on Netflix. I had to tell him directly that we were in a screen-free zone.

Kids These Days

My husband made the comment earlier during week three that we’re raising a new generation of kids. Technology is ever-present and integrated into their lives. It’s a part of home life and school life. They can’t fathom the technological void that was my generation’s childhood.

I told my daughter about the joys of three-way calling when I was her age. I could talk to two people at one time! It was a big deal! She laughed and pointed out that she can talk to all her friends at once on Skype. I would have loved to have Skype as a pre-teen.

I felt the tug of understanding. As a software engineer, I do spend a lot of time with screens.

At the same time, I appreciate the sense of calm obtained through a screen-free environment. By cutting my own ties to screens over the course of our challenge, I reduced my own anxiety by a good half.

The question is, do kids seek out peace and calm? Was I misunderstanding the problem yet again, approaching it through the eyes and experiences of adults?

The Home Stretch

With one week to go, I resolved myself to make one last push. In some ways, the last week of our challenge was easier than the rest. We had many plans to be out of the house.

The last day of week three was Memorial Day in the States. We spent it at the ice den, letting the kids get in some practice, and I began working on a table-top role-playing adventure to introduce my children to the wide world of pen, paper, dice and miniatures!

Week Four – Survival and Beyond!

We made it! We survived!

After a full 30 days of screen challenge, I found myself reflecting back. There were high and low points throughout the month. We didn't have resounding success, nor did we fail. Overall, I labeled it a solid step in the right direction. As a family, we learned more than a few lessons.

The irony does not escape me – I wrote all of my blog posts and my eBook regarding this challenge on my computer. Screens are unavoidable in today's society, especially for a software engineer/freelance writer such as myself. My kids are out of school for the summer, and they, too, have summer assignments that are mostly screen-based. My husband works in IT as well. We are a family of screen users.

However, our screens do not define us. The past month has reminded us of some facets of life that had faded from view: Our collective love of tabletop gaming; Our own back yard and the fun we have there; The joy of having friends over for visits.

It's not that we purposefully sink into a screen routine and forget the rest of the world. After a month of making screen avoidance a habit, I've realized that reaching for a screen is easy. After long, hard days, the brain-numbing screen-dive fills the void between times of obligation.

But then, so do other activities. Forcing myself to fill those time gaps in other ways, I've realized the meaning we can add to our own life by simply choosing. Reading a book, listening to music, playing a board game or going for a swim – all of these activities lighten the spirit and bring joy.

But the path to this enlightenment has been bumpy.

Subtle Suggestion Breeds Subtle Resistance

Kids are little rebels by nature, and it's especially true of pre-teens. If Mom thinks it's cool, then it must be the lamest thing ever. If Dad wants to do X, then I must choose Y!

One night during our challenge, after dinner and playing in the pool, my son chose to go to bed rather than watch a movie with the rest of the family. He wanted to play on the Wii about halfway through the movie. I said no. He chose sleep instead.

We had moments like those occasionally, particularly with my son. When he gets it into his mind that it's time to go play a video game, my gentle coxing and encouragement toward alternatives causes him to rebel in equally indirect ways. There were no fits of rage or outright rebellion. He would just subtly, quietly choose to do anything other than what I'd suggested. This response was especially observed in the face of an activity that he didn't actively choose.

The Best Response to Resistance is Inclusion

My pre-teens crave autonomy in decision-making when it comes to family activities. The most useful solution to resistance was to ask, "What would you like to do?" I did find that most of the time I had to follow it up with "...besides watching Pokémon."

I realized pretty early on that my chart of activities didn't sit well with my kids. Some of the ideas struck gold, and the kids came running to participate. Others were met with solid indifference. I had to be fluid, change the plan accordingly, and re-engage. Sometimes, it still didn't work.

Allowing my kids to take turns choosing our activity helped engage them for longer periods of time. Insisting that they participate in each other's choices also helped. If my daughter didn't want to participate in the game my son chose, then she'd lose her next choice.

The Obvious Isn't Obvious

Several studies over the last decade conclude that screen use prior to bed time affects sleep patterns in negative and harmful ways. For me, personally, when I game up to the point of sleep, I see little game visuals dancing in my mind when I close my eyes, and my dreams typically reflect whatever I had been playing.

The night after our ComiCon weekend, my husband observed that we all slept soundly and felt refreshed the entire time we were there. He surmised that our solid sleep could be related to the fact that each day, we did something that we truly enjoy besides sit behind screens.

My response was something like, "You think?!"

But truly, it comes down to each person coming to his own conclusion. My husband had the breakthrough. He realized how heavy screen-use affects us. He came to this conclusion on his own.

It wasn't until then – a day after our challenge officially ended – that I had the “a-hah” moment. While subtle redirection and direct interaction are great, we all need to derive our meaning from facts. We need a *why* to support our *what*.

Teaching the Reasons Behind the Actions

We teach our children that healthy food makes healthy bodies. We instruct their minds, giving them access to a full-spectrum education. We engage them in extracurricular activities and take them to museums, plays, concerts and events to give them a sense of culture.

Over the course of the month, and prior, during my research, I educated myself by reading studies both for and against screen use. There are as many benefits to technology in the classroom as there are dangers like screen addiction and sleep disorders. The question is why aren't we teaching our children the health factors in their screen use?

It's important that we teach them what screen use can do to their minds and bodies. Beyond the screen challenge, my new task is educating my kids in why we participated in our challenge.

My goal is to raise critical thinkers. If I'm too covert about decreasing screen dependence, my children lack the benefit of learning the reasons behind the actions. They lose out on applying the knowledge for themselves, and they are robbed the benefit of drawing reasonable conclusions from facts and evidence. Moving forward, I will actively teach my children both the benefits and risks to screen use.

Balance is Key

Ask me how many times I actually got in a workout over the month.

The original idea of planned activities included time to exercise in an engaging manner that included the kids. I watched that hour of availability slip away every day as we managed homework, cooking dinner and setting up for whatever non-screen activity we had planned.

As a mom, when faced with insufficient time and resources, I immediately cut those parts of life that benefit me. Self-sacrifice: It's what we do.

There were times during the month when I felt like our screen challenge had become a self-torture device. I found I didn't want to engage with my family, because I'd robbed myself of every spare second.

Manage the Hours, But Be Flexible

My original plan included free days roughly once per week where we got to choose our own activities. This part of the plan turned out to be one of those great-in-theory aspects of the overall scheme.

Toward the end of the month, I found myself debating internally over what I had planned (I think it was painting with the kids) and what I wanted (a hot bath, a good book and a cup of tea). Thankfully, my husband helped me rationalize through the moment. We'd had a lot of solid family time throughout the week. Some days are harder than others. Sometimes you just have to take some time for yourself and not worry that they kids are defaulting to the screens.

Long story short, I settled for the bath and the book. The kids lived. I lived. All was right in the world.

Schedules are great, until they're not. Don't be afraid to change your plans.

The Little Victories Add Up to Big Success

As I wrote this article, my son came and asked me to help him make a new Pokémon deck. The kids both ask to play board games more often. My daughter expressed interest in using her summer time to paint a mural on her bedroom wall. My husband and I joined a local gaming group, and have some scheduled, face-to-face game nights out of the house with new friends. I, personally, have broken my Facebook addiction.

The month hasn't all been hard lessons and head-scratching moments. We've made steps, if not strides, toward our path to decreased screen dependence.

Most importantly, we are consciously aware about where we want to take our path toward decreased screen use. As a family, we've asked ourselves hard questions and have listened with open minds for the truest answers we can find.

The Things I'd Change

There are a few things I'd do differently, if I started the challenge over right now.

1. I'd include the kids at the onset and we would choose screen-alternative activities together. This is entirely antitheses to my original plan, but it ended up being how the month played out in the end.
2. Free time would be by the hour, not by the day. Again, this is how it ended up in reality.
3. I would make our life work into the schedule rather than trying to schedule new activities around life. Since the end of the challenge, we have actively included the kids in making dinner more often, and my daughter is beginning to cook meals by herself!

4. I wouldn't shoot for perfection at the outset. By the midpoint of the challenge, I realized that *connection* is infinitely more desirable than *perfection*! Anything that drives connection is beneficial, even if it's playing a round of Mario Kart or watching a movie together.

What Worked

There are several habits we've forged that I want to record for future reference. I don't want to lose this new reality.

1. We made a solid transition away from "If you don't get off that screen I'm shutting off the Wi-Fi" to "Hey, why don't you put on your swimsuit. It's really nice outside!" It's a much more peaceful reality.

2. Sometimes, a decrease in screen dependence is a single phone call and invite away. Having friends over both entertains and enlivens everyone involved. More play days, more dinner dates, more face-to-face with friends. Count me in!

3. When in doubt, leave the house. There were a few times when we killed the screen need by finding something to do away from home. We went ice skating, took a few walks and enjoyed the park.

Conclusions

In the beginning, I'd hoped for an 85% participation rate regarding my planned schedule. From the original article, I stated, "By the end of the month, my hope is to have established some new habits and engrain a new idea of leisure, not just my children, but in my husband and myself as well. It's time to take the reins back from the Internet and learn how to be social again. It's time to find out what we really enjoy beyond the screen."

While it's true that we didn't hit that 85% mark, I'm confident that we have established new habits and engrained new ideas of leisure.

All four of us are thinking about better ways to spend our time, and we're acting accordingly. In that respect, I assert that our screen challenge is a success. More importantly, I am confident that our new habits are strong enough to carry us through to a better future centered around family interaction.

Action Plan

Are you ready to implement your own challenge? Are you ready to take the plunge? Do you want to see more of your children's smiling faces and less of the backs of their heads as they stare at a screen?

Yes?

Very well, but be forewarned that you might see positive changes, have startling revelations and experience growth, each as individuals and together as a family.

Step 1: Ask yourself the following questions

1. How much time does my family spend on screens? (Be honest!)
2. How much screen time does my family need in order to accomplish their online requirements (school assignments, work tasks, etc.)
3. How much additional screen time do I feel is allowable and acceptable for myself and my children?
4. What activities do I enjoy that my children might also enjoy if I were to engage them?
5. What activities do my children enjoy that I would also like to participate in?
6. How does my spouse/partner feel about a screen detox?
7. Am I willing to lead by example? Is my spouse/partner willing?
8. How can I work the challenge into and around my life? How can we redesign our day-to-day activities to be family-centric and interactive?

Step 2: Talk to your kids about a decrease in screen dependence

1. Explain your desire for family time and connection.
2. Stay positive! This isn't about stopping a bad habit – it's about creating new, positive habits!
3. Decide on a day to start together.
4. Allow the kids to brainstorm activities.

Step 3: Fill out your schedule

1. Refer to Appendix A; print out the schedule and insert your chosen screen-light activities.
2. Don't forget to include your "have to" activities – appointments, parties, concerts, school projects, etc. all become fodder for family-centric activities.
3. Allow free days. Everyone needs some time to just chill!

Step 4: Optional – Write out your experience. Blog it, if you can! Be honest, be realistic and keep yourself going! You can do this!

Appendix A – Challenge Schedule

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday

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About The Author



Shanan Winters is a professional software engineer and freelance writer, editor and novelist living in the Phoenix metropolitan area. She has avid interests in geek topics and fandoms, issues of parenting, Autism awareness, cooking, gardening and natural living. She has been featured on a number of websites and blogs, including Better Family Habits, A Fine Parent, CodeProject and eHow Tech. When she's not running adventure games, attending comic conventions or playing with her kids, you can find Shanan writing about writing at

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