



UNPLUGGED

REDISCOVERING CONNECTION WITH A REGULAR SCREEN-FREE FAMILY DAY

Screens have become a huge part of all of our lives, including children, and for many parents managing tech use can feel like a constant battle. It's easy to feel burned out by our own ubiquitous tech use and frustrated by the constant pull screens have on our kids, whether it's the tablet, smartphone, or gaming console. Recently, Jonathan Haidt's book, *Anxious Generation*, highlighted how a screen-based childhood has displaced an array of essential developmental activities, such as free 'risky' play and in person social interaction; negatively impacting children and young people's mental health and general wellbeing. One way to start to shift the focus within family life back to greater connection and balance is implementing a regular tech-free day.

A screen-free day can be refreshing, reconnecting, totally possible and even fun! The key? Making it a family collaboration. This isn't about announcing and imposing a new restriction, but rather about co-designing a new family routine that everyone feels excited about, reinforcing family bonds while reducing our reliance on screens. This will look different for every family but needs to be something you plan and do together rather than something the adults impose and 'do to' kids! As the parent, you will have to decide it's going to happen and this probably won't immediately be a popular decision; breathe ... there will be lots of these! But what the day looks like and how the day works in your family is something that you can, and should, work on together.



The Benefits of a Regular Tech-Free Day

Taking a day off from screens has many benefits, supported by studies and feedback from families who've tried it. Here's how it can help:

- 1. Mental Reset:** Having a break from constant stimulation lets everyone decompress and reduces stress. Kids (and parents) get a chance to relax, refocus and put the attention on the here and now, being together undistracted as a family.
- 2. Replacing Screen Time with Quality Time:** When we put devices away, we make space for activities that nurture relationships and allow creativity to flourish. We can be active, enjoy new experiences and places, find common interests and learn about each other.
- 3. Better Sleep:** Tech-free days often mean less exposure to blue light, especially before bed, which promotes deeper, more restful sleep. They also provide space from the constant stimulation, information overload and on demand connectivity which can help us to be more relaxed at the end of the day. Finally, if our tech-free day has got us outdoors, and being more physically active, this too can set us up for a better night's sleep.
- 4. Stronger Family Bonds:** Shared activities help family members connect through laughter, conversation, and teamwork, creating memories and connecting through shared activity and experiences. There is also the opportunity to establish new family traditions and routines which become defining factors of our unique family culture; the way we do things in our family.
- 5. Building Self-Control and Mindfulness:** We can explore and establish new habits of not always turning first to screen-based activities for enjoyment, relaxation and to alleviate boredom. Extended time away from screens gives us the opportunity to just be, to be lost in our thoughts, and to choose other activities which just don't happen if we simply reach for our devices to fill every 'free' moment. Blocks of screen free time can help us be more aware of our unconscious habits and to decisively exercise self-control, enabling us to learn to make more mindful non-screen-based choices in different aspects of our lives.

The '*right to disconnect*' laws now in place in Australia affirm that it's essential to unplug for mental wellbeing. Modelling this can help children to recognise that adults also benefit from dedicated device-free time, and that you don't need to be constantly available via technology to your employer or other contacts. We need to break the myth and prevalent social expectation that has developed, particularly since the advent of the smartphone, that we have to be constantly connected and contactable, as well as immediately responsive to everyone within our network. The truth is we actually don't, and we can reset this unhealthy expectation, if we break the cycle.

Tips to Make a Tech-Free Day Work

Involve the Family in Planning: Talk about why a tech-free day can help everyone. Share the benefits and invite ideas on how to make it enjoyable. Everyone should have input to feel engaged.

1. Empower Older Kids as Leaders: Getting older children to lead planning can make them feel responsible and grown-up, which can go a long way in reducing resistance and even encouraging younger siblings.

2. Set Expectations Together: Establish the boundaries clearly and make it consistent (e.g., “No phones, tablets, or gaming consoles”).

3. Commit Fully as Parents: Your commitment matters most! Avoid ‘sneaking a peek at your emails, social media or messages, even under the guise of work. Being fully present models the value of unplugging for kids and helps you to get the benefit of genuinely disconnecting for the day. Try to turn off devices and leave them at home if you go out. It’s surprising how hard this feels at first but how liberating it actually is. It also provides a really strong positive role model to your children that you really don’t need your phone with you at all times (think about it – you actually don’t even though your brain will try to convince you otherwise!)

4. Highlight the Positives: Emphasise how fun, creativity, and real-life experiences take centre stage. The goal is for everyone to look forward to these tech-free days and enjoy repeating them.

5. Look for Low-Cost, Sustainable Activities: A tech-free day doesn’t need to be expensive. Choose activities like a park visit, local hike, or crafting with items at home to make it affordable and repeatable. If you’re stuck for ideas, then have a look at our *Guide to 100 Tech-Free Activities on our website* to get you started. You can create your own list as a family and come back to this each time you are planning together your screen-free day.

6. Establish a Routine: Consistency is key. If it becomes part of the family rhythm, younger children will grow up seeing it as simply “how we do things.”



10 Starter Ideas for Tech-Free Family Activities

**These are just some ideas. Your family will almost certainly come up with some that are even better and that suit your location, interests and passions.*

- 1. Outdoor Adventures:** Plan a family hike, bike ride, or nature walk. Fresh air and physical activity can improve our mindset and bring an array of positive benefits to health, wellbeing and happiness.
- 2. Family Cooking Challenge:** Work together to cook a new recipe, a special meal, or bake some special treats. Let everyone take a role in the kitchen.
- 3. Board Games or Puzzles:** Board games can bring out everyone's competitive and collaborative side, providing scope for lots of laughs (as well as potentially a few differences of opinion and opportunities to practice those negotiation skills!)
- 4. Arts and Crafts:** Let creativity flow with arts, crafts, or even a family art competition. This could include painting, drawing, or creating something unique. Don't get sucked in to a digital art or video production project – whilst these are great to do together, we are deliberately keeping away from technology and screens today.
- 5. Gardening or Planting:** If you have a garden, spend time planting flowers, herbs, or vegetables together. It's a great way to be outside and to connect with nature and each other.
- 6. Family Book Club:** Spend time reading a shared book aloud, then talk about it together. This can be a relaxing, cozy activity. Who doesn't like a great story?
- 7. Explore the Local Area:** Visit a nearby museum, park, or nature reserve. Discovering local spots can turn into an adventure and create memories.
- 8. Storytelling or Family History Sharing:** Have each family member share a favourite story or learn about family history. Kids often love hearing about parents' and grandparents' pasts and looking at old photos (just avoid those on screens and devices for today!) You could also start to build your family tree together.
- 9. Family Sports Day:** Whether it's soccer, a Frisbee game, or a friendly race, a family sports can bring energy and smiles.
- 10. Plan a Family Service Project:** Doing something together for others, like volunteering or baking for a neighbour, can create shared purpose and lasting impact.

Encourage outdoor time whenever possible, even if it means braving a little rain! Studies show that time in nature boosts mood and lowers stress, giving a healthy boost that screens can't provide.

Addressing Resistance and Making It a Habit

Expect some initial resistance, especially if the habit of turning to screens is strong and well established. You might even hear, “this is boring!” That’s normal. Screen-free activities may feel unfamiliar or underwhelming at first because they don’t have the instant pull of highly stimulating screen-based activities. Here’s how to ease the transition:

- **Start Small:** If a full day seems too ambitious, begin with a half-day or a tech-free morning.
- **Lead with Positivity:** Emphasise that this isn’t a restriction but an opportunity to do new things for fun and connection. You’re not banning technology but rather taking a break.
- **Empower Older Kids as Leaders:** When older children feel involved in planning and leading, it can lessen resistance and help them feel empowered and responsible.
- **Celebrate the Wins:** End each day by talking about the day’s highlights. Let kids share what they enjoyed most, gradually making it something they look forward to. Building a habit of vocalising gratitude and affirming positive experiences is a strong foundation for wellbeing and positive family life.

If a weekly tech-free day feels daunting, try a one-off or even a once-a-month trial at first. As your family begins to enjoy these experiences, they may find themselves requesting more frequent tech-free days. It takes repetition to bring about change and build new habits so don’t give up, just adapt and try new things until you find success for your family (it won’t take as long as you think, if you stick with it).

Creating a Wider Support Network

Talk with close family and friends about tech-free days. Even if you aren’t spending the day together, knowing that other families are also unplugging can create a sense of solidarity and shared experience.

Exploring New Passions and Interests

Tech-free days might spark new interests that can be explored and pursued outside of screen time. Whether it’s a new hobby like drawing, sports, or crafting, finding these offline passions helps build a balanced relationship with technology, ensuring screens don’t take over every spare moment.

Embracing the Tech-Free Tradition

A regular tech-free day can become a cherished family tradition, strengthening relationships, fostering resilience, and setting a positive example for screen balance. The benefits for your family’s wellbeing, focus, and connection will soon become clear, and pretty quickly everyone may find themselves looking forward to these unplugged days.

By making it a fun and positive experience, families can establish a sustainable and healthy tech-off, tech-on balance, enriching everyone’s lives with the joys of connection, creativity, and shared purpose.