

PARENT TIPS AND SCRIPTS

The Invisible Playground | garygattis.com

How to Use Screens Without Getting Used

Screens are part of family life. Some screen time is creative, social, useful, funny, relaxing, and meaningful. Some are designed to keep people watching, scrolling, checking, comparing, reacting, and coming back.

This guide gives families shared language. When kids can name what is happening, they have more room to choose what happens next.

One question works in almost every situation:

Is this worth my attention right now?

For older kids:

How is this affecting me right now, and do I want to keep going?

FOUR QUESTIONS TO REUSE ANYTIME

TIME

What are you here for, and when are you done?

MOOD

Do you feel better, worse, or more wound up now?

BELONGING

Does this feel like a choice or an obligation?

IDENTITY

What is this teaching you to value?

SCRIPTS FOR COMMON MOMENTS

Before Screen Time

Use when: your child is about to watch, play, scroll, or borrow a device.

“Before you start, what are you here for, and when are you done?”

Follow with:

“What are you doing right after?”

This works because the system often goes on forever. A simple plan gives the child a stopping point before the screen chooses the next one.

When You Want to Watch Without Judging

Use when: you want to understand what your child likes without turning it into a lecture.

“Can I sit with you for a minute and see what you like about this?”

Then ask:

“What do you like about it?”

If the pace picks up:

“That got intense fast. Does your brain feel like that right now?”

This helps parents enter through curiosity before correction.

When You Want to Spot the Hook

Use when: autoplay, suggested videos, streaks, rewards, or “one more” keeps pulling them forward.

“Pause for a second. Let’s spot the hook.”

Then ask:

“How is this trying to keep you going?”

Follow with:

“That was built on purpose. Now where do you want to stop?”

This turns the moment into pattern recognition instead of a power struggle.

When They Say Just One More

Use when: one more episode, video, match, or round keeps appearing.

“I get why stopping is hard. This was built to keep going. What counts as done?”

Or:

“Pick the stopping point: end of this episode, end of this round, or five more minutes.”

Then:

“You do the off switch.”

This keeps agency with the child while still holding the limit.

When Boredom Triggers the Grab

Use when: they reach for a device the second there is empty space.

“That pull is real. Let’s notice it for a second before we feed it.”

Then:

“Three quiet minutes. Then you choose.”

For younger kids:

“Do you want to make something, move your body, or help me with something?”

Boredom is the doorway into the loop. A small pause helps kids feel the pull instead of automatically obeying it.

When Everything Feels Slow

Use when: your child says books are boring, conversations feel slow, or they cannot settle into anything that is not a screen.

“That feeling where everything else seems slow is real. It is not laziness.”

Then:

“Some content is built to be super-fast. After enough time there, the brain starts expecting that pace everywhere. The fix is spending time with slower things until the dial shifts back.”

Frame this as calibration that can be adjusted.

After an Intense Session

Use when: your child is irritable, wound up, reactive, or foggy after screens.

“Your brain is still moving fast. Two-minute landing, then we’ll talk.”

Try one or two:

- Water or a snack.
- Ten breaths outside.
- Walk around the house.
- Wall push or slow squats.

Then ask:

“Do you feel better, worse, or more wound up now?”

Do the reset before the hard conversation.

When Screens Are Genuinely Helping

Use when: your child uses a show or game to decompress after a hard day, and it seems to actually be working.

“Sometimes screens help. After a hard day, a show or a game can genuinely bring the nervous system down. That is real and worth respecting.”

Then ask:

“Did that help you reset, or did it keep the engine running past the point where it helped?”

The question is whether the screen did what was needed.

When a Game Is Also the Hangout

Use when: your child says they cannot leave because friends are online.

“I believe you. Leaving mid-session can feel like leaving the hangout.”

Then ask:

“What would be a respectful way to exit?”

Options for kids to use with friends:

“I’m done after this round.”

“I have five more minutes.”

“I’m getting off after this mission.”

“I can play tomorrow.”

Teach these phrases directly. Kids often stay because they do not have language for leaving.

When Messages Feel Urgent

Use when: group chats, streaks, active status, or read receipts create pressure to respond immediately.

“Does this feel like a choice or an obligation?”

Then ask:

“What would happen if you answered later?”

Or:

“What would you want a friend to assume if you were quiet for a while?”

The belonging effect turns friendship into urgency. Naming it gives kids room to push back on the pressure without pushing back on the friendship.

When Likes, Rank, or Streaks Start Mattering Too Much

Use when: your child is upset about trophies, rank, likes, streaks, skins, followers, or online status.

“That scoreboard was built by someone. What is it asking you to care about?”

Then ask:

“Is this still fun, or does it feel like pressure?”

Or:

“What is this teaching you to value?”

When a Post Triggers Comparison

Use when: your child compares their body, clothes, friends, popularity, trips, life, likes, or followers.

“Remember, a post is a production. What was selected, edited, posed, filtered, or left out?”

Then ask:

“What is this teaching you to value?”

For older kids:

“Does this make you feel more like yourself, or more like you need to perform?”

This helps kids see the difference between expression, comparison, and performance.

When Something Is Being Sold

Use when: your child sees ads, influencer content, sponsored posts, skins, products, or shopping links.

“What are they selling?”

For older kids:

“Why do you think this showed up for you?”

Then:

“Your attention is valuable to them. We get to decide if this gets it.”

This connects everyday screen moments to the business model behind them.

When AI Is Doing the Thinking

Use when: your child uses AI to skip the hard thinking rather than sharpen it.

“What did you think before you asked it?”

Then:

“What did AI add?”

And:

“Can you explain the answer in your own words?”

Use AI as an instrument. Stay the author.

When You Want to Open a Bigger Conversation

Use when: you want to talk without starting a fight.

“I’ve been learning more about how apps, games, feeds, and group chats are designed. I want us to have better language for what is happening. We don’t have to fix everything today. Let’s just start spotting the patterns.”

Then ask:

“Which one do you notice most: time, mood, belonging, or identity?”

This gives kids a way into the conversation without requiring them to confess or defend.

When You Want to Use the Beating the System Frame

Use when: your child responds better to rebellion than to rules.

“Every time you make a conscious choice about your attention, you are beating a system designed by some of the smartest and best-funded people on the planet to make that choice for you.”

Then:

“That is not a small thing. That is what a power user does.”

This frame works especially well with kids who resist being told what to do. It makes awareness feel like agency.

When the Phone Conversation Comes Up

Use when: your child asks when they can get a phone or more access.

“A phone puts every hook from every platform into one object you carry everywhere. That takes a practiced brain to handle.”

Then:

“We are watching for readiness.”

Readiness looks like:

- Can you stop when you say you will?
- Do you notice what screens do to your mood?
- Is there still room for the other things that matter to you?
- Can you handle messages without feeling like every reply is urgent?
- Can you use the phone as a tool without letting every app become the boss?

Then say:

“Build your brain before you plug it in. That is preparation.”

THE SMALLEST POSSIBLE START

Pick one pressure point this week.

- Turn off autoplay on every platform.
 - Move Shorts, Reels, and TikTok-style apps off the home screen.
 - Charge phones outside bedrooms overnight.
 - Turn off all non-essential notifications.
 - Set the stop before screen time starts.
 - Add a two-minute landing after intense sessions.
 - Keep the first 30 minutes of the morning screen-free.
 - Create a shared family charging station.
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FULL TIPS BY CATEGORY

Phone and Device Setup

- Charge devices outside bedrooms overnight.

- Use a physical alarm clock instead of a phone.
 - Keep the first 30 minutes of the morning screen-free.
 - Keep meals screen-free.
 - Turn on Do Not Disturb during homework, meals, family time, and the hour before bed.
 - Turn off all non-essential notifications.
 - Move social, video, and game apps off the home screen.
 - Put useful tools on the home screen: camera, music, maps, notes, calendar, weather.
 - Use grayscale when a device feels too sticky.
 - Create a shared family charging spot.
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YouTube, Shorts, Reels, and Feeds

- Keep Shorts, Reels, and TikTok-style apps off the home screen.
 - Avoid feed-based platforms for younger kids when possible.
 - Turn off autoplay on every platform.
 - Watch from subscriptions, playlists, or search instead of the home feed.
 - Choose the video before opening the app.
 - Use YouTube's Take a Break reminder in settings.
 - Watch together sometimes and ask: "What do you like about this?"
 - Teach kids to search for what they want more of and scroll past what they want less of.
 - Ask: "How is this trying to keep you going?"
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Netflix, Streaming, and Autoplay

- Turn off autoplay previews and next-episode autoplay.
 - Decide the number of episodes before starting.
 - Make the end visible: when the credits start, we are done.
 - Plan the next thing before starting: snack, bath, book, outside, game, chores, bedtime.
 - Choose shows with natural stopping points for younger kids.
 - Avoid starting a new episode close to bedtime.
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Games

- Before starting, define done: one round, one quest, one level, one match, one mission, one build goal.

- For online games, plan the exit before joining.
 - Teach phrases kids can say to friends: last round, I am off after this, I will be back tomorrow.
 - Look for games with natural endings.
 - Turn off in-game notifications where possible.
 - Turn off streak reminders and daily reward prompts where possible.
 - Disable in-app purchases entirely for younger kids.
 - After intense games, use a two-minute landing before talking.
 - Treat co-op gaming as social time, not just screen time.
 - Notice when social time starts feeling like obligation.
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Social Pressure, Group Chats, and Messaging

- Turn off read receipts where possible.
 - Hide active status where possible.
 - Mute stressful group chats.
 - Move stressful chats out of the main view.
 - Let a streak end on purpose as practice.
 - Set family norms around response time.
 - Practice language for delayed replies: I was offline, I will answer later, I am not available tonight.
 - Ask: “Does this feel like connection, pressure, or both?”
 - Ask: “Does this feel like a choice or an obligation?”
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Mood and Recovery

- Watch for the landing, not just the content.
 - Ask: “Do you feel better, worse, or more wound up?”
 - Use a two-minute reset after intense sessions.
 - Do the reset before the hard conversation.
 - Notice patterns: certain games, feeds, creators, or times of day may reliably change mood.
 - Recognize when screens are genuinely helping the nervous system come down, and when they are keeping it elevated past the point of usefulness.
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Shorts, Reels, and Calibration

- Shorts and Reels are built to hook quickly, so slower things can feel harder afterward.

- When everything feels boring after fast feeds, name it: “That may be the attention dial, not the activity.”
 - Add a buffer before homework, reading, chores, bedtime, or hard conversations.
 - Use a simple reset: water, bathroom, snack, outside air, walking, wall pushes, or slow squats.
 - Start with one small slow thing: one page, one drawing, one chore, one song, one puzzle piece, five minutes of building.
 - Make the first minute easy: sit nearby, open the book, set out the materials, or start together.
 - Move from fast to slower gradually: Shorts, then music, then drawing, reading, building, or outside.
 - Protect slow zones: mornings, meals, car rides, bedtime, and the first few minutes after school.
 - Treat “nothing sounds fun” as a recovery signal, not defiance.
 - Try: “Your brain got used to fast input. Let’s give slower things a few minutes to come back online.”
 - Keep fast feeds away from transition points, especially before school, homework, dinner, and bed.
 - Watch the landing: if fast feeds reliably lead to irritability or foginess, shorten the session or add a stronger reset.
 - Teach the bigger idea: “Your attention adapts to what you feed it.”
 - Family rule of thumb: “Fast feeds are powerful, so they need edges.”
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Identity, Comparison, and Performance

- Treat posts like productions, not reflections of reality.
 - Ask what was selected, edited, filtered, posed, omitted, rewarded, or monetized.
 - Notice when likes, views, followers, streaks, or rankings start to feel like worth.
 - Ask: “What is this teaching you to value?”
 - Ask: “Does this make you feel more like yourself, or more like you need to perform?”
 - Remind kids that online visibility is a scoreboard someone else built.
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Ads, Influencers, and the Business Model

- Ask: “What are they selling?”
- Ask: “Why do you think this showed up for you?”
- Notice sponsored posts, shopping links, skins, subscriptions, and influencer promotions.
- Explain that attention has value.
- Remind kids: “We get to decide if this gets our attention.”

- Help them see that some content is entertainment, some is advertising, and some is both.
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Bedrooms, Mornings, and Bedtime

- Keep phones and tablets out of bedrooms overnight when possible.
 - Use a shared charging station.
 - Keep mornings screen-free until basic needs are done.
 - Protect the hour before bed from fast feeds, Shorts, intense games, and social checking.
 - Do not let the phone become the alarm clock.
 - Make bedtime boring on purpose.
 - Use the same phrase each night: devices charge here, bodies charge there.
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AI

- Ask kids to try first, then use AI.
- Use AI to improve thinking, not replace it.

Good uses:

- Explain.
- Quiz.
- Brainstorm.
- Outline.
- Give feedback.
- Compare options.

Risky uses:

- Write the answer before the child has thought.
- Replace reading.
- Skip struggle.
- Fake understanding.

Ask:

- “What did you think before you asked AI?”
- “What did AI add?”
- “Can you explain it in your own words?”

Family rule of thumb:

- Use AI as an instrument. Remain the author.

Your attention is priceless. It becomes your time, your choices, and your life.

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How Hidden Screen Systems Shape Childhood
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