

7 Days From Drift to Self-Direction

Kids can't navigate what they can't see

For families with kids 5–12 years old

Early Reader Edition. Your feedback shapes this.

I spent three decades building systems designed to capture your kid's attention. Here's what I know.

Every screen in your house is running an auction. Corporations are the bidders. Your child's time is the inventory.

This isn't a willpower problem. The system is working exactly as designed.

Screens are built around business goals like Time on Device, engagement, retention, session length, and return frequency.

Apps, games, and feeds are designed to keep your child clicking, scrolling, and coming back.

This guide is not about changing the world. It is about giving your child a way to move through it with intention.

I am now raising a child inside the systems I helped build. These seven practices combine industry insight with developmental research.

What to expect

- No rules. No moralizing. No panic.
- Under 5 minutes to read and do each day.
- By Day 7, stopping should feel calmer and recovery should be faster.

How to apply

- These work best when done as a family, not imposed.
- The practices are cumulative. Families who return to them see the difference.
- Every family works differently. Start with what fits and build from there.
- Designed for passive and feed-driven screen time. Social and creative play are covered in the upcoming book.

Seven days from drift to self-direction. Here's the map:

- Day 1: Begin with Intent
- Day 2: Feel the Pull
- Day 3: Spot the Hook
- Day 4: Stage the Exit
- Day 5: Pad the Landing
- Day 6: Bridge the Gap
- Day 7: Follow the Money

Every app and platform in your house runs on the same principle. By Day 7 you and your child will know exactly what it is.

Ready? Let's go!

Day 0: System Overview

Screens are designed with three things in mind:

Get you there

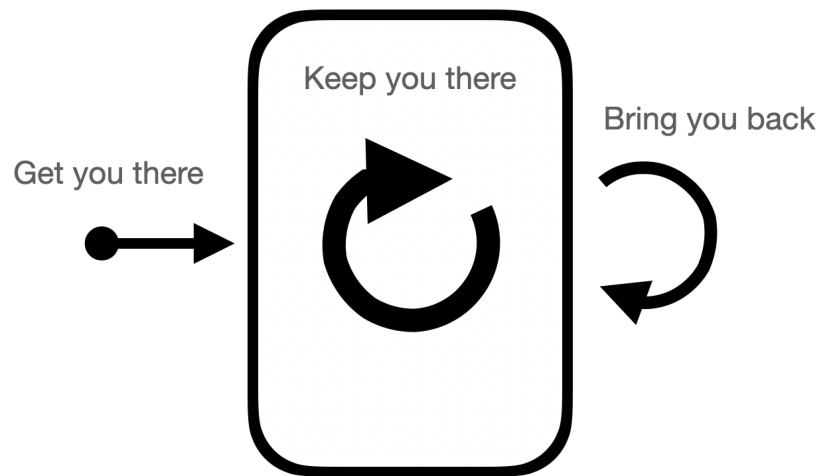
- Boredom
- Habit
- Quick question

Keep you there

- Autoplay
- Endless scrolls
- Made-for-you feed

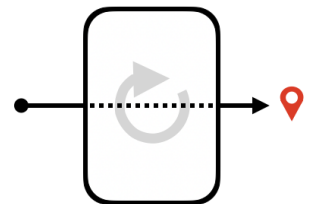
Bring you back

- Notifications
- Streaks
- Messages



Day 1: Begin with Intent

The system goes on forever. A simple plan makes stopping easier.



Goal: Start with a decision, not a drift

Setup: Before starting screen time.

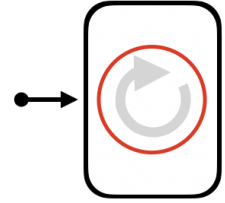
Steps:

1. Say: "What are you going to do, and when are you done?"
2. Ask: "What are you doing right after?"
3. Say: "Great. When you're done, come tell me."

Ongoing Practice: Ask: "What are you going to do, and when are you done?"

Day 2: Feel the Pull

Staying is easier than stopping. Noticing it together brings awareness instead of blame.



Goal: Shift from passive watching into active observation as a family.

Setup: Sit with your child during their screen time. With older kids, ask before sitting down. Even one session starts building the habit. The more you do it, the less you need to say.

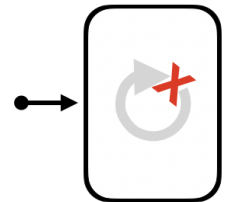
Steps:

1. Say: "Screens pull me in too. Let's watch together for a bit and see what it feels like."
2. Watch together, without commenting for a couple of minutes.
3. Ask: "What do you like about this?" Be genuinely curious.
4. If the tempo picks up, say: "That's intense. Does your brain feel like that right now?"

Ongoing Practice: Sit for three minutes and ask "What do you like about this?"

Day 3: Spot the Hook

The loop is designed to be seamless. Naming the hook creates a pause to find the exit.



Goal: Name the hook to break its grip.

Setup: Join them for the last minute of a clip, round, or episode.

Steps:

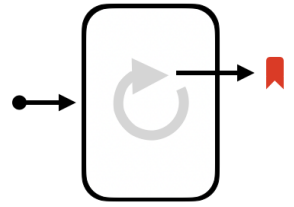
1. Say: "Pause. This never ends. Let's spot the hook that keeps us going."
2. Notice triggers like Autoplay, suggested videos, streaks, rewards, one more round. Name what you see. Make it a game to spot the hooks.
3. Say: "That was built on purpose."
4. Ask: "What part makes it hard to stop?"
5. Choose a stopping point together: one more, end of this level, or the timer.
6. Say: "You do the off switch." This becomes their decision, not yours.

Optional: Disable autoplay, reduce notifications, or remove content that disrupts tone.

Ongoing Practice: Ask: "How is it trying to get you to stay?"

Day 4: Stage the Exit

Feeds are designed to never stop. Your child needs a bookmark.



Goal: Create an ending the system intentionally left out.

Setup: Best for exits at the end of an episode or a clear scene break.

Steps:

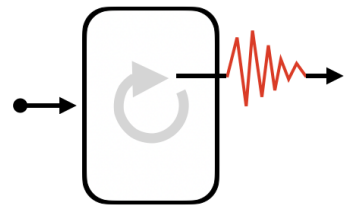
1. Say: "You said you'd stop after this. Where are you starting next time?"
2. If there's no natural stopping point, say: "Find one. End of this level, end of this clip, or five minutes. You pick."
3. Say: "You do the off switch."

Optional (multi-child homes): Rotate who does the off switch by night. Same agency, shared ownership.

Ongoing Practice: Say: "Pick what's next, then do the off switch."

Day 5: Pad the Landing

Reward systems leave the nervous system elevated. The first minute after screens is a regulation problem, not a behavior problem.



Goal: Help the body and mind come down after screens.

Before screens end: Give a five-minute warning, then a one-minute warning.

Setup: Immediately after screen use.

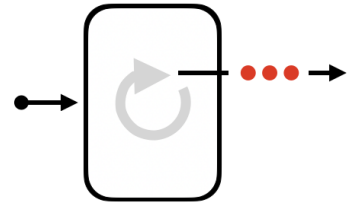
Steps:

1. Pause your own screen use. Your child models your behavior.
2. Say: "Your brain is still moving fast. Let's slow it back down. Two-minute landing, then we'll talk."
3. Do one or two of these together: water, a bathroom break, ten breaths outside, wall push or slow squats, a short snack.
4. Say: "And we're back."
5. For older kids, add: ""What did we just watch? Was it worth it?"

Ongoing Practice: After screens say: "Two-minute landing. Then we'll talk."

Day 6: Bridge the Gap

Constant input crowds out the inner voice. A quiet gap lets it back in.



Goal: Let boredom do its job.

Setup: After screen time when your child says "I'm bored."

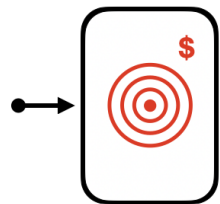
Steps:

1. Say: "Screens can make it hard to hear your own ideas. Quick gap. Then you choose."
2. Set a timer for one to three minutes. Pause your own screen too.
3. Stay nearby. No fixing, questions, or suggestions. If sitting still makes things worse, switch to outside or movement.
4. When the timer ends, ask: "What do you want to do next?"
5. If they are stuck, ask: "Do you want to make something or move your body?"

Ongoing Practice: Say: "Three quiet minutes. Then you choose."

Day 7: Follow the Money

Feeds are a targeting system. Kids can choose not to participate.



Goal: Show your child that their attention has value and they don't have to give it away.

Setup: Co-watching. This works best when it happens casually. Make it a part of the game.

Steps:

1. Say: "What are they selling?"
2. For older kids, ask: "Why do you think it showed up for you?"
3. Say: "Your time is valuable to them."
4. Say: "We get to decide if this gets our attention."

Ongoing Practice: Ask this: "What are they selling?"

Closing Notes

I wrote this guide to share what I wish I'd had earlier.

It is adapted from my forthcoming book on raising self-directed kids in the age of feeds, games, social influence, and AI. It goes deeper on the mechanisms, the research, and what self-direction actually looks like when kids grow up inside these systems.

To get the next tools and updates, join the list at garygattis.com.

Thank you for being an early reader.

Gary

Appendix: Tips and Tricks for All of Us

Phone

- Turn off all non-essential notifications.
- Switch the display to grayscale.
- Charge devices outside the bedroom overnight.
- Turn on Do Not Disturb during meals, homework, and an hour before bed.
- Move social and entertainment apps off the home screen.

Video

- Turn off autoplay on every platform.
- Use YouTube's "Take a Break" reminder in settings.
- Watch together when possible.
- Choose content with natural stopping points.
- Avoid platforms with homepage feeds for younger kids.

Games

- Turn off in-game notifications and streak reminders.
- Look for games with defined endings.
- Disable in-app purchase access entirely.

General

- Keep bedrooms and mealtimes screen-free.
- Keep the first 30 minutes of the morning screen-free.
- Use a physical alarm clock instead of your phone.
- Review screen time data with your child weekly, not punitively.