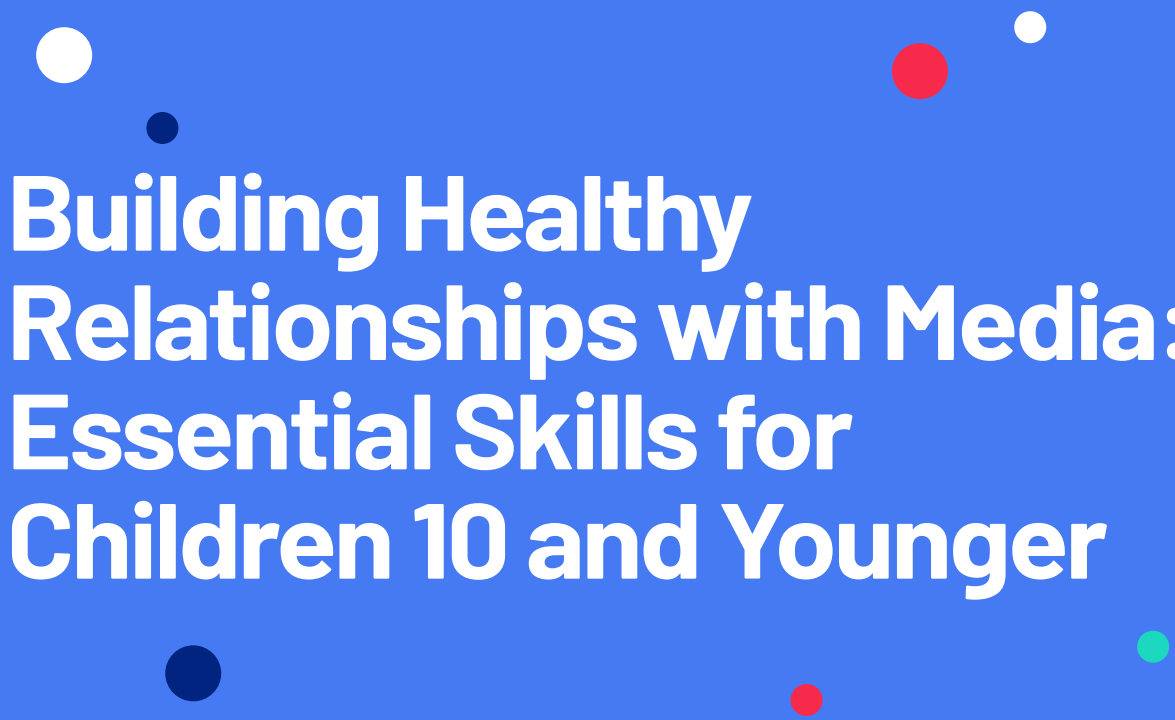
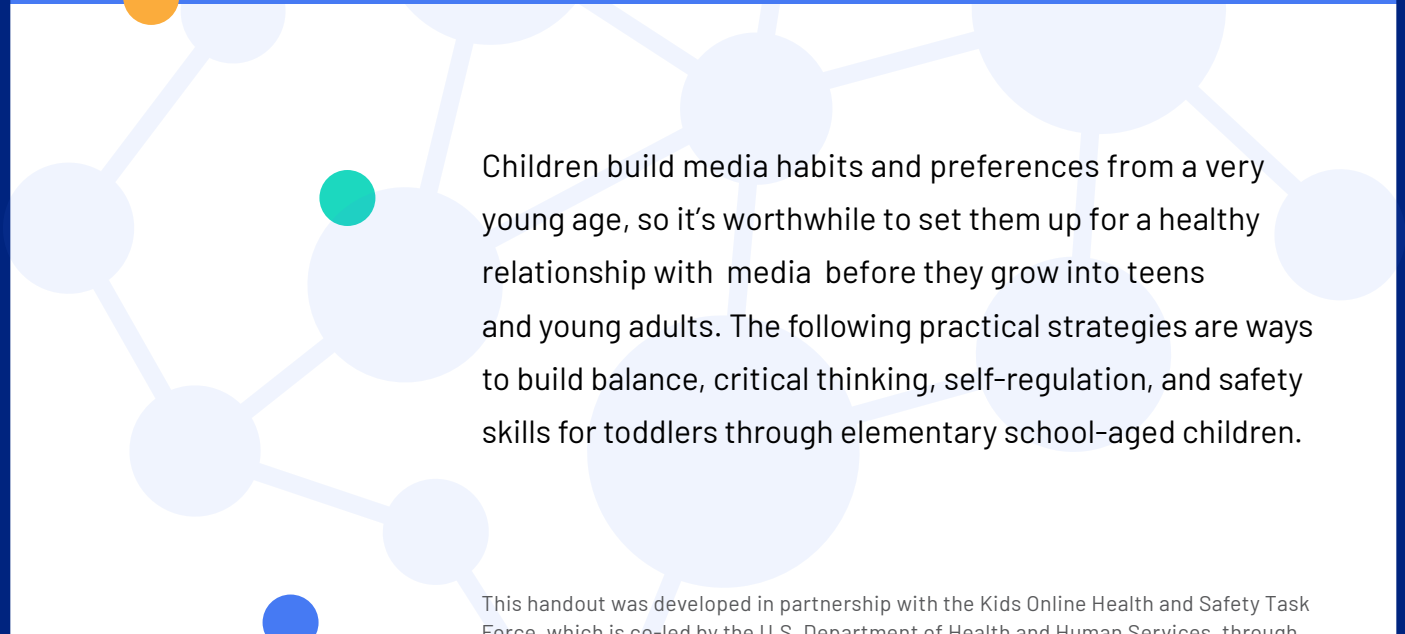




# Building Healthy Relationships with Media: Essential Skills for Children 10 and Younger



Children build media habits and preferences from a very young age, so it's worthwhile to set them up for a healthy relationship with media before they grow into teens and young adults. The following practical strategies are ways to build balance, critical thinking, self-regulation, and safety skills for toddlers through elementary school-aged children.

This handout was developed in partnership with the Kids Online Health and Safety Task Force, which is co-led by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, in close partnership with the U.S. Department of Commerce.

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# 1.

## Make it a Low-Drama Part of the Family Conversation

### Do you ever find yourself arguing with your kids about screen time?

You are not alone! Often, families' discussions about screens feel like a power struggle, full of negotiations and negatives. But they don't have to be.

Screens are all around us, and help us work, laugh, learn, and escape from stress. Therefore, like you talk about food, sleep, school, or any other part of life, it's important to find time to talk about media and technology. It can be anything from the latest movie or video game or something you hear about in the news. The key is to be open-minded, listen to our kids, and guide them without shame and blame. Even young kids can learn from conversations about online safety, how to recognize marketing, and being smart about what videos they watch. Children in elementary school may enjoy sharing their emerging opinions about technology.

### Ideas for how to do it:

- **Be an influencer detective (age 6+):** If your child likes videos created by influencers, watch along with them and ask: "Why did they say that? Do you think someone paid them to put that in their video? Are they being real, or showing off? Do you think they get more 'likes' or earn more money that way?"
- **Family movie night (all ages):** Pick a movie or show to watch together. Have conversations about the characters, what happened, and what you agree with and disagree with.

# 2.

## Normalize Having Boundaries

**Technology can't take up every minute of our downtime.** We need a good night's sleep, time to talk to each other, and time to share food and laughs. Think about the family routines your family loves, whether it's chatting on car rides, family meals, or dancing together, and make time for it. These are the things that we need to ensure tech doesn't crowd out — for kids or parents.

### Ideas for how to do it:

- **No-phone zones (all ages):** Together with your family, decide on rooms of your home or times of day when you don't want technology to invade, such as at the dinner table, in the car, or before bedtime.
- **Quiet those devices (all ages):** Set do not disturb, focus mode, or other settings on devices so that unnecessary notifications don't come through when you want quiet time.
- **Device free meals (all ages):** Families who decide there's "no tech at the table" can focus more on each other, having conversations, and enjoying the food they are eating.

### Things you can say:

- **Ages 2-3+:**
  - Give a warning to help them transition away from screens, and help them come up with ideas for what to do next. "I'm going to set a timer for five more minutes, and then it will be time to do something else. What ideas do you have for what you want to play – maybe cars, playdoh, or stickers?"
  - "Let's do a challenge where you turn off the iPad/game console/TV by yourself, without me having to remind you. Do you think you can do that?"
  - Help kids plan so that media doesn't take up all of the day: "What's your plan for using the iPad today?" "What's your plan for doing other things too?"
  - "I am going to put my phone away for the night so we can have time together."
- **Ages 5+:**
  - "It seems like you're having a hard time putting your device down, let's talk about that."
  - "What makes you want to play that game every day?"

# 3.

## Pick Good Content

**There is so much content out there for kids!** It's your right to be choosy about what your kids watch and learn from. Pick videos, games, and movies with good storytelling and minimal marketing or ads. If you want something educational, go with shows that are proven to help kids learn, like Sesame Street or PBS KIDS. This helps kids understand that their minds can really engage with media – not just zone out.

### Ideas for how to do it:

- **Look it up (all ages): Common Sense Media** rates thousands of movies, shows, apps, games, and books to let you know whether they are worth your child's attention, are too mature, or contain themes you'd rather not introduce yet.
- **Peek in on what they are watching (all ages):** Part of monitoring kids' media use is watching along – even for just a few minutes. If you don't like what they are watching, talk about it and find alternatives.

### Things you can say:

- **Ages 2-3+:**
  - When you see them watching something new, ask:  
"What do you like about this?  
What happens on this show/game?"
  - "Can you show me your favorite channel?"
  - "I'm not crazy about what that character just did. I thought it was rude.  
What do you think?"

# 4.

## Teach Non-Screen Ways to Manage Emotions and Boredom

**During the COVID-19 pandemic, we all used media a little more to manage stress and boredom.** But those habits don't need to stick around.

It's a really important part of mental health to learn how to manage strong emotions and channel boredom into other activities that make us feel human. Many kids need to unwind and burn off a little steam when they come home from school, but make a time limit around technology so that this doesn't take up the whole afternoon. Remember, managing emotions and boredom are skills that don't come easily to all kids, so they need practice and help from caregivers.

### **Ideas for how to do it/What to say:**

- **(Age 2+) Talk about emotions:** "When you feel these big emotions, it's okay. Emotions come and go. Let's stretch our bodies reeeeeaaaaalllly big and take 5 deep slow breaths. When we're done, let's see how we feel."
- **(Age 4+) Help build insight into how technology makes us feel.** "How does your brain and body feel after playing that game?"
- **(All ages) Find alternatives:** "Let's try listening to some calm relaxing music" or "Instead of watching tv to go to bed, we are going to try reading a book. How about you pick out two books for us to read tonight?"
- **(All ages) Recognize when your family is all sitting around looking at your own devices.** "I've noticed that our family has been using our screens to help us calm down. Let's talk about other ways we could calm down when we are stressed out."

# 5.

## Build Digital Smarts and Kindness

**We all see weird or upsetting stuff online sometimes.** Talk about it in a non-judgmental way, so that your child knows it's not their fault and they can come to you to process it. When they do see something upsetting, empower them to pause, think about it, block it, and report it. Kids should know that kindness and respect is the expectation online, and rudeness or violence is not.

### Ideas for how to do it/What to say:

- (Ages 6+):

- "I saw something rude in my social media feed today, and it made me upset. Does that ever happen to you?"
- "Do you ever see other kids being mean online/in your game? Why do you think they do that?"

# 6.

## Teach Safety Skills

**When kids are young, we talk to them about street safety, swimming safety, and other rules that come with exploring the world.**

Safety rules for the digital world should include:

- 1) privacy about names, addresses, phone numbers, and passwords,
- 2) not chatting with strangers (who can sometimes pose as kids),
- 3) not clicking links or downloading things that can carry viruses, and
- 4) unsafe websites that can show sexy or violent things. Kids can be impulsive and curious, so it's important to teach them these rules ahead of time, before they stumble into trouble. Having kid-safe filters and protections on devices or Wi-Fi also helps.

### **Ideas for how to do it/What to say:**

#### **• (Ages 3+):**

- "Just like I teach you how to be safe crossing the street, it's my job to teach you how to be safe when using your tablet."

#### **• (Ages 5+):**

- "You wouldn't post your name and address on a billboard, right? That's why we don't share private information on a chat or game that anyone can see."
- "Computer viruses can make our laptop/tablet crash and not work. That's why I help you decide what websites to visit and games to download."
- "If people online try to give you things, ask you for pictures or private information, or otherwise are making you feel weird, let me know and I can help you block them."

# 7.

## “Sharenting:” Thinking Before You Share

**Since the invention of social media, parents have shared billions of photos of their children online – often without kids’ permission.**

While these photos can share joy, parents say they also can lead to negative social comparisons about picture-perfect parenting. These photos also contain a lot of data about children’s faces and locations. Experts recommend asking for your kids’ permission before posting photos or stories about them online. This helps teach children about consent and privacy, which may help them be a more responsible social media user as a teen.

### **Ideas for how to do it/What to say:**

- **(Ages 5+):** If your child doesn’t like what you’ve posted, ask them why. Sometimes children are embarrassed or might want more of a say in what pictures you decide to post.
- **(All ages):** If you post pictures of your child(ren) on social media, show them. Younger children may not understand who else can see these posts, so you might need to explain it, like “My account is public, so anyone can see this.” or “I only share pictures with my good friends and people like grandma.”



# Suggested Activities

Print and try some of these fun skill-building activities with your kids!

## Setting Up for Us Time

## Family Movie Night

## Technology That's Hard to Put Down

## YouTube Together Time

# Suggested Activities

Print and try some of these fun skill-building activities with your kids!

## Family Movie Night

Plan a family movie night. You can have your child pick something or watch something you loved from your childhood. Or, if your child likes to watch a streaming series, ask to join them for an episode or two. Resist picking up your phone! Ask your child 1) what they like about the movie/show and characters. 2) What they think is going to happen next in the plot. 3) How does the movie/show make them feel (happy/sad/excited/nervous/etc.)

## Setting Up for Us Time

Set up device free dinners or device free zones and designate a basket or box where devices go to be quiet for a while. If you feel like being crafty, make the bag or box and have your child help make or decorate it. When your devices are in there, communicate that you are doing this so you can focus just on them and the things you want to do or play together.

## YouTube Together Time

Watch a YouTube video together (can be anything you find appropriate or perhaps your child's favorite channel). Talk about the ads that pop up and what they mean. Talk about the recommended videos that show up, encourage appropriate choices, and see what your child wants to click on. Talk to them about what you think is appropriate video content, and what is not.

## Technology That's Hard to Put Down

Take turns looking at your 'screen time' output and talk about what you usually do on your device and whether it brings you joy or stress. Ask kids which apps and games are hardest to put down, and which ones let them have boundaries or allow them to feel like they are easily in control.

# Suggested Activities

**How We Manage  
Emotions**

**Our Non-Tech  
Favorites**

**How Technology  
Makes Us Feel**

**Choosing the  
Good Stuff**

# Suggested Activities

## Our Non-Tech Favorites

Pick a board game you want to play, song you want to dance to, art activity that makes you feel good, outdoor place you want to visit, or pet you want to snuggle. Each family's non-tech favorites are different, so find a few that work for you and make them a regular routine. Write them down here:

## How We Manage Emotions

What's your family's emotion coping plan? How do you each like to deal with stress or upsetting feelings? Find healthy ways to cope that feel right for your family, like movement (stretching, taking a walk), using your senses (music, hugging, stress putty), deep breathing, or talking about your feelings without yelling. Write down your coping plan here:

## Choosing the Good Stuff

Talk with your child about what type of channels/shows they watch or what digital games they play. Play a quiz game where you rate each video or game on a scale of 1 to 5 on qualities like:

- I use my brain when I watch this (vs. My brain turns off when I watch this)
- The people are kind (vs. The people are rude)
- I feel good about myself when I watch this (vs. I feel worse about myself when I watch this)
- This feels like our family (vs. This feels unrealistic)

## How Technology Makes Us Feel

Both parents and kids, think about what apps or games you use the most. How do they make you feel during and after using them? Good? Cranky? Riled up? Worried? Maybe take a break from the ones that don't make you feel good.

# Suggested Activities

**Scam Finder**

**Digital  
Disengage  
Challenge**

**Pop-up Ad  
Whackamole**

**Weird or  
Creepy Content**



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Services Administration

# Suggested Activities

## Digital Disengage Challenge

This is a family challenge to put your devices down! It's hard to pull your attention away, but make a plan to turn it off, hand over the device, or put it away when it's time to do something else. Count up points when family members can put their device down the first time someone asks them. The person with the most self-control points at the end of the week wins!

## Scam Finder

Talk about the types of scams you've seen lately. Spam phone calls? Too-good-to-be-true advertisements? An influencer saying something outlandish? This helps your child build a critical eye.

## Weird or Creepy Content

Ask your child to tell you about the weirdest or creepiest thing that they've seen online lately. Don't overreact! Help them understand what it was, why it showed up, and how to avoid it next time.

## Pop-up Ad Whackamole

If your child is watching videos or playing a mobile game, teach them to close, "X" or "skip" the ad, and to let you know when they did it! Have them help you figure out which apps or games have the most annoying pop-ups, uninstall them, and find fun alternatives.

# Suggested Activities

**To Post or  
Not to Post**

**Private vs.  
Shareable**

**Offline Family  
Photo Album**

**Chat Etiquette**

Visit [AAP.org/socialmedia](https://www.aap.org/socialmedia)

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**Youth Mental Health**  
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Services Administration

# Suggested Activities

## Private vs. Shareable

Quiz your child on what is private versus what is OK to be shared. Their last name? Address? School name? Phone number? Home town? Password? All private! Their high score? Favorite game? OK to share!

## To Post or Not to Post

Do you regularly post photos of your children? If so, sit down with them on the couch and go through your social media feed with them. Ask them to rate your posts — from recent to when they were just babies — with one of three responses:

- I love that you shared it!
- Meh, don't really care.
- I kinda wish you hadn't....

You don't need to necessarily take photos down but listen to your kids with an open mind about why they wish those photos stayed on your phone, and not on the internet.

## Chat Etiquette

If your child uses a video game or video platform that allows chatting and comments, have them show you what it looks like. Look at the chat together and talk about: who is being respectful and positive? Who isn't? How do they know that other players are really kids? Help them restrict their chat to "friends" online, or try turning off the chat for a week or 2 — some kids don't miss it.

## Offline Family Photo Album

Instead of posting photos online, select a few that are special to your family to print out and put in an album in your home. Have your children help pick out the ones that give them the best memories and help arrange their order in the album. Keep the album in an easy-to-reach place so that kids can look through it during downtime (rather than grabbing a device!).

Visit [AAP.org/socialmedia](http://AAP.org/socialmedia)