

Christian parents know they need to think carefully about kids and screens — but why? And how?

by *Andy Crouch*

In the blink of an eye, humanity has collectively made one of the biggest changes to family life in history, introducing what our family calls “glowing rectangles” into every part of the home. Barely three decades after the invention of the internet, laptops, tablets and smartphones now fill our lives. I love the way technology makes some parts of life easier and more productive. But after 20 years of raising two children in the midst of the screen revolution,

I’m convinced that parents need to pay much more attention to how, when and where our families use screens.

Here’s why ...

We are meant for reflection, but our screens glow.

Before technology, only two things in creation glowed by themselves — the sun, which was too bright to look at directly, and fire. (Actually, three

ALL THOSE GLOWING RECTANGLES



things: don't forget fireflies!) We saw everything else by reflected light. Think about how captivating, even mesmerizing, fire (and fireflies) can be. Now, in many homes, that same mesmerizing glow comes from a dozen screens. Glowing things disrupt our ability to appreciate reflection — in both the literal and metaphorical sense. It's hard for us to concentrate on real people and experiences, things illuminated only by reflected light, when there's a glowing rectangle anywhere in view.

We are meant to experience the world in terabytes. Our screens give us kilobytes.

Human beings aren't computers. We are a divinely shaped combination of heart, soul, mind and strength. We are meant to take in the world through all our multiple senses, which give us rich knowledge of the world and one another — far richer than computers can process or deliver. Indeed, when you talk with someone in person, you probably absorb terabytes of data every minute without even realizing it. Even our high-resolution screens and fast internet connections only give us a thousandth of that much information. We are meant for far deeper encounters than these thin information streams can give us.

We thrive on a rhythm of work and rest. Our screens want to be always on.

Human beings are designed to sleep for about one-third of our lives, and our minds and bodies get tired after intense effort. But our devices never grow weary. Increasingly, they are designed to be always on. They disrupt the natural rhythms that give us rest from the challenges of the day — which is part of why it's so alarming that eight out of 10 American teenagers, like seven out of 10 parents, sleep with their phones next to them. No one, least of all children and adolescents, can handle the pressure of always-on information and notifications in a healthy way.

We grow through difficulty, but our screens give us a way to escape.

Every modern parent has faced this dilemma: Give a child a glowing rectangle and they will be almost magically compliant. But this "solution" doesn't actually address the underlying challenge. When we hand our kids a screen, we do nothing to help them, or us, learn how to handle a difficult situation. It's a fundamental principle of growth — I can either seek to escape from difficulty, leaving myself unscathed but also unchanged, or I can

seek to grow to become a different kind of person who can overcome difficulty. At every step, our devices offer us an escape route — but very often, the path toward real life involves growth rather than escape.

... and how.

As our family began to acknowledge these troubling realities, we decided we had to change our use of technology from its "default settings" and embrace a healthier set of habits.

First, we did some redecorating. We rearranged the spaces in our home where our family spends the most time, filling them with things that reward skill and active engagement. We exiled the devices — things that work on their own and don't ask much of us — to the edges. The TV went to the basement. Cell phones now get plugged in to a charging station rather than following us into the heart of the home. At the center of our home now are musical instruments, books, a craft table with art supplies always ready, and of course the kitchen — things that invite us to actively create rather than passively consume.

Then we built our lives around a rhythm, modeled on the Old Testament principle of Sabbath. Neither parents nor children get 24/7 access to their devices. For one hour a day — during bath-time when the children were small, at dinnertime now that they're older — we turn them all off. We even turn off the electric lights. Candlelit dinners don't just have to be for special occasions — every night, when we turn off the glowing devices and light the candles, something changes for the better in how our family relates to each other. (It doesn't hurt that your spouse, in candlelight, once again has the charming glow of youth!)

One day a week — every Sunday — we do the same thing. Both parents and kids take a day off from the constant demands and distractions of screens. And believe it or not, one week a year, when our family is on vacation, all those devices get turned off as well. These daily, weekly and seasonal rhythms are like circuit breakers for our dependence on devices. They give us a chance, as my teenage daughter said one day, to build our lives around "things that are older and better than the newest thing."

Our family isn't at all anti-technology. We use it gratefully, but also carefully. We don't want to miss out on real life — the reflective kind, the restful kind, the deep kind. We want to grow into the resilient, creative persons we are meant to be. We've discovered that even in a world of devices, that kind of life is possible — for parents and kids alike. **LW**

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Andy Crouch is author of *The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place*, winner of the 2018 Christianity Today Book Award for Christian Living/Discipleship.