

# RAISING SCREENAGERS

PRESENTATION SUMMARY BY DR KRISTY GOODWIN

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# KEY MESSAGES

Raising teenagers in a digital world is hard... *really* hard. Why? Most parents had predominantly analogue childhoods where we stared at the sky and not a screen! However, we've been forced to raise teens in a digital world: they're living in a tsunami of screens and social media. We're frequently given confusing and conflicting (and often inaccurate) advice in the media and by professionals. We wrestle with the fact that our teens will inherit a digital world, so digital amputation simply isn't an option (nor would it make you very popular with your teen). Yet, we're unsure as to how we can allow our teen to embrace technology, whilst still preserving and protecting their adolescence. This eBook summarises some of the key points addressed in the seminar *Raising Screenagers*, my signature talk that helps worried parents and professionals raise thriving, healthy teens (*without* suggesting that you ban their phone, laptop, or gaming device).

## *Parents need to be the pilot of the digital plane.*

To develop healthy technology habits, our teens need their parents/carers and educators to be the pilot of the digital plane and *not* the passenger. When adults assume the role of pilot they help their teen navigate the digital terrain. Even though many parents and educators may feel ill-equipped to be the pilot because we feel we lack the technical skills and knowledge adolescents display, we have two things they don't yet have:

- (i) life experience; and
- (ii) a fully developed prefrontal cortex (the part of the brain that's responsible for high-order thinking, logical decision-making and impulse control). This is the part of the brain that isn't yet online: your teen hasn't yet fully developed their prefrontal cortex (remember, I broke the bad news in the seminar that the female prefrontal cortex develops in the early twenties and for males it's late twenties!)

When parents and educators are the pilot of the digital plane, they can help their teens deal with turbulence (which they will inevitably do), without crashing the plane. When teens go in the wrong direction (which is a normal rite of passage as a teenager), parents can help them course-correct. When our teens are facing scary digital dilemmas, (like cyber-bullying, exposure to pornography, violent or inappropriate content) they'll come to the pilot and not fellow-passengers to help them. However, they'll only do this if parents and educators are sitting in the pilot's seat AND if we don't use screens as a punishment tool.

As pilots of the digital plane, parents need to establish and enforce healthy BOUNDARIES. When teens have firm and consistent boundaries they're more likely to develop healthy technology habits that will stand them in good stead for the digital future they'll no doubt inherit. And even better, you don't need to ban or avoid screens (and your teenager will love that!).



So what boundaries do parents need to develop in consultation with their teen? Firm and consistent boundaries help our teens to ensure that screens don't derail their basic needs for healthy development and help them to form healthy technology habits.



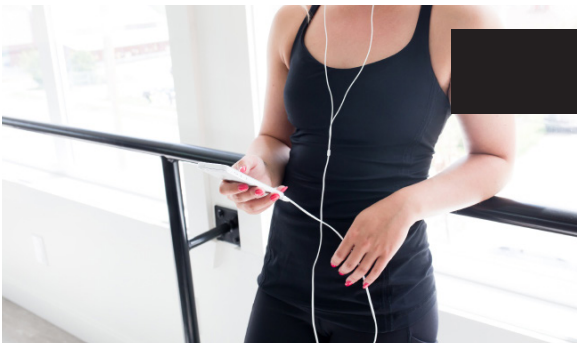
## *How much?*

*Whilst we do have government guidelines and it's important to ensure that time with devices isn't encroaching on a teen's developmental priorities, it's near impossible to prescribe an exact amount of time that's deemed 'healthy'. We always have to consider the displacement effect of screen-time and determine whether time online is adding value.*



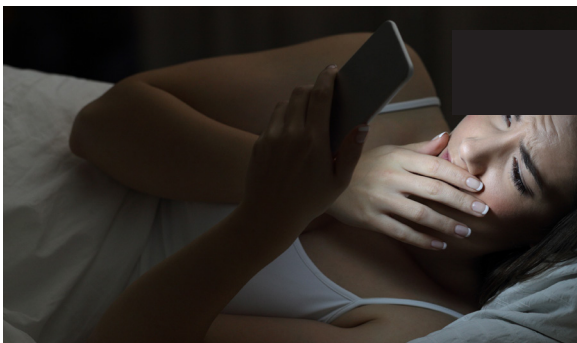
## *What?*

*Content is king. What your teen is doing online is so much more important than simply quantifying 'how much' time they're spending online. Is their time online for leisure or learning? Is it active or passive? Is it age-appropriate and safe?*



## *When?*

*To ensure that screens don't adversely impact teens' sleep or learning, parents need to help their teens minimise screens before sleep and be selective with screen activities before school (to ensure their concentration and attention spans aren't impaired).*



## *Where?*

*Families need to establish, again in consultation with their teen, what are the no-go tech zones in the family house?*



### *With whom?*

*It's imperative that parents and carers know who their teens are interacting with online. We need to remind our teens constantly about cyber-safety risks (teens are particularly vulnerable to online predators) because their prefrontal cortex development means their working memory is still somewhat impeded.*



### *How?*

*There are emerging concerns that teens' excessive and inappropriate screen habits are having a negative impact on their physical health. We need to again remind teens of the correct ways to use digital devices so their vision, hearing and musculoskeletal health aren't adversely impacted.*

## **The Four Bs- What teens need to thrive in a digital world**

Teenagers need **boundaries**, help preserving their **basic needs**, guidance to **blend** their analogue and digital worlds, opportunities for **boredom** and for their parents and carers to **be involved**.



# HOW MUCH?

Research consistently tells us that teens have seven, basic developmental priorities that will ensure their optimal health and well-being (in fact kids and adults share most of the same priorities and basic needs too). It's critical that screen-time doesn't displace opportunities for these basic needs to be met. For optimal health, learning and development your teen needs:



*Relationships*



*Language*



*Sleep*



*Play*



*Physical Activity*



*Nutrition*



*Executive  
Function Skills\**

*\* impulse control, working memory  
& mental flexibility*

*Screens can either help or hamper your teen's basic needs.*

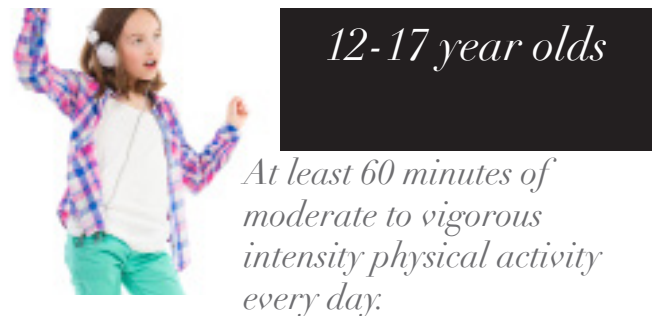
My simple formula for calculating healthy amounts of screen-time:

*24 hours – sleep\* – physical activity\*\* – time for 5 other basic developmental needs = time available for screen-time.*

*\*Sleep guidelines-*



*\*\*Physical activity guidelines-*



When it comes to determining 'how much' screen-time is healthy for teens, we need to remember there's no 'safe' threshold or prescriptive amount that's been scientifically validated. We always need to consider the displacement effect. What's the opportunity cost of five hours/day on a screen? Is their screen-time interfering with their sleep, social interactions or physical movement opportunities?

It also helps to understand why screens have captivated and engaged our teens. Technology caters for our three fundamental **biological drivers** (based on self-determination theory)- our need to connect, feel competent and in control.

In addition, technology has a strong **neurobiological impact** on the teen brain and this can explain their digital infatuation:

// digital devices can cause the brain to release **dopamine** (feel-good neurotransmitter) as screen activities are typically pleasurable pursuits. Dopamine can hijack and impede the performance of the prefrontal cortex (the logical, CEO, air-traffic control system of the brain);

// teens often enter the **psychological state of flow** when using gadgets and so their sense of time can disappear (hence, why giving them screen limits is often ineffective because their concept of time disappears);

// the prefrontal cortex has been **biologically wired for novelty** and the online world is *always* new, interesting and immediately gratifying. The real world, in contrast is not. It's slow-paced, requires concerted effort to achieve results and is boring at times. Remember, this is why boredom is still essential for your teen;

// when teens use devices they often enter the **state of insufficiency**. They never feel 'done' or complete. There's always another browser or app they can open, they can constantly refresh their social media feeds and video games literally never end.



In 2017 the Department of Health updated the Australian Movement, Sleep & Sedentary Guidelines, as outlined below (source: [www.health.gov.au](http://www.health.gov.au)). I recommend that families use these as a starting point for establishing healthy amounts of screen-time, as opposed to trying to strictly adhere to them.

## 12-17 YEARS



### MOVEMENT

60 minutes/day (moderate to vigorous)  
3 days/week activities that strengthen muscles & bones

### SLEEP (NOT UPDATED IN 2017)

8-10 hours/night



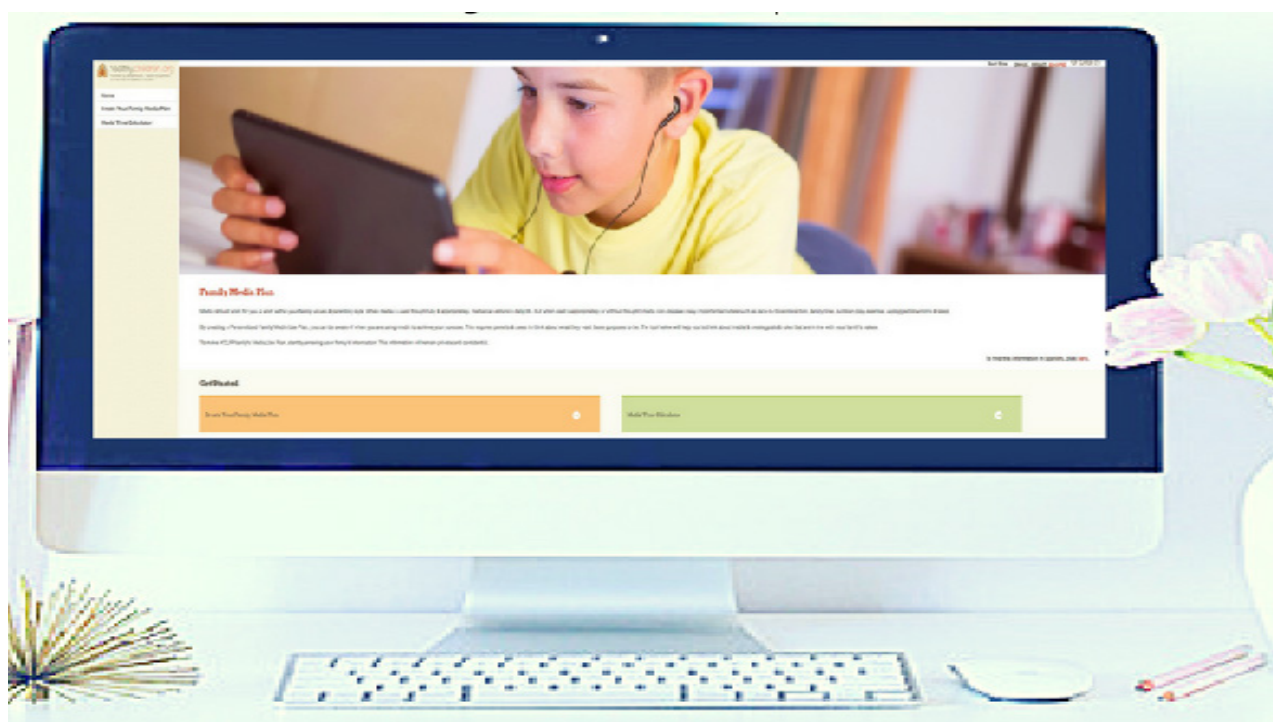
### SEDENTARY (SCREENTIME)

No more than 2 hours/day with screens for entertainment  
Break up long periods of sedentary activity

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[drkristygoodwin.com](http://drkristygoodwin.com)

If you'd like tool to help you determine a rough estimate regarding healthy screen limits, the American Academy of Pediatrics developed an online tool which can be accessed at <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/media/Pages/default.aspx>. This online tool can assist parents develop a healthy media plan in collaboration with their teen.



# WHAT?

Knowing what apps, social media platforms, websites and games your teen has access to and installed on their devices is paramount. As pilots of the digital plane it's vital that parents know exactly what teens are doing on their devices and what they're able to access online.

Your teen's impulse control centre is still developing, so they will make mistakes online. It's a given. However, now their mistakes have 'digital DNA' attached and their mistakes can be long-lasting and sometimes even catastrophic (remember, they don't yet have life experience and a prefrontal cortex to help them consistently make logical and smart decisions).

The four Ps concerning most parents of teens are predators, pornography, peers (cyber-bullying) and photos (social media). It's our job as parents to ensure that our teens only have access to appropriate content on their devices. Of course, this doesn't mean our child won't see something inappropriate- perhaps they sit next to someone on the bus who shows them something upsetting, or they visit a friend's house and see something that's inappropriate. This is why open and ongoing conversations about technology is important and why using screen-time as a punishment tool is something I strongly discourage. Our kids simply won't come to us if they've seen something inappropriate or upsetting, or if they're a victim of cyber-bullying as they worry they'll be digitally-amputated.

Keeping digital devices in publicly-accessible parts of the family home is essential (more on this in the 'Where?' section), showing an avid interest in your teen's online activities, installing Internet-filtering software on all Internet-connected devices (I personally use and recommend [The Family Zone](#)).

If you're unsure of the digital playgrounds in which they're playing the e-Safety Commissioner's website has a wonderful iParent Tool which clearly explains (in simple language what the websites/apps/games are and the potential risks and dangers, legal age restrictions etc). If you're looking for age-appropriate and up-to-date reviews for TV shows, movies, apps, video games then [Common Sense Media](#) (a non-for-profit group from America have a review service).







# WHEN?

Image source: Baxter Blue

There are two times of the day when parents need to be cautious about teens' technology use: (i) before school and (ii) before sleep. I'm not suggesting that teens need to completely avoid screens at these times, but we do need to be mindful about what they're doing with screens at these two periods of the day.

The use of fast-paced screen action before school can impact their attention spans. Rapid-fire screen action can hyper-arouse the brain and overload the nervous system, making it challenging to focus their attention. Their teacher is no match for the animated characters, or fast-paced action of a screen.

If devices are used before bed they can adversely impact the quality and quantity of sleep teens can accumulate each night and teens need sleep for optimal learning and mental health. The use of tablets and smartphones are particularly problematic because they emit blue light which suppresses the body's production of melatonin (the sleep hormone), which can delay the onset of sleep. This is problematic for adolescents as their circadian rhythms biologically alter with the onset of puberty and they naturally fall asleep at later times. However, the use of screens before sleep time can further delay these sleep times.

Bedrooms should be device-free. Your teen will tell you they need their phone in their bedroom as it's their alarm. If this is the case I suggest you buy them an old-fashioned alarm clock. Having devices in teens' bedrooms can impact the quality of their sleep. Each night teens need between 4-6 completed sleep cycles (where they move through five stages of sleep). However, having devices in the bedroom can disrupt these sleep cycles (thanks to alerts and notifications), meaning many teens aren't completing a sufficient number of sleep cycles each night. Again, poor quality sleep can have adverse impacts on their cognitive abilities (learning) and on their emotional well-being.

The use of devices at night time is also associated with increased cyber-safety and cyber-bullying risks. At night, your teen's prefrontal cortex (logical part of the brain) switches off and the amygdala (emotional centre) of the brain switches on. In this heightened emotional state, your teen is more susceptible to making poorer digital decisions and this is why most cyber-bullying and safety risks occur at night- the logical brain is off and the emotional brain is switched on.

**// Set a digital bedtime-** specify an exact cut-off time when digital devices need to be put away. 60-90 minutes before bedtime is ideal.

**// Establish a landing zone-** identify a specific place in your home (kitchen counter, study, buffet, lounge room) where all the digital devices go each night for charging. Keeping bedrooms as tech-free zones is essential. BONUS TIP- make sure they're charging the device and not the empty case.

**// Use blue-light blocking glasses-** Some teens need to use digital devices at night before bed to complete homework or assignments. If so, using [Baxter Blue](#) glasses can help to prevent eyes from absorbing the blue light. If you use the promo code 'drkristy' you'll get free shipping and 10% discount too).

**// Do a technology swap-** some teens like watching something before bedtime. This is where a technology swap can help. Rather than watching on the tablet device (which emits blue light that can interfere with sleep hormone secretion) watch it on the TV (which doesn't emit as much blue light and teens sit further away from it).

**// Use digital tools-** Tools like [The Family Zone](#) allow families to set up routines around when digital devices can be used (also restrict times of the day when you don't want kids using screens, for example, in the middle of the night or very early in the morning before parents wake up).

**// Empty their sensory cups-** To help calm teens' nervous systems, that are often hyper-aroused after they've used screens, provide activities that enable them to empty their sensory cup. This can include things such as running outside, walking, playing an instrument (anything physically active and outdoors is usually a great sensory experience). So too is chewing crushed ice (as it calms the vagus nerve) and even having a bath or shower. Basically, anything that calms the nervous system down and allows the senses to re-calibrate is helpful and can prevent the onset of the techno-tantrum that often follows screen time.

**// Balance teens' screen-time and green-time-** Teens need outdoor, unstructured activities each and every single day. Unplugged time is essential for their visual development, helps to regulate their circadian rhythms required for sleep and allows them to enter the mind-wandering mode of thinking (which will enable them to come up with creative ideas and solve problems).



# WHERE?

Our teens are often playing in digital playgrounds and no one is supervising. We need parents and educators to know the apps, websites, TV programs and games that adolescents are using. And the easiest and most logical way to do this is if technology is used in open places in the home. As the pilot of the digital plane, parents need to prescribe exactly where devices can and cannot be used in the home. This is challenging to do, given the prevalence of mobile devices. This is also critical when kids come to your house for a playdate (and to enforce if your child goes to a friend's house for a playdate).

Keeping technology in publicly-accessible areas of the home and classroom has dual benefits. First, it helps parents and educators to be involved in children's digital lives. Research consistently shows us that adult involvement (co-viewing) is beneficial for our kids' learning. When parents and/or educators co-view or use technology with kids, it helps them to make meaning from the screen and shows your teen you value what they're doing online. This is a subtle, but powerful way of conveying to your child that technology isn't toxic or taboo and you're really interested in what they're doing. Whilst it may not always be possible to sit down and play a video game with your teen (although that's also great too), having ongoing and incidental conversations with your child ensures that they're actively involved with the media and not simply a 'digital zombie'.

The second benefit associated with teens using screens in publicly-accessible areas of your home and learning space relates to cyber-safety and cyber-bullying. The adolescent brain is wired to take risks- they always have, but now their risks and mistakes have digital DNA attached to them! The neuroscience confirms that teens' brains are wired to take risks because their prefrontal cortex (the part of the brain responsible for logical decision-making) is not fully developed. However, our kids now have access to powerful digital devices which can be used to easily share and curate their mistakes (such as sharing private information, or posting a nude image they'll later regret, or sending a nasty message). If our teens are using devices in bedrooms or hidden away from their parents/carers/educators then they're more likely to engage in risky activities. Remember, it's highly unlikely that your child will be sending sexts whilst they're sitting next to you on the lounge, but much more likely to do this in their bedrooms!

Suggested tech-free zones at home-

// **Bedrooms**- keep bedrooms as tech-free zones. Devices in bedrooms have been associated with poorer quality and quantity of sleep and also increase cyber-safety risks. Develop healthy sleep hygiene by ensuring that devices are left out of bedrooms.

// **Meal areas**- keeping devices away from meal areas helps to promote family interaction. Meal-times should be a sacred time for families to connect and interact and phones can act as a digital intruder at the table. For younger children, digital distractions at the meal area, can also compromise their eating habits.

// **Cars**- For short, everyday trips, it's best to keep cars as device-free zones. Car trips are a rich opportunity to have conversations with your teens as they're literally held captive in the confines of your car. And if they're at an age where they don't want to talk, then this 'white space' is great for their brains. Constantly processing information from screens can be exhausting and their brains and nervous systems need a break from the sensory stimulation screens provide. For adolescents we also know that if they become accustomed to using devices in the car when they're a passenger, this is a very difficult habit to break when they gain their provisional licence.

// **Bathrooms**- I think this one goes without saying! Hygiene and white space for brains is all I'll say.





Image source: Baxter Blue

# WITH WHOM?

It's vital that parents and educators establish boundaries around exactly whom adolescents can use screens with both in the physical sense and also online. We'd never consider our children going to a stranger's house for a playdate, but we're often allowing our kids to do just this, when they're using online tools.

We need to be aware of who our teens are interacting with and playing with online, as many apps and online games now have chat rooms and other modified aspects of social media. Teens are naturally vulnerable as they want to establish secure peer networks and feel like they belong, so they can easily be preyed upon by online predators targeting these vulnerable youth.

Keeping teens safe online is amongst parents' chief priorities when it comes to acting as the pilot of the digital plane. Parents need to have ongoing conversations with their kids about who they're interacting with online and remind them (because the part of the brain responsible for logical decision-making isn't fully developed until their twenties) that not everyone on the Internet is who they say they are.

Top tech tips-

// **Have ongoing conversations-** Know exactly what digital playgrounds your teen is playing in and supervise so you know who they're interacting with. Know exactly who they're speaking to online and interacting with and let them know if their interactions are appropriate (remember, their brains are wired to be impulsive as their prefrontal cortex isn't yet fully developed).

// **Phone audits-** conduct regular phone audits with your teen on an ad hoc basis. Be transparent about why you're doing it (because you want to ensure you know who they're interacting with) and always do it with them present. If they question your trust or your decision to do this, explain that if they have nothing to hide then there's nothing to worry about. Over time and once trust is established parents will need to do this less frequently.

// **Teach kids online etiquette-** Our kids don't learn social skills and online etiquette though osmosis. We need to explicitly teach them and remind them how to interact appropriately online. Remind them that every comment, post or profile has some form of digital DNA attached to it.

// **Don't introduce social media prematurely-** giving kids access to social media before the legal age, or before they're emotionally and socially ready to cope with the demands of social media is incredibly risky, as they'll instantly be exposed to unfamiliar people. They can also start to seek external validation from social media by posting sexually explicit, inappropriate or risky content just to gain likes and comments.

// **Encourage them to come to you if they have a problem-** we know that many teens are subject to cyber-bullying or see inappropriate content online and whilst they know they should report it to a parent or teacher, most don't because they're worried about the consequences. Many teens fear that they'll be digitally-amputated if they go to a parent or teacher for help. So it's vital that we have open and ongoing conversations with our kids and remind them that they can come to you with any concerns.



# HOW?

## Vision

Given that kids are spending increasing amounts of time with digital devices and often at younger and younger ages, it's vital that parents and educators ensure that they're using them in healthy and correct ways. Incorrect, excessive or premature use of screens can potential harm a child's visual development. Unhealthy screen habits place children's eyes under many stressors at earlier ages and often for increasing periods of time.

### *Top tech tips for protecting kids' vision-*

**/ 20-20-20 rule** – Teens need to take frequent breaks when using digital devices. Every 20 minutes of using a screen, teens need to take (at least) 20-second break away from the screen, blink 20 times (this also helps to lubricate the eyes and prevent computer vision syndrome), to look at something at least 20-feet away (approximately 6 metres which helps to develop depth of vision) and to do something physically active for 20 seconds (star jumps, run on the spot, stretch to help the body calibrate and reposition so no unhealthy postures are adopted).

**// Encourage screen-free breaks outside-** Time in natural sunlight is vital for healthy visual development. Children need 10-14 hours of natural sunlight per week for healthy eyes. Time in nature also gives eyes a much-needed break from looking at things close distance.

## Hearing

The World Health Organization (sic) estimates that 1.1 billion people worldwide could be at risk of noise-induced hearing loss (NIHL) because of unsafe use of personal music devices including mp3 players and smartphones. NIHL typically develops because of repeated exposure to loud sounds over time (as is the case for many kids incorrectly using headphones).

Teens consistent use of headphones above safe hearing levels is a huge threat to their hearing. Research confirms that use of headphones above 75dB can cause permanent hearing loss. However, many parents are surprised to learn that most commercial mp3 players can reach more than 130dB (contingent upon the model of mp3 player and brand of headphones used)! Hearing damage is cumulative, which is a potential concern as younger and younger children are now using headphones, meaning they may be susceptible to hearing loss in years to come- we don't yet have the long-term research to confirm this, as yet.

### *Top tech tips for protecting teens' hearing-*

**// Volume control** – Use the settings on the device to set maximum volume levels. Many products do not allow users to set a specific decibel level, but you can set maximum levels based on what 'sounds' suitable. Check with individual manufacturers as to how to do this.

**// Avoid using ear-bud style headphones** – children should use noise-canceling, ear-muff type headphones (it's not essential that they're the expensive branded headphones that tweens will insist you buy them) as these cancel some of the background noise, making it easier for children to listen to the music without having competing background noise.

**// Limit time with headphones-** children should not use headphones for more than 60 minutes/day.

**// No headphones when being a pedestrian** –Young children don't typically develop their peripheral vision until they're 8 years of age so they rely more on their sense of hearing when crossing the road. If they're digitally-distracted with headphones, their sense of hearing is compromised.



A photograph of a man and a young girl looking at a smartphone together. The man is wearing a light blue polo shirt and the girl is wearing a blue t-shirt. They are both looking intently at the screen. The word "HOW?" is overlaid in large white letters.

# HOW?

## Physical Health-

There are potential risks to kids' physical health if they're using screens excessively or incorrectly. Tech-neck, gaming claw and text-thumb are the colloquial terms used to describe the serious physical ailments that can result from repetitive or incorrect use of screens. As pilots of the digital plane parents need to teach kids (and remind them constantly) about how to hold and position screens in a way that won't compromise their health.

Chiropractors, physiotherapists and occupational therapists are anecdotally reporting increasing numbers of adolescents presenting with musculoskeletal problems. They attribute this increase to the early introduction of screens, the amount of time children are spending with screens and the adoption of unhealthy ergonomic postures.

// **Encourage regular breaks**– Regular breaks away from screens prevent teens' muscles from fatiguing. When they're tired children are more unlikely to adopt poor postures. If children have a break from using a screen and do something physically active in the interim, when they resume using a device they'll be more likely to adopt healthy ergonomic postures.

// **Teach correct ergonomics**– teach adolescents how to adjust desks and work areas to suit their physical needs. For example, when using laptops and desktop computers their feet should be flat on the ground and their knees and spines should be at a 90° angle too. Use chairs with adjustable heights, tilts and lower-back support (or insert a cushion to provide extra support). With mobile devices like tablets and smartphones, encourage children to lie on their stomachs as this keeps their necks in a neutral position (and as an added bonus, they'll naturally reposition themselves as their elbows will tire). Another alternative with touchscreen devices is to use tear-shaped bean bags, as this allows them to bring devices to their eye level while maintaining their posture (just remember to switch the device to airplane mode first before popping it in their lap to reduce any possible risks associated with electromagnetic radiation).

// **Limit the weight of schoolbags carrying digital devices**– many adolescents are now carrying tablets and/or laptops in schools bags as part of Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) initiatives. Children shouldn't carry bags that are more than 10% of their body weight. So it's important that parents monitor the weight of kids' school bags and make adjustments where necessary.



## FINAL TIPS

*Balance teens' screen-time and green-time.*



Technology is here to stay so we need to teach our teens how to harness its potential and also how to mitigate any potential risks. This means our teens must learn healthy and helpful ways to use screens and why we must avoid 'digital amputation'. This is why parents have to be in the pilot seat helping them to navigate the digital terrain.



[CLICK HERE](#)

[CLICK HERE](#)

Kristy also delivers Lunch and Learn seminars in the workplace on *Raising Digital Kids* and *Digital Health and Wellness* (for executives and employees).

If you're interested in Kristy speaking at your workplace or school please contact her team via [info@drkristygoodwin.com](mailto:info@drkristygoodwin.com)



# About Dr Kristy

Kristy's on a mission to solve parents' and professionals' digital dilemmas by arming them with facts (not fears) about the impact of technology on kids, teens and adults. She helps parents ditch the techno-guilt and raise happy, healthy kids who thrive online and offline. Kristy takes the guesswork and guilt out of raising kids in the digital age by translating the latest research, from a range of disciplines into practical and digestible information, tips, and tricks for parents and educators so that they can feel confident and assured that they're raising healthy, happy and balanced kids in the digital age.

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