



1st Edition

# The Healthy Tech Toolkit for Parents

A Practical Guide for Building  
a Tech-Healthy Family

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# Why Healthy Technology Use Matters

Did you know that 90 percent of the time we spend with our kids in our lifetime occurs by the time they turn 18? Did you also know that the average adult spends about 70 days a year just looking at their smartphone (to say nothing of computers, tablets, and TV)? That's 1,260 days — or about three and a half years — of those 18 years that we're glued to that little computer in our pocket.

What might seem like a harmless 20-minute email purge or half-hour Facebook scroll quickly adds up over the course of a week, month, or year. That's real time — time we can't ever get back — that we could be spending with the most important people in our life. And that's why this issue matters.

Every day, we're fighting a battle that we probably don't even realize we're fighting. Multi-billion dollar companies with endless resources are doing everything they can to take from us the two

most precious resources we have: our time and attention. And the tragedy is that most of us don't even realize it.

*Keep an eye out throughout this toolkit for ideas for screen-free activities you can do as a family.*



## SCREEN-FREE ALTERNATIVE

**Try a new hobby or craft.** Scrapbooking, gardening, baking, pottery, and woodworking are some great options.

Those same devices and apps that are marketed and sold under the guise of convenience, productivity, and connection often have the exact opposite effect. They've become digital pacifiers and an ever-present source of cheap dopamine hits that take us away from the things we should

be focused on: reading; learning; sleep; exercise; prayer; and spending quality, distraction-free time with loved ones.

The insidiousness of this 21st century addiction is that it doesn't present itself the way other addictions do. The consequences of a severe alcohol or heroin addiction are obvious and impossible to ignore. The consequences of technology addiction? Less so. But make no mistake: They're every bit as serious and, in some ways, even more so.

We're also not naive. We know we can't fully protect our children from technology — nor should we want to — but teaching them to adopt healthy attitudes and habits around it is one of the most essential roles of a parent today. From pretty much the time they can walk, our kids are surrounded by digital media. It influences how they feel, learn, think, and behave. It has become so integrated into the way they grow up and go through the world, that helping them understand the effect it has on their physical, mental, and emotional well-being and setting up proper boundaries is a reality of raising this new generation of digital natives.

It's important that everyone understands both the risks and benefits of digital media use.

And when we talk openly and honestly about challenging topics, we raise young people who question, stay curious, practice self-care, and develop their own voice.

While there's no perfect answer to the question of "How much is too much?," we hope this toolkit provides you with some practical advice and guidelines you can follow to take steps in the right direction.

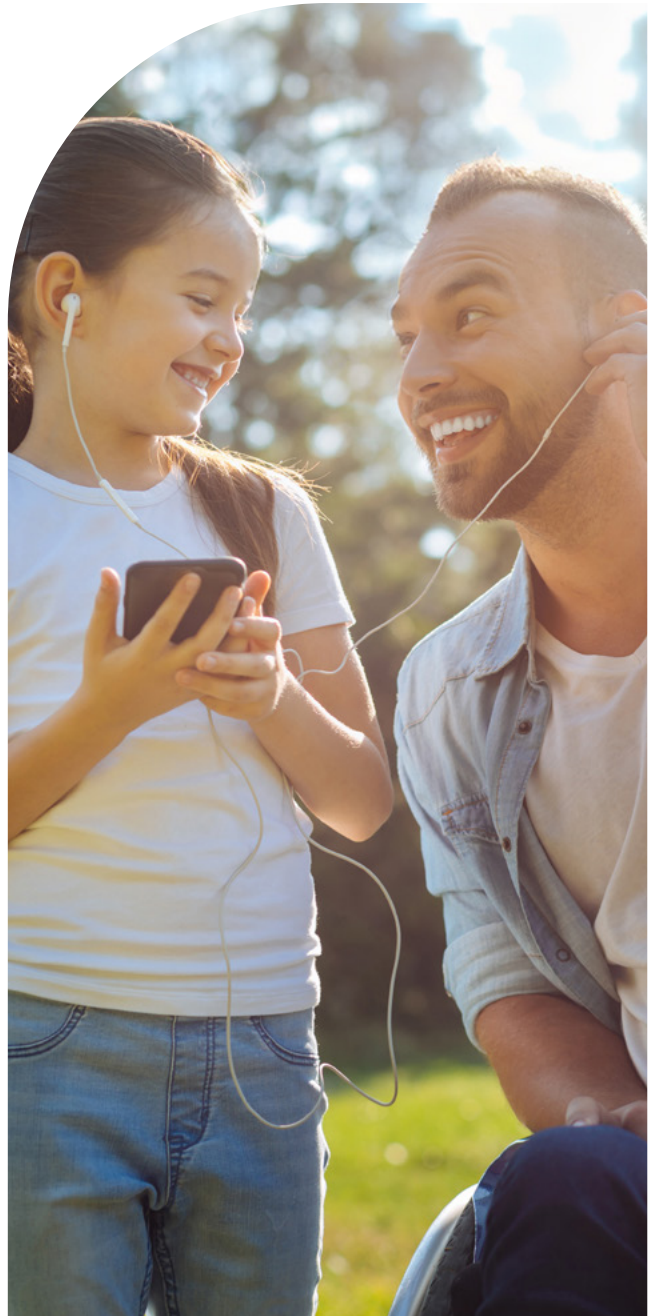
In this toolkit, you'll find 17 best practices and tips for establishing a culture of healthy technology use within your own home, along with numerous resources, ideas for screen-free activities, and a template for creating a family technology plan.

As you move through this toolkit, we'd encourage you to keep one question in particular top of mind: What's really important to me and to my family?



## DID YOU KNOW?

*Despite founding companies that hook kids with screens and apps from an early age, Silicon Valley Tech elites such as Bill Gates, Evan Spiegel, and Mark Zuckerberg severely limit their own children's technology exposure and usage. Steve Jobs famously didn't even let his own kids use iPads.*



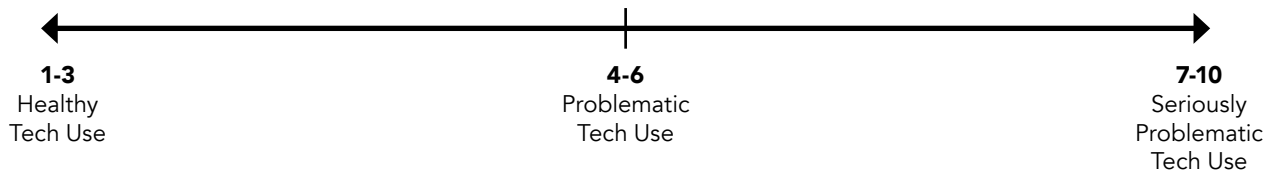


# Technology Use Self-Assessment

**Instructions:** Before you dive into the toolkit, we'd encourage both you and your kids to take this short self-assessment to get an idea of where your current technology habits fall on the spectrum from "healthy" to "seriously problematic." This isn't a shaming exercise but rather an opportunity to do some honest reflection about your relationship with screens.

- ☐ Do you use your digital devices (smartphones, iPads, computers, etc.):
  - ☐ At inappropriate times such as during conversations or in class or meetings?
  - ☐ While dining with others?
  - ☐ To escape from more important matters?
  - ☐ While driving?
  - ☐ To stave off boredom?
  - ☐ In the bedroom when you should be sleeping?
  - ☐ More than two hours per day?
- ☐ Have you ever attempted to hide your digital use while at school or work?
- ☐ Would you rather spend time online than going out with others?
- ☐ Do you keep your cell phone near you at almost all times?

Based on how many boxes you checked, where do you fall on the scale below?



# 17 Healthy Technology Use Tips

## 1. TEACH KIDS ABOUT TECHNOLOGY FROM A YOUNG AGE.

From the time they're little, remind your kids that tablets, computers, and other media devices are not toys and should be handled with care. Discuss with them the many benefits of technology, as well as the risks. Don't frighten them, but discuss the importance of respecting privacy and protecting personal information in age-appropriate ways. These conversations should be ongoing and should become more detailed as your children get older.



### SCREEN-FREE ALTERNATIVE

**Read a hard-print copy of a book.**  
*Turn the pages, look up unknown words, and highlight meaningful passages to be saved for later.*

## 2. BEHAVE THE SAME WAY ONLINE AS YOU WOULD IN PERSON.

People often say things online that they'd never say to someone's face. Talk to your children about the importance of being as respectful in their online interactions as they would be in person. Encourage them to come to you if they witness cyberbullying or other troubling information online.

As technology becomes more and more an integral part of our lives, it can often be difficult to separate our online experiences from the rest of our lives. This adds another layer of complexity to our interpersonal relationships and allows us to relate to others in new ways.

In the online world, each person has the potential to have a much broader reach than most in-person interactions allow — a power that can have both positive and negative consequences. That's precisely why it's so important to take an extra moment to make sure we truly mean the things we say and do online. Think before you type.

## 3. AVOID DEMONIZING ALL TECHNOLOGY USE.

While screen-time limits are often a good idea, experts caution that parents shouldn't assume technology use is inherently harmful. Consider the context when establishing your family's rules for technology use, and use your best judgment. For example, FaceTime-ing with grandparents is different from playing video games. If you're entertaining your preschooler on a plane, the world won't end if they have a little extra screen time that day. If your teen is doing research for a school paper, that computer time shouldn't necessarily count as their only screen time for the day.

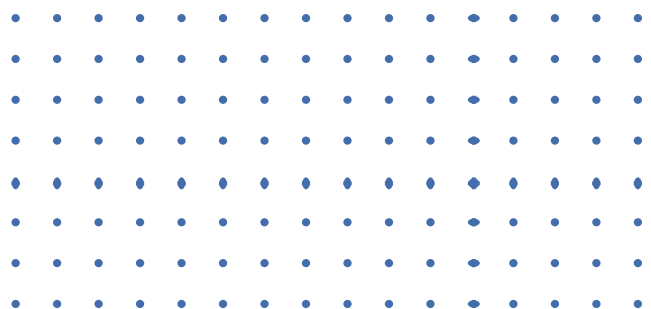
### Four Technology Recommendations

Jonathan Haidt, a renowned social psychologist and bestselling author of "The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing An Epidemic of Mental Illness," has four simple guidelines for phone and social media use:

1. No smartphones before high school
2. No social media before age 16
3. No phones at school
4. More free play and less screen play



*20 years ago, one-third of Americans reported having 10 or more close friends. In 2021 — despite being more connected than ever — that number dropped to just 13 percent.*



## Six Conversation Starters

1

*Think about a time when you may have seen a positive video or read a positive post. What kind of impact did that make on you? How can you do the same for others?*

2

*What are five ways you like to have fun without your phone?*

3

*What would you do if you posted something online that you didn't mean?*

4

*How can you be the change you want to see online?*

5

*When was the last time someone sent you something online or in a text message that had a positive impact on your day?*

6

*What is your current relationship with your phone/devices? Do you prioritize it over real-life relationships?*

## 4. KEEP AN EYE ON YOUR KIDS' ONLINE HABITS WITHOUT BEING OVERBEARING.

Pay attention. With younger kids, it's easy to see what they're doing online. As they get older, it's not so easy to look over their shoulder. Have open, honest discussions about which sites and types of content are off-limits. Do your research to understand the media your child is using, and check out your child's browser history to see what sites they visit. Explore software that filters or restricts access to content that's off-limits.



*On average, people check their phones 144 times a day. This translates into tapping, swiping, and clicking a whopping 2,617 times daily. For the heaviest users, that number is closer to 5,427 touches a day.*

## 5. HELP CHILDREN VIEW THE INTERNET AS A RESOURCE, NOT A VICE.

It's okay for your teen to be online. Online relationships are now a typical part of adolescent development. Social media can support teens as they explore and discover more about themselves and their place in a grown-up world. Just be



### SCREEN-FREE ALTERNATIVE

***Schedule a regular family game or puzzle night.*** Try a new board game, play cards, or get outside for a yard game.





sure your teen is behaving appropriately in both the real and online worlds. Many teens need to be reminded that a platform's privacy settings do not make things actually "private" and that images, thoughts, and behaviors teens share online will instantly (and permanently) become a part of their digital footprint. Keep lines of communication open, and let them know you're there if they have questions or concerns.

Also, make sure they understand that many of the sites they're visiting, apps they're using, and devices they interact with are designed to capture and hold their attention. If they're not intentional about the way they use them, healthy use can quickly become problematic.

## 6. WARN CHILDREN ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF PRIVACY AND THE DANGERS OF PREDATORS AND SEXTING.

Teens need to know that once content is shared with others, they will not be able to delete or remove it completely (this includes texting of inappropriate pictures). They may also not know about or choose not to use privacy settings, and they need to be warned that sex offenders often use social networking, chat rooms, email, and online gaming to contact and exploit children.

Questioning, probing, and curiosity are cornerstones of media health and family modeling. Showing our kids that we're open to new thinking and ideas — while also staying true to our values and belief systems — can develop a strong sense of self on and away from screens.



### SCREEN-FREE ALTERNATIVE

***Do some housekeeping you've been putting off.*** Clean out your closet, tidy up a room, or stock your pantry with any needed essentials.

### Some Additional Tips

- **Treat media as you would any other environment in your child's life.** The same parenting guidelines apply in both real and virtual environments.
- **Set limits.** Kids need and expect them.
- **Know your children's friends.** This applies both online and offline.
- **Know which platforms, software, and apps your kids are using.** Be aware of the sites they're visiting and what they're doing online.
- **Do your homework on apps made for kids.** Many apps are labeled as educational, but little research has demonstrated their actual quality. Products pitched as interactive should require more than pushing and swiping. Look to organizations like Common Sense Media for reviews about age-appropriate apps, games, and programs to guide you in making the best choices for your children.



*70% of adults now say they get insufficient sleep at least one night a month, and about 1 in 10 don't get enough daily.*



## 7. REGULARLY DISCUSS DIGITAL DECISION-MAKING.

It can be hard to discern whether or not some websites are reliable sources of information. Have conversations with your child about how to evaluate authenticity and accuracy online. Explain why they shouldn't download unfamiliar programs, click on suspicious links, or share personal information on unknown apps or websites. Also teach your kids not to respond to unsolicited messages from strangers and to tell you if they ever do receive them.

## 8. REMIND AND MODEL FOR KIDS THAT SCREEN TIME SHOULDN'T ALWAYS BE ALONE TIME.

Engage with your children when they are using screens. This encourages social interactions, bonding, and learning. Play a video game with your kids. It's a good way to demonstrate good sportsmanship and gaming etiquette. Watch a show with them. You will have the opportunity to

introduce and share your own life experiences, perspectives, and guidance. Don't just monitor them online; interact with them so that you can understand what they're doing and be a part of it.



### SCREEN-FREE ALTERNATIVE

**Spend some time writing gratitude notes.** Make someone's day by letting them know how thankful you are that they're in your life.

## 9. CREATE TECH-FREE ZONES AT HOME.

Keep family mealtimes, other family and social gatherings, and children's bedrooms screen-free. Turn off TVs that you aren't watching because background noise can get in the way of face-to-face time with kids. Charge devices overnight and outside of bedrooms to help avoid the temptation to use them when they should be sleeping. These changes encourage more family time, healthier eating habits, and better sleep.



### Why Limit Media Use?

Overuse of digital media may put your children at risk of:

- **Not enough sleep.** Screen use interferes with sleep. Children and teens who have too much screen exposure or who have a TV, computer, or mobile device in their bedroom fall asleep later at night and sleep less. Even babies can be overstimulated by screens and miss the sleep they need to grow. Exposure to light (particularly blue light) and stimulating content from screens delays and disrupts sleep and has a negative effect on school performance.
- **Obesity.** Excessive screen use and having a TV in the bedroom can increase the risk of obesity. Watching TV for more than 1.5 hours daily is a risk factor for obesity for children ages 4-9. Teens who watch more than five hours of TV per day are five times more likely to be overweight than teens who watch 0-2 hours. Food advertising and snacking while watching TV can promote obesity. Also, children who overuse screens are less apt to be active with healthy, physical play.
- **Delays in learning and social skills.** When infants or preschoolers watch too much TV, they often show delays in attention, thinking, language, and social skills. One reason for this could be that they don't interact as much with their parents and family members. Parents who keep the TV on or spend excessive time on their own digital media miss precious opportunities to interact with their children and help them learn.
- **Negative effect on school performance.** Children and teens often use entertainment media at the same time that they're doing other things such as homework. Such multitasking has a negative effect on school performance.
- **Behavior problems.** Violent content on TV and screens can contribute to behavior problems in children — either because they are scared and confused by what they see or they try to mimic on-screen characters.



## 10. CREATE A POLICY OF TURNING OFF ALL SCREENS AT LEAST ONE HOUR BEFORE BEDTIME.

This will improve sleep quality and help them avoid blue light, which is associated with disrupted sleep patterns. Even better, fill that hour with some quality time reading, listening to music, or taking a bath. This is just as important for adults as it is for children. News and social media can make us anxious, and what we need is proper rest to cope with daily life. So take a break from scrolling, and switch off before you head to bed.



### SCREEN-FREE ALTERNATIVE

**Get out in nature.** Take your family for a hike, go fishing, or have a picnic by the lake. Fresh air and quiet does wonders and helps us reset.

## 11. LET YOUR KIDS BE DISRUPTIVE SOMETIMES.

Keep mobile phones off the dinner table. Resist the temptation of the “digital pacifier,” and accept that sometimes your children will be disruptive. And that’s okay. They are kids, and it’s an important part of growing up.

## 12. SET LIMITS AND ENCOURAGE PLAY TIME.

Media use, like all other activities, should have reasonable limits. Unstructured and offline play stimulate creativity. Make unplugged playtime a daily priority, especially for very young children. Set consistent screen-time limits based on your child’s age, mental maturity, and “digital resilience,” or their understanding of the dangers on the internet and their ability to deal with them by not falling into traps.

Consistency is key, not just for your child’s sense of stability but also for your own sanity. Of course, in special circumstances, you might have to extend your screen-time limits to allow for online education or just to give yourself a 15-minute break. And that’s okay. Just try to be consistent about those extensions, explaining to children why they’re happening.



*The average American adult gets only about 15 minutes a day of physical activity — this is half as much as is needed. Kids need about two hours of physical activity each day.*



### 13. DON'T USE TECHNOLOGY AS A DISTRACTION FROM EMOTIONS.

Media can be very effective in keeping kids calm and quiet, but it should not be the only way they learn to calm down. Children need to be taught how to identify and handle strong emotions, come up with activities to manage boredom, and learn to calm down through breathing, talking about ways to solve a problem, and finding other strategies for channeling emotions.

When adults have the knowledge and awareness and the space has been set, regular debriefings become a natural part of the scaffolding toward digital health and well-being. We can intentionally discuss stories, answer questions, share our points of view, and talk about the tough stuff that comes across our screens.

#### Some of the Benefits of Digital Media Use

- Exposes users to new ideas and information
- Raises awareness of current events and issues
- Promotes community participation
- Helps students work with others on assignments and projects
- Allows families and friends to stay in touch no matter where they live
- Enhances access to valuable support networks, especially for people with illnesses or disabilities
- Helps promote wellness and healthy behaviors such as how to quit smoking or how to eat healthy

### 14. ENCOURAGE KIDS TO FOSTER REAL-LIFE RELATIONSHIPS.

Kids who find it difficult to connect with peers often spend more time online than playing with friends in real life. But digital friendships aren't a replacement for the real thing.

Help your child develop social skills and nurture their real-life relationships. Know the value of face-to-face communication. Very young children learn best through two-way communication. Engaging in back-and-forth "talk time" is critical for language development. Conversations can be face-to-face or, if necessary, by video chat with a traveling parent or far-away grandparent.

Research has shown that it's that back-and-forth conversation that improves language skills — much more so than "passive" listening or one-way interactions with a screen.

#### SCREEN-FREE ALTERNATIVE



**Learn a new instrument.** This can help with improving brain function and connectivity, increasing memory function, improving concentration, and better developing coordination and fine-motor skills.

### 15. ESTABLISH FAMILY VALUES THAT GUIDE YOUR TECH USE.

Think about the values that you want to live as a family. What is important to you? Use these values to think about how to focus your time and energy as a family and set a routine for the week. We become our habits, after all. You could use a family contract to agree on screen time limits and sign it together. Being open about the controls you put in place and the reasons why, increases buy-in.



*American adults now spend about seven hours on digital devices and screens per day. Teens use an average of nine hours per day of entertainment media, and nearly half say they're online on a near-constant basis. About 95 percent of teens say they have access to a smartphone.*



*About half of teens and one-quarter of parents say they're addicted to their digital devices.*

## Red Flags

- **Problematic internet use:** Children who spend too much time using online media can be at risk for a type of addictive behavior called problematic internet use. Heavy video gamers are at risk for internet gaming disorder. They spend most of their free time online and show less interest in offline or real-life relationships. There may be increased risks for depression at both the high and low ends of internet use.
- **Risky behaviors:** Teens' displays on social media often show risky behaviors such as substance use, sexual behaviors, self-injury, or eating disorders. Exposure of teens through media to alcohol, tobacco use, or sexual behaviors is linked to engaging in these behaviors earlier.
- **Sexting:** Sexting is the sending or receiving of sexually explicit images, videos, or text messages using a smartphone, computer, tablet, video game, or digital camera. About one in five youth have sent a sexual photo to someone else. Teens need to know that once content is shared with others, they may not be able to delete it completely. Kids may also not use privacy settings. Sex offenders may use social networking, chat rooms, email, and online games to contact and exploit children.
- **Cyberbullying:** Children and teens online can be victims — or even perpetrators — of cyberbullying. Cyberbullying can lead to short- and long-term negative social, academic, and health issues for both the bully and target.

Build the muscle of opening doors on tough topics. Our reactions and responses to issues send a strong message to our teens about what is and isn't okay to talk about. Reflect on the rise of your own emotions so that, if an issue begins to shut you down, you can work to stay open — in mind and heart — during hard conversations.

## 16. REMEMBER TO ALWAYS MODEL APPROPRIATE TECH-HEALTHY BEHAVIOR.

Always remember that you're a role model. Put down your phone, and make eye contact with your child. Face-to-face interactions are critical for children learning to socialize and provide important emotional connection to support our children through uncertain times.

We have the opportunity to embrace those countless one-minute conversations, which can be so formative. Be a good role model. Teach and model kindness and good manners online. Because children are great mimics, limit your own media use. In fact, you'll be more available for and connected with your children if you're interacting, hugging, and playing with them rather than simply staring at a screen.

It's up to adults to address, educate, and process our own feelings, experiences, and beliefs so that we can bring fully formed, dynamic self-knowledge, self-development, and self-understanding to our family system. The more we know about ourselves and our own challenges, the better we can prepare and support our children.




## 17. TEACH KIDS TO TAKE REGULAR BREAKS.

When using screens, every 45 minutes, kids should take a break and move their body for at least 20 minutes. This is important for eye health, physical health, and also for learning. If it's not convenient to go outside, then do a quick stretch and look out the window to allow your eyes and body to use different muscles.

Engaged families know that deliberate time and space away from screens is part of being a tech-healthy family. Being physically and emotionally present for friends and family — with our full attention — working on projects, hobbies and activities that matter to us, moving our bodies or getting fresh air, and having good sleep and eating habits all support our personal regulation and well-being.



# How You Can Take Action

- Share this toolkit with other parents.
- Reach out to us at [Info@DakMed.org](mailto:Info@DakMed.org) to order physical copies of this toolkit or to schedule a Healthy Technology Use presentation at your workplace, service club, or place of worship.
- Follow us on social media (see below) for regular healthy technology tips, resources, and screen-free activity ideas.
- Create a family technology plan (pg. 13), and make a habit of regularly reviewing it.
- Visit [DakMed.org/Health-And-Wellbeing](https://DakMed.org/Health-And-Wellbeing) for more healthy technology resources and to take the Phones Down, Heads Up Challenge.
- Visit us on social:   







# Create Your Family Technology Plan

Make your own family technology plan. Technology should work for you and within your family values and parenting style. When used thoughtfully and appropriately, technology can enhance daily life. But when used inappropriately or without thought, it can displace many important activities such as face-to-face interaction, family time, outdoor play, exercise, unplugged downtime, and sleep.

From TV to smartphones to social media, our lives are dominated by 24/7 screen exposure. Despite this, many children and teens have few rules around their technology use. Parents, help your children balance their online and off-line lives.

Scan the QR code below, or [click here](#) to create your family technology plan today:



# Additional Resources

## APPS

1. [Qustodio](#) – best for geofencing
2. [Bark](#) – best for social media
3. [Net Nanny](#) – best for location tracking
4. [mSpy](#) – best for mobile phones
5. [Kaspersky Safe Kids](#) – best for PC
6. [Norton Family](#) – best for Mac/iOS
7. [Mobicip](#) – best for Chromebook
8. [McAfee Safe Family](#) – best for Windows
9. [OpenDNS Family Shield](#) – best for blocking adult content
10. [Kidlogger](#) – best for Android

## BOOKS

- [“Dopamine Nation: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence”](#) (Dr. Anna Lembke)
- [“The Coddling of the American Mind”](#) (Jonathan Haidt & Greg Lukianoff)
- [“Real Fear, Real Hope: Social Media, Mental Health, and Our Children”](#) (Sam Shapiro)
- [“Technology Addiction: Concern, Controversy, and Finding Balance”](#) (Common Sense Media)
- [“The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness”](#) (Jonathan Haidt)

## ARTICLES

- [“Control Your Tech Use”](#) (Center for Humane Technology)
- [“5 Simple Steps to a Healthy Family Media Diet”](#) (Common Sense Media)
- [“Be a Role Model: 4 Ways to Balance Screen Time Around Children”](#) (Common Sense Media)
- [“Making Digital Well-Being a Habit”](#) (Common Sense Media)
- [“What Parents Need to Know About Technology Addiction”](#) (Common Sense Media)
- [“Dealing with Devices: The Parent-Teen Dynamic”](#) (Common Sense Media)
- [“Boost Your Brain with Boredom”](#) (Mayo Clinic)

# About Us

## Dakota Medical Foundation

Dakota Medical Foundation (DMF) leads community-centered initiatives and programs, builds the fundraising and boards success of charities, and invests in new ideas that create widespread health improvement. Since 1996, DMF has invested more than \$130 million to operate initiatives and expand the impact of more than 600 charitable organizations in North Dakota and northwest Minnesota.

Originally a hospital, DMF has a specific interest in identifying and working to find solutions to emerging health issues of all kinds. As physical, mental, and emotional health indicators have continued to plummet for the past few decades, in 2022, DMF and its partners began to look at potential causes. While the answer is no doubt complicated and multicausal, a workgroup identified smartphones and screen overuse as playing a significant role.

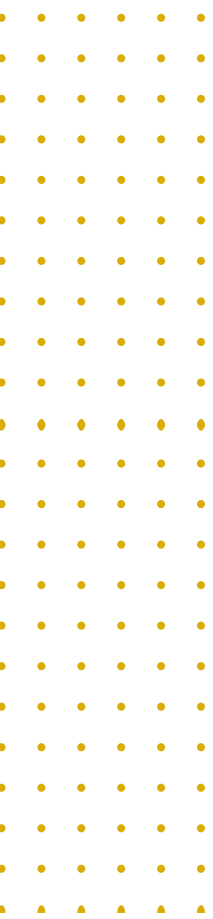
In 2023, DMF and Matto Foundation hosted a summit featuring keynote speaker Dr. Anna Lembke, a Stanford University psychiatrist and author of the bestselling “Dopamine Nation.” Dr. Lembke spoke about digital addiction and how the devices we use on a daily basis have hijacked the pleasure centers of our brains. The interest in and response to the event was overwhelming, and we developed this toolkit as a way to not only keep the dangers of digital addiction top of mind but also to provide practical solutions for parents and families dealing with the challenge on a daily basis. We plan to release a similar toolkit for creating best practices in the workplace in the near future.



## Matto Foundation

Part of the DMF family of programs and initiatives, Matto Foundation works to end addiction of all kinds, from substances such as alcohol and drugs to behaviors such as smartphone addiction. Its “delay, decrease, defeat” approach helps parents identify problems and intervene early to save the adolescent brain from long-term consequences.

The Foundation is named for Matthew Traynor, who lost his battle with addiction on June 4, 2016, at the age of 25. Following the overwhelming show of community support following Matthew’s passing, his family felt compelled to take action and prevent addiction from taking other lives. The family worked closely with Dakota Medical Foundation to establish a charitable fund in memory of Matthew.



[DakMed.org](https://DakMed.org)