How to Raise an Indistractable Kid

By Nir Eyal, NirAndFar.com
Excerpt from the forthcoming book *Indistractable*

As we've learned throughout this book, simple answers to complex questions are frequently wrong. There is often a deeper root cause lying just below the surface, if we dare to look. Perhaps no debate encapsulates the tendency to draw shallow conclusions like the one raging about kids and tech distraction.

Though parents and guardians have bemoaned kids' dependency on one distraction or another for generations, the fear of new technologies like social media and video games has reached a fever pitch. Articles with headlines like "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?"[1] in *The Atlantic* and "The Risk Of Teen Depression And Suicide Is Linked To Smartphone Use, Study Says" from *NPR* have gone viral. As a parent of a preteen, I'm well aware of the anxieties of raising a child in the digital age. These articles surface big, scary questions. Is tech bad for our kids? If so, how do we deal with it? How do we help our kids manage digital distractions and teach them how to become indistractable?

In this chapter, we'll go beyond the headlines to understand what's really happening. First, we'll unpack the simplistic conclusions surrounding the supposed harm of teen tech use. Next, we'll get to the bottom of what's really driving some kids to distraction. And finally, we'll find solutions using the four-part indistractable model.

[1] Jean M. Twenge, "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?" *The Atlantic,* (September 2017), https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/.

But first, we need be willing to face facts with an open mind and accept that much of what we think we know about "kids these days" is wrong. As George Bernard Shaw writes, "those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything."[2]

The Answer We Don't Like to Hear

Every parent knows children become hyperactive when they eat sugar, right? What else could explain their crazy behavior at birthday parties? Well, don't blame the ice cream and cake just yet. An exhaustive meta-analysis of sixteen studies "found that sugar does not affect the behavior or cognitive performance of children."[3] Interestingly, though the so-called "sugar high" is a myth for kids, it does have a real effect on parents. A study found that mothers who were told their sons had been given sugar rated their behavior as more hyperactive despite the fact their children had been given a placebo.[4] Videotapes of the mothers' interactions with their sons also revealed that they were more likely to trail their children and criticize them when they believed they were "high" on sugar despite the fact that their sons hadn't ingested any.

How about the common knowledge that teens act irrationally because of their underdeveloped brains? Everyone knows teenage moodiness is caused by "raging hormones." Not so fast. That's not true either. Robert Epstein, a senior research psychologist at the American Institute for Behavioral Research and Technology, writes in *Scientific American*, "A

---

[2] Bernard Shaw, *Everybodys Political Whats What*, (1944), http://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.90110.
[3] Mark L. Wolraich, David B. Wilson, and J. Wade White, "The Effect of Sugar on Behavior or Cognition in Children: A Meta-Analysis," *JAMA* 274, no. 20 (November 22, 1995): 1617–21, https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.1995.03530200053037.
[4] D. W. Hoover and R. Milich, "Effects of Sugar Ingestion Expectancies on Mother-Child Interactions," *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* 22, no. 4 (August 1994): 501–15.

careful look at relevant data shows that the teen brain we read about in the headlines—the immature brain that supposedly causes teen problems—is nothing more than a myth."[5]

At least we can all agree that teenagers are rebellious by nature, right? Surely, teenagers all over the world desire to break away from their parents. Hardly. Studies have found that teenagers in many societies, particularly preindustrialized ones, don't act especially rebelliously and, conversely, spend "almost all their time with adults."[6] In fact, Epstein writes in "The Myth of the Teen Brain" how "many historians note that through most of recorded human history the teen years were a relatively peaceful time of transition to adulthood."

Each one of these pervasive beliefs about our kids is bunk. Yet, they are myths parents perpetuate because they serve a compelling narrative—that kids do things we don't like because of something outside of our control. But the thing outside of our control isn't some widely disproven old yarn; it's an obvious truth staring us right in the face every time we look into a child's eyes. It's the fact that kids are people too. We shouldn't be surprised they'll often make decisions differently than we might for ourselves.

However, coming to grips with knowing we exert less control over our kids as they age is often hard to accept. We'd much rather believe in bogus stories like the sugar high and the teenage hormone myth than accept that our kids do indeed make their own decisions, whether we like those choices or not.

The history of ignoring this fact and placing blame elsewhere goes back centuries, as Vaughan Bell writes about for *Slate*, referencing several sources throughout history. According to Bell, Swiss scientist Conrad Gessner worried about handheld information devices causing

---

[5] Robert Epstein, "The Myth of the Teen Brain," *Scientific American,* (June 1, 2007), https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-myth-of-the-teen-brain-2007-06/.

[6] Alice Schlegel, and Herbert Barry III, "Adolescence: An Anthropological Inquiry," *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 180 (May 1, 1992), https://doi.org/10.2307/2076290.

"confusing and harmful" consequences. That was 1565. He was talking about books. Bell goes on to reference an 1883 New York medical journal that predicted a new norm would "exhaust the children's brains and nervous systems with complex and multiple studies, and ruin their bodies by protracted imprisonment." The article was referring to public education. Then, Bell moves to 1936, when kids were said to "have developed the habit of dividing attention between the humdrum preparation of their school assignments and the compelling excitement of the loudspeaker," from the radio, according to the music magazine *Gramophone*. "At night the children often lie awake in bed restless and fearful, or wake up screaming as a result of nightmares brought on by mystery stories."[7]

It seems hard to believe these benign things scared anyone, but leaps in technological innovation are often followed by moral panics. "Each successive historical age has ardently believed that an unprecedented 'crisis' in youth behavior is taking place," says Dr. Abigail Wills, an Oxford historian writing about youth culture for the BBC.[8] "We are not unique; our fears do not differ significantly from those of our predecessors."

While our parental fears may be the same as our ancestors, this latest wave of technological innovation certainly feels different. Dr. Jean Twenge, a professor of Psychology at San Diego State University and author of the *Atlantic* article "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?" writes in the article, "It's not an exaggeration to describe iGen as being on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades. Much of this deterioration can be traced to their phones." According to Twenge, this generation can't look each other in the eye, isn't

---

[7] Vaughan Bell, "Don't Touch That Dial!" *Slate,* (February 15, 2010), http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2010/02/dont_touch_that_dial.html.
[8] Abigail Wills, "Youth Culture and Crime: What Can We Learn from History?" *History Extra,* (August 12, 2009), https://www.historyextra.com/period/20th-century/youth-culture-and-crime-what-can-we-learn-from-history/.

comfortable in conversation, and therefore can't form deep relationships. They're cyberbullied, like-obsessed, and more prone to killing themselves, she says.

Are today's technologies really destroying our kids? Is this time really different? Are our kids, and perhaps the future of humanity, screwed?

Maybe. But probably not. Twenge's findings can't be ignored, but a deeper look reveals much more nuance in the numbers. And thankfully, that nuance suggests that while distractions pose challenges, they aren't the grim reaper that some make them out to be.

Mind you, when trying to answer a question like, "Is tech bad for our kids?" "It depends" is not a very satisfying answer. The mind reflexively rejects answers like "It depends." We hunger for certainty, for talking points, and often grasp for the most obvious solution, particularly when the culprit involves a new technology we don't fully understand. When at our wit's end wondering, "Why does my kid act this way?" it's understandable that caregivers look for something to blame. But in reality, "It depends" is the answer to many of life's most vexing questions.

Ultimately, the answer to the question, "Is tech bad for our kids?" depends upon the answer to four critical questions: What is technology displacing? What are our kids doing with it? How much are they using it? And who is using it? Let's start with some little-known facts about what kids are *not* doing with the time they spend online.

What Is Technology Displacing?

If we're going to draw correlations between tech use and depressive symptoms and suicide rates, as Twenge does, shouldn't we also consider potential positive correlations as well?

In the same period of time that personal tech use has increased, many of the hallmarks of self-destructive adolescence have decreased precipitously. Nationwide, the juvenile arrest rate

for vandalism fell 75 percent between 1994 and 2015.[9] The past-year use of illicit drugs other than cannabis for eighth, tenth, and twelfth graders came in at the lowest level in the forty years of the survey.[10] And teen pregnancy rates in the United States have reached historic lows.[11]

In California, for example, "Social trends among California youth have been spectacular," gushes the *The Sacramento Bee*.[12] "Over the last generation, rates of arrests of Californians under age twenty have fallen by 80 percent, murder arrest by 85 percent, gun killings by 75 percent, imprisonments by 88 percent. . . . Back in 1980, teenagers comprised 27 percent of California's criminal arrests. Today, 9 percent. Anecdotes of kids gone wrong remain, but they're rarer than ever."

The fact is, despite the recent rise in teen suicide rates, the overall rate of kids dying is decreasing year over year. If anything, the trend line of child deaths slopes downward at an increasingly steeper pitch since the release of the smartphone.[13] How can this trend be explained? A reasonable question to ask may be whether tech use is providing kids with a safer way to spend time than past generations did.

If you wanted to design a device to keep kids off the streets, off the road, and out of trouble, you couldn't do much better than many of the devices and apps kids use today. Along with

---

[9] "Juvenile Arrest Rate Trends," (Accessed July 20, 2018), https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatBB/crime/JAR_Display.asp?ID=qa05212.

[10] Matt Richtel, "Are Teenagers Replacing Drugs With Smartphones?" *The New York Times*, (December 22, 2017), sec. Health, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/13/health/teenagers-drugs-smartphones.html.

[11] "U.S. Teen Pregnancy, Birth and Abortion Rates Reach the Lowest Levels in Almost Four Decades," Guttmacher Institute, (April 4, 2016), https://www.guttmacher.org/news-release/2016/us-teen-pregnancy-birth-and-abortion-rates-reach-lowest-levels-almost-four-decades.

[12] Mike Males, "It's Not Just Parkland. Teenagers Are Better than You in California, Too," *The Sacramento Bee,* (April 26, 2018), https://www.sacbee.com/opinion/california-forum/article209791339.html.

[13] "QuickStats: Death Rates for Teens Aged 15–19 Years, by Sex—National Vital Statistics System, United States, 1999–2013," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, (October 9, 2015), https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6439a11.htm.

being a safer pastime, tech use may also come with some built-in benefits for keeping kids from engaging in the sorts of dangerous activities teens did in previous generations. For instance, knowing friends have cameras in their pockets could discourage kids from doing things that may haunt them later in life. Cases of police using social media posts as evidence or job applicants being passed over because of something their potential employer found online may have a chilling effect on bad behavior.

Of course, like suicide statistics, the dramatic drops in teen drug use, incarceration, pregnancy, and death are correlated factors, but it's difficult to draw conclusions about causation. There are certainly other factors at play. However, it's worth considering whether tech use is displacing more dangerous alternatives that lead to more kids staying out of trouble, and staying alive, during their teenage years.

What Are Our Kids Doing with It?

Along with what kids are *not* doing offline, it's also important to understand what they *are* doing online. Dr. Robert Kraut of Carnegie Mellon University has studied the effect the web has on our relationships and well-being since the days it was called the "information superhighway."

In an early study of "human-computer interaction," Kraut found that households with dial-up internet reported "declines in participants' communication with family members in the household, declines in the size of their social circle, and increases in their depression and loneliness."[14]

---

[14] R. Kraut, et al., "Internet Paradox. A Social Technology That Reduces Social Involvement and Psychological Well-Being?" *The American Psychologist* 53, no. 9 (September 1998): 1017–31.

Kraut's work seems to echo Twenge's findings. However, the more years Kraut spent studying how people interact with technology and each other, the more he came to realize that time spent online was a perfunctory metric. Kraut's more recent studies find certain online activities improve quality of life, not degrade it. It's all in how we use it.

For instance, while passively consuming content online, such as mindlessly watching YouTube videos, is correlated with less life satisfaction, creating things or connecting intimately with others is associated with greater well-being.[15] Similar studies cited by Facebook admit spending time on its site can make people feel worse when the service is used passively.[16] Scrolling mindlessly past pictures of friends having fun without you doesn't feel good. However, when users interact with others' posts—commenting, sharing, and liking—studies find an increase in well-being as people feel more connected to those they care about.[17]

In a rebuttal to Twenge's research, Dr. Sarah Rose Cavanagh, a PhD and associate professor at Assumption College in Boston, writes in *Psychology Today* that "the data the author chooses to present are cherry-picked, by which I mean she reviews only those studies that support her idea and ignores studies that suggest that screen use is NOT associated with outcomes like depression and loneliness."[18]

---

[15] Eline Frison and Steven Eggermont, "Toward an Integrated and Differential Approach to the Relationships Between Loneliness, Different Types of Facebook Use, and Adolescents' Depressed Mood," *Communication Research*, (December 3, 2015), https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650215617506.
[16] David Ginsberg and Moira Burke, "Hard Questions: Is Spending Time on Social Media Bad for Us?" *Facebook Newsroom,* (December 15, 2017), https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2017/12/hard-questions-is-spending-time-on-social-media-bad-for-us/.
[17] Moira Burke and Robert E. Kraut, "The Relationship Between Facebook Use and Well-Being Depends on Communication Type and Tie Strength," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 21, no. 4 (July 1, 2016): 265–81, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12162.
[18] Sarah Rose Cavanagh PhD, "No, Smartphones Are Not Destroying a Generation," *Psychology Today,* (August 6, 2017), https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/once-more-feeling/201708/no-smartphones-are-not-destroying-generation.

Although attention-grabbing headlines almost always highlight the negative ways kids use tech, many of the things kids do online are perfectly healthy and should be encouraged. Some write music, create blogs, and use social media to stand up for social causes they believe in. They use tech to learn new skills, feel closer to friends, or stick up for those being bullied. Unfortunately, critics who blame technology for kids' ills gloss over what exactly kids do online. Studies like Twenge's quantify time spent equally, denying the reality that kids can do all sorts of things on the web, some healthy and some unhealthy. Helping kids spend more time creating and connecting and less time passively consuming is a smart way to enjoy the benefits of connectivity while avoiding potential harms.

How Much Are They Using It?

As is the case with any media, kids can get too much of a good thing. The price of time spent online is the lost opportunity of doing other things. Every hour playing a game or staring at a smartphone is time not spent outdoors or making connections with friends IRL—that's "in real life" for those of us who didn't grow up texting. Hence, the answer to the question "Is tech bad for our kids?" clearly depends on how much they use it. While Twenge's studies, as reported in her *Atlantic* article, claim to show tech use is associated with symptoms of depression like self-reported levels of loneliness and suicidal thoughts, digging further into the data reveals a curious shape one wouldn't expect when plotting the correlation between these symptoms and the time spent on screens.

Kids who used tech in moderate amounts in their free time, about an hour or so per day, showed no increase in symptoms. On the high end of the scale, kids who spent over three hours per day online did show some correlation with symptoms. Interestingly, however, at the other end of the spectrum, those who spent very little time online were also at higher risk.

The United Nations Children's Fund conducted a 2017 research overview of hundreds of studies on the matter, concluding, "In terms of impact on children's mental well-being, the most robust studies suggest that the relationship [with technology] is U-shaped."[19] The report explains, "Where no use and excessive use can have a small negative impact on mental well-being, while moderate use can have a small positive impact." When teens use the right tech in the right amounts, they're better off for it.

Some might look at the U-shape and argue that the inordinate amount of time some kids spend with screens is more than correlational and may cause depressive symptoms. However, that's a very hard argument to win. Common sense would have us ask whether excessive amounts of any form of media are a symptom of a larger problem. Is tech really causing their symptoms, or are their symptoms causing them to seek refuge in the analgesic effects of tech?

Dr. Michael Rich, an Associate Professor of Pediatrics at Harvard Medical School and the Founder and Director of the Center on Media and Child Health, treats children who overuse interactive media. According to Rich, "Virtually all of the kids I've seen with problematic interactive media use disorder have an underlying diagnoses."[20] Rich says, "It's Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, anxiety, mood disorders, developmental disorders, or other issues which have either been subclinical or undertreated. Their behaviors are the young person's attempt to self-soothe by distracting themselves from their distress. . . . When their underlying disorder is addressed with medication and/or talk therapy, we are able to modify their behavior so it no longer impairs them."

---

[19] Daniel Kardefelt-Winther, "How Does The Time Children Spend Using Digital Technology Impact Their Mental Well-Being, Social Relationships And Physical Activity?" *Innocenti Discussion Papers*, no. 2017-02 (2017), https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/925-how-does-the-time-children-spend-using-digital-technology-impact-their-mental-well.html.

[20] Email exchange with Michael Rich, October 2018.

Dr. Andrew Przybylski, at the Oxford Internet Institute, evaluated the data in Twenge's study for himself and concludes that whatever caused the depressive symptoms in heavy tech users had little to do with the tech itself. "Even at exceptional [usage] levels," Przybylski tells *BuzzFeed*, "we're talking about a very small impact. It's about a third as bad as [the effect on well-being of] missing breakfast or not getting eight hours' sleep."[21]

Who Is Using It?

The way people differ is perhaps the most important of the four dependencies to ultimately answer the question of "Is tech harmful?" Who is using the tech greatly impacts the effect it has on them. For instance, if tech is really to blame for causing the increase in depressive symptoms and teen suicide, we'd expect to see the same trends across varying populations. If Twenge's theory that tech usage leads to more mental and behavioral troubles is correct, similar patterns should be visible across groups over time. But that's not the case.

For one, it's also important to note that teen suicides started steadily rising well before the introduction of smartphones. The uptick began around 1999.[22] Though the increase is worrisome, it's by no means unprecedented. Teen suicide rates were substantially higher in the 1990s.[23] Why were they higher then than now? That's anyone's guess.

Then there's the gender disparity. The data from Twenge's study shows no correlation with depressive symptoms among boys. Why? Nobody knows.

---

[21] Andrew K. Przybylski and Netta Weinstein, "A Large-Scale Test of the Goldilocks Hypothesis: Quantifying the Relations Between Digital-Screen Use and the Mental Well-Being of Adolescents," *Psychological Science* 28, no. 2 (February 1, 2017): 204–15, https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797616678438.
[22] Sally C. Curtin, Margaret Warner and Holly Hedegaard, "Increase in Suicide in the United States, 1999–2014," Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, no. 241 (April 2016): 3.
[23] "QuickStats: Suicide Rates for Teens Aged 15–19 Years, by Sex—United States, 1975–2015," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, (August 4, 2017), https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6630a6.

Next, let's go abroad to see what tech might be doing to kids overseas. We'd expect to see the same trends in the United States occurring in other countries where kids play the same games, use the same smartphones, and scroll the same social networks. But that's not the case either. Rising teen suicide rates are a uniquely American phenomenon. In fact, teen suicide rates have held steady across nearly every other industrialized nation. Furthermore, several countries that adopted smartphones faster than the United States, including Norway and Finland, have actually experienced declines in teen suicide over the past decade since smartphones came to market.[24]

A deeper look at where kids are killing themselves in the United States reveals an even more startling revelation. The rise in teen suicides isn't happening everywhere in America.[25] Rather, the increase is coming overwhelmingly from rural areas of the country. Despite the fact that a higher proportion of city kids have cell phones than rural kids, the rates of suicide among urban-dwelling teens has stayed relatively flat.[26] There's something causing the spike in teen suicides in the American heartland, and we don't know what it is. Maybe it's time to admit it's not the tech itself that's the problem so we can focus on figuring out the real causes.

By now you're hopefully convinced that the answer to the question, "Is tech bad for our kids?" is a resolute "It depends." It depends on what dangerous behaviors kids are doing less of—like taking drugs or committing crimes. It depends on what kids are doing online—are they passively consuming content or actively creating new works and communicating with friends

[24] "Teenage Suicides (15–19 years old)," OECD Family Database, (Accessed October 30, 2018), https://www.oecd.org/els/family/CO_4_4_Teenage-Suicide.pdf.
[25] Mike Males, "The Truth about Teen Suicide," *Washington Monthly,* (January 30, 2018), https://washingtonmonthly.com/2018/01/30/the-truth-about-teen-suicide/.
[26] Amanda Lenhart, "A Majority of American Teens Report Access to a Computer, Game Console, Smartphone and a Tablet," Pew Research Center, (April 9, 2015), http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/09/a-majority-of-american-teens-report-access-to-a-computer-game-console-smartphone-and-a-tablet/.

whose relationships matter? It depends on how much time they spend in front of their screens—too much and too little aren't healthy. And it also depends on who is using the technology—a troubled kid will find trouble online, while a supported teen will likely be just fine.

Simple solutions to complex problems are nothing new. Our brains crave the certainty of a scapegoat, but that makes our easy answers no more culpable or correct.

Parents and guardians don't need to believe that tech causes clinical depression and suicide to justify our desire to help our kids manage their tech use. Just because tech isn't the root cause of the problems doesn't mean overuse and misuse aren't harmful. To teach our kids better ways to use tech and take greater responsibility for their choices, we must first free our minds of the myth that tech is hijacking our kids' brains. Once this myth is disarmed, we have the perspective and rationality required to arm kids with the tools they need to manage distraction for themselves. But before we can teach them how to become indistractable, we have to understand what's driving our kids' behaviors.

Getting to the Bottom of Their Behavior

How should parents help kids manage distraction? Some parents are so fed up with their kids' tech use, they resort to extreme measures. A search on YouTube reveals thousands of videos of moms and dads storming into their kids' rooms, unplugging the computer or gaming console, and smashing those devices to the ground or pounding them to bits with a baseball bat to teach their kids a lesson.[27] At least, that's their theory.

[27] YouTube search, "dad destroys kids phone," YouTube, (Accessed July 23, 2018), https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=dad+destroys+kids+phone.

Though these parents' tactics are clearly idiotic, I understand their feelings of frustration. Some of my daughter's first words were, "iPad time. iPad time!" If we didn't comply quickly, she'd increase the volume until we did, raising our blood pressure and testing our patience. As the years passed, my daughter's relationship with screen time evolved, and not always in a good way. She was drawn to spending too much time playing frivolous apps and watching videos. My wife and I needed answers for how to help our daughter develop a healthy relationship with tech. We needed to understand our daughter's behavior better, so we decided to call in the experts.

Dr. Richard Ryan, in collaboration with his colleague Dr. Edward Deci, is among the most cited researchers on the drivers of human behavior. Ryan is not only a highly respected authority on human motivation, but he's also the co-author of *Glued to Games: How Video Games Draw Us In and Hold Us Spellbound*.

According to Ryan and Deci's "self-determination theory," all people need three things to flourish: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Like the vitamins and minerals that help kids grow, these three elements of well-being are essential for healthy psychological development. Self-determination theory helps explain why kids sometimes overdo unhealthy behaviors like spending too much time in front of screens. Ryan believes the reason has less to do with what devices do to kids and more to do with the underlying reasons why kids gravitate to distractions in the first place. To understand our kids' behavior, Ryan believes, we need to understand what psychological vitamins they're not getting enough of.

First, we need autonomy—volition and freedom of control over our choices. Second, we look for competence—mastery, progression, achievement and growth. And third, we strive for relatedness—to feel like we matter to others and that others matter to us. When these three

needs are met, people are more motivated, perform better, persist longer, and exhibit greater creativity. To the degree that these psychological needs are unsupported, however, the energy, determination, and joy that drives us begins to disappear.

When considering the state of modern childhood, Ryan believes many kids aren't getting enough of these three essential elements in their offline lives and, consequently, go looking for substitutions online. "We call this the 'need density hypothesis,'" says Ryan.[28] "The more you're not getting needs satisfied in life, reciprocally, the more you're going to get them satisfied in virtual realities."[29] Ryan's research leads him to believe that "[o]veruse [of technology] is a symptom, one indicative of some emptiness in other areas of life, like school and home. One needs to focus not only on the overuse, but also on its causes."

To help our kids, we first must understand the inner workings of these three critical needs.

Autonomy

Drs. Maricela Correa-Chávez and Barbara Rogoff, professors at the University of California Santa Cruz, conducted a study comparing Mayan children aged five to eleven living in Guatemala with their middle-class, white American counterparts. The researchers found that in comparison to American kids, Mayan children had superhuman attention spans.

In their experiment, two children were brought into a room where an adult taught just one of them how to build a toy while the other one waited.[30] The study was designed to observe what the nonactive child, the one not being taught, would do while they waited.

---

[28] Research assistant interview with Richard Ryan, May 2017.
[29] Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, *Self-Determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs in Motivation, Development, and Wellness,* (New York, NY: Guilford Publications, 2017), 524.
[30] Maricela Correa-Chávez and Barbara Rogoff, "Children's Attention to Interactions Directed to Others: Guatemalan Mayan and European American Patterns," *Developmental Psychology* 45, no. 3 (May 2009): 630–41, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0014144.

Most of the American kids did what you'd likely expect: They shuffled in their seats, stared at the floor, and generally showed signs of disinterest. One impatient boy pretended a toy was a bomb and threw his hands in the air to mimic an explosion, making loud disruptive noises to match the carnage. The Mayan children, in contrast, concentrated on what the other child was learning. Many sat still in their chairs, transfixed by the teacher as they showed the other child what to do.

The study found that, overall, American children sustained their focus only half as long as the Mayan kids. Even more interesting was the finding that the Mayan children, who had less exposure to formal education, "showed more sustained attention and learning than their counterparts from Mayan families with extensive involvement in Western schooling." In other words, less schooling meant more focus. How could that be?

That key finding is understandable when viewed through the lens of autonomy. In many ways, formal schooling in America and similar Western societies is the antithesis of a place where kids feel the autonomy to control their own choices. In these highly regulated environments, kids are told what to do, where to be, what to think, what to wear, and what to eat. Many enter their schools through metal detectors like prisoners. Alarms and bells orchestrate their movements with farm-chattel precision while teachers opine on topics students could generally care less about. If they're bored and want to leave, they're reprimanded. If they want to learn something else, they're told no and, instead, have their curiosity curtailed to stay in line. If they'd like to go deeper on a topic, they're prodded to stay on track for progress's sake.

Of course, such a restrictive environment isn't every American student's experience, and different countries, schools, and teachers use alternative approaches to education. But while

some argue that discipline and control provide structure, it's clear from the research why so many students struggle with motivation in the classroom: Their need for autonomy to explore what interests them is going unfulfilled.

Mayan kids, on the other hand grow up very differently. Dr. Suzanne Gaskins has studied Mayan villages for decades as part of her research as a psychologist at Northeastern Illinois University. Gaskins tells NPR that Mayan parents give their kids a tremendous amount of freedom. "Rather than having the mom set the goal—and then having to offer enticements and rewards to reach that goal—the child is setting the goal," Gaskins says. "Then the parents support that goal however they can." Mayan parents "feel very strongly that every child knows best what they want," she says. "And that goals can be achieved only when a child wants it."[31]

According to Rogoff, "It may be the case that [some American] children give up control of their attention when it's always managed by an adult."[32] In other words, kids can become conditioned to lose control of their attention and, as a result, become distractible.

Ryan's research reveals exactly where we lose kids' attention. "Whenever children enter middle school, whenever they start leaving home-based classrooms and go into the more police state kind of style of schools, where bells are ringing, detentions are happening, punishment is occurring, they're learning right then that this is not an intrinsically motivating environment,"[33] he says. Epstein reaches a similar understanding. "Surveys I have conducted show that teens in the U.S. are subjected to more than ten times as many restrictions as are

---

[31] Michaeleen Doucleff, "A Lost Secret: How To Get Kids To Pay Attention," NPR, (June 21, 2018), https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2018/06/21/621752789/a-lost-secret-how-to-get-kids-to-pay-attention

[32] "A Lost Secret: How To Get Kids To Pay Attention," NPR.

[33] Research assistant interview with Richard Ryan, May 2017.

mainstream adults, twice as many restrictions as active-duty U.S. Marines, and even twice as many restrictions as incarcerated felons," he writes.

"We're doing a lot of controlling them in their school environments and it's no surprise that they should then want to turn to an environment where they can feel a lot of agency and a lot of autonomy in what they're doing," Ryan says. "We think of [tech use] as kind of an evil in the world, but it's an evil we have created a gravitational pull around by the alternatives we've set up."

Unlike in their real lives, kids have a tremendous amount of freedom online. There, they have the autonomy to call the shots, do what they want, and experiment with creative strategies to solve problems. "In internet spaces, there tends to be myriad choices and opportunities, and a lot less adult control and surveillance," Ryan says. "One can thus feel freedom, competence, and connection on-line, especially when the teenager's contrasting environments are overly controlling, restrictive, or understimulating."

Ironically, when parents grow concerned with how much time their kids spend online, they often smack down more rules. Of course, given what we know about the importance of autonomy, that tactic tends to backfire.

Competence

Think about doing something you're good at, like what you enjoy most about your job, cooking that meal you have down to an art, or practicing that pastime you do just for fun. Competence feels good. And that good feeling grows the better you get at something.

Unfortunately, the joy of progress felt in the classroom is a waning feeling among kids today. Ryan warns, "We have so many kids we're giving messages of 'you're not competent at what you're doing at school.'" Ryan points to the rise in importance of standardized testing as

part of the problem. "High-stakes testing is one of the most damaging things we've done to our schools," Ryan believes. "It's destroying classroom teaching practices, it's destroying the self-esteem of so many kids, and it's killing their learning and motivation." Tragically, this sort of testing is on the rise.

According to a research cited by the National Education Association's blog, "teachers spend 30 percent of their time on prep and testing. It's not uncommon for districts to test their students ten times a year. Some districts have more than thirty tests a year in one grade. Pittsburgh has thirty-five tests in grade four, with nearly as many in some other grades. Chicago had fourteen mandated tests for kindergarteners, and nearly as many in grades one and two."[34]

"Kids are so different, and their developmental rates are so variable," Ryan says. However, by design, standardized tests don't account for those differences. If a kid is doing well in school, then testing can reinforce their competency. However, if a child isn't doing so well and doesn't get the individualized support they need to improve, they start to believe achieving competence is impossible, and they stop trying. This might help explain why researchers find students tend toward one motivation extreme or the other, either obsessively driven to achieve the highest levels of success or checked out without a reason to work hard at all.[35]

In the absence of competency from the classroom, kids turn to other outlets to experience growth and development. And companies who make games, apps, and other potential distractions are happy to fill that void by selling readymade solutions for the feeling kids miss.

---

[34] Cindy Long, "The High-Stakes Testing Culture: How We Got Here, How We Get Out," *NEA Today,* (June 17, 2014), http://neatoday.org/2014/06/17/the-high-stakes-testing-culture-how-we-got-here-how-we-get-out/.

[35] Gareth Cook, "The Case for the 'Self-Driven Child," *Scientific American,* (February 13, 2018), https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-case-for-the-ldquo-self-driven-child-rdquo/.

Tech makers know how much users enjoy leveling up, gaining more followers, or getting likes. Those accomplishments provide the sort of fast feedback that feels good more quickly than other methods of achieving competency. When all day is spent in school doing something you don't enjoy, doesn't matter to you, and that you can't see yourself improving in, then "it should be no surprise to us that at nighttime [kids] would rather turn to an activity where they can feel a lot of competence," Ryan says.

Relatedness

The technologies kids use are also a social outlet where they feel relatedness. Whether by using social media, playing a multiplayer online game, or turning to an online forum, kids use the internet to connect with one another.

In many ways, connections made in digital environments are very positive. A child who is bullied at school can reach out for help from supportive friends they've made online, a teenager struggling with their sexuality can find support with a caring friend from across the country, and a kid who feels socially awkward and shy at school can be a hero to their gaming guild whose members live in all corners of the world. "What the data show," says Ryan, "is that kids who aren't feeling relatedness, who are feeling isolated or excluded in school are going to be more drawn to media, where they can get connections with other people and find subgroups they can identify with. So that's both a plus and a minus."

Spending time with peers has always been a quality and formative part of growing up. In today's world, teens are increasingly experiencing these social interactions and developing their social skills in virtual environments because doing so in the real world is inconvenient, painful, or off limits. That's a real challenge because, as we'll see in a moment, there is no substitute for in-person interactions and relationship development to forge lasting social skills

and a sense of relatedness. For kids, much of that opportunity centers around chances to play with others. And the very nature of play is rapidly changing.

Remember pick-up games? Mall hanging? Or simply roaming around the neighborhood to find someone to play with? Spontaneous socializing just isn't happening as much as it used to. Dr. Peter Gray, who has studied the decline of play in America, tells *The Atlantic*, "It is hard to find groups of children outdoors at all, and, if you do find them, they are likely to be wearing uniforms and following the directions of coaches."[36]

Whereas previous generations of kids were allowed to simply play after school and form close social bonds, many children today are raised by parents who insist they either attend a regimented afterschool program or stay behind lock and key at home. In a survey of parents in the same *Atlantic* article who were asked why they restricted their child's outdoor play, they "mentioned child predators, road traffic, and bullies" despite the fact that kids today are statistically the safest generation in American history.

Unfortunately, as fewer and fewer parents let their kids have unstructured play time, by finding their way to the neighborhood park, for example, the fewer kids there are for others to play with. It's a downward spiral that leaves many kids with no choice but to stay indoors, attend a structured program, or as is so often the case, use some sort of technology to find friends.

However, the loss of real-world play has real costs according to Gray, given that "learning to get along and cooperate with others as equals may be the most crucial evolutionary function of human social play . . . and that social play is nature's means of teaching young humans that

---

[36] Esther Entin, "All Work and No Play: Why Your Kids Are More Anxious, Depressed," *The Atlantic,* (October 12, 2011), https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2011/10/all-work-and-no-play-why-your-kids-are-more-anxious-depressed/246422/.

they're not special. Even those who are more skilled at the game's actions . . . must consider the needs and wishes of the others as equal to their own, or else the others will exclude them."

Gray sees the loss of play as "both a consequence and a cause of the increased social isolation and loneliness in the culture." Long before Twenge's study correlated screen time with rising rates of depression, Gray saw a much bigger macro trend dating back over sixty years. "Since about 1955 . . . children's free play has been continually declining, at least partly because adults have exerted ever-increasing control over children's activities." Gray warns, "[A]s a society, we have come to the conclusion that to protect children from danger and to educate them, we must deprive them of the very activity that makes them happiest and place them for ever more hours in settings where they are more or less continually directed and evaluated by adults, setting[s] almost designed to produce anxiety and depression."

Now that we understand the real factors behind kids' behaviors and how those factors, when unsatisfied, can drive kids' technology overuse, we can deploy strategies and tactics to help them moderate their use. Using the four-part indistractable model as our guide, we can help our kids learn the skills they need to put distractions in their place, even when we're not around.

Understand Their Internal Triggers

Everything should start with a discussion, Ryan says. Instead of more ways to limit your kids' autonomy, Ryan advises seeking to understand the underlying needs and associated triggers driving them to digital distraction. "What we've found is that parents who address internet use or screen time with kids in an autonomy-supported way have kids who are more self-regulated with respect to it, so less likely to use screen time for excessive hours," he says.

"Part of how parents are doing that is they're talking with their kids, communicating about what they're doing on the internet."

It's essential, therefore, for parents and guardians to ask questions first instead of jumping to conclusions and assuming the worst about kids' tech use. That's a lesson Diana Graber learned for herself when she found her daughter, Piper, jogging on a treadmill, listening to her headphones through her phone instead of doing her homework.

Graber is the founder of Cyber Civics, a middle school media literacy program that teaches kids how to better manage their relationship with technology. Seeing her own daughter distracted with tech instead of doing what she was supposed to sent Graber through the roof. She was ready to yell. Until, that is, she started asking her daughter some questions to figure out what was really going on. As it turned out, her daughter had found her textbook in audiobook format and was studying while getting some exercise. Crisis averted.[37]

The more you talk to your kids about your reasoning and theirs, and the more you make decisions with them as opposed to for them, the more willing they will be to come to you for advice and listen to your guidance, according to Ryan. In fact, he says it's the controlling parents whose kids go astray.

To avoid the undesirable fate of controlling parents, Ryan recommends opening a discussion with kids about the cost of too much screen time. "Say, 'I notice how much time you're spending on screens and it concerns me. Can we talk about that?' And just hear what they have to say, at the beginning, before you go jumping in and setting rules," he says. Ryan isn't against setting limits, but those limits should be set along with the child, not arbitrarily

[37] Research assistant interview with Diana Graber, May 2017.

enforced because you think you know best. “Because part of what you want your kid to get from that is not just less screen time, but an understanding of why,” he says.

Sharing the techniques for dealing with internal triggers described in the first section of this book is a good idea. Methods for dealing with “distraction from within,” such as reimagining the trigger, the task, and their temperament, as well as techniques like the ten-minute rule, are helpful life skills. But we also need to understand and help kids deal with the difficulties of the low-control, high-expectation school environment many of them are subjected to daily.

We certainly can’t solve all our kids’ troubles, nor should we attempt to, but we can try to better understand their struggles through the lens of their need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and through that shared understanding help them build resilience in the face of adversity. Truly understanding what they’re going through from this perspective is the first step to helping kids learn to overcome their problems in a healthy way instead of escaping the pain and discomfort of their circumstances with their digital distractions.

Our kids need us to teach them the skills for coping with discomfort and to be there to help them through tough times they may not be yet equipped to handle on their own. Our kids don’t need us to solve their problems for them, but they do need us to first acknowledge their feelings and then be there as a trusted partner to help them come up with their own solutions to life’s challenges. It’s only when we’re not physically and emotionally available, and thus when we condition our kids to no longer trust us to be a source of unconditional acceptance and love, that they turn elsewhere to escape their difficulties and get their psychological needs met, often through their devices or worse distractions.

Once an open line of communication is established and kids know they can count on their parents or guardians to listen to them fully and support the satisfaction of their needs, they can begin planning how to best spend their time.

Make Time for Traction Together

It's important to make the tech overuse conversation about people, not the tech. That's according to Lori Getz, the founder of Cyber Education Consultants, which provides internet safety workshops to schools. It's a lesson she learned in her own childhood.

Getz got her first phone (a corded one for her room) as a teenager. The moment she got it, she closed the door and spent the entire weekend in her room gabbing with friends instead of spending time with her family. When she got home from school on Monday, her door had been taken off the hinges. "It's not the phone's fault you're behaving like an a-hole," her father told her. "You closed the door and you closed all of us out."

Getz doesn't recommend the aggressive tactics or tone her father used, but her father's focus on the effect her behavior had on others rather than the phone itself is instructive. "Make [the conversation] about how you're treating and interacting with the people around you," she advises.[38] When it comes to how we spend time together, the important thing is to define what constitutes traction versus distraction as a family.

A recent Getz family vacation put her theory to the test. Her six- and eleven-year-old daughters asked if they could use their phones during the two-hour ride from Sacramento to Truckee. Getz and her husband agreed, motivated to ease the monotony as well as have a kid-free conversation with her husband. Later in the trip, Getz began noticing her daughters turning to their devices whenever the family had downtime. The girls' tech overuse, and the

---

[38] Research assistant interview with Lori Getz and family, May 2017.

distraction it was causing in the family, came to a head when Getz returned from a run to find her kids glued to their screens and unready to leave in the alloted ten minutes. She told her family, "We need to have a family talk."

During the family huddle, they all agreed it would be best if no one used their tech until they were 100 percent ready to go. By agreeing upon what needed to get done, they could all see that doing anything else was a distraction interfering with the family's plans for quality time together (aka traction). For Getz, it was a small victory that promoted a larger point about defining distraction as well as consensus building with her kids. "There's no perfect number, perfect answer, perfect solution," Getz says in retrospect. Rather, it's about coming to an agreement about how the family wants to spend time together, whether it's on a family vacation or during their day-to-day lives.

Getz acknowledges that admitting you don't have all the answers is a great way to involve the kids in finding new solutions. "We're all figuring it out as we go along," she admits. "Sometimes [the kids] give great input and we are absolutely willing to listen, but they don't make the rules." Rather, coming up with new family norms that provide traction toward desirable experiences and accomplishments is something the family does together.

For example, scheduling family meals is perhaps the single most important thing parents and kids can do together. Studies demonstrate that children who eat regularly with their families show lower rates of drug use, depression, school problems, eating disorders, and a host of other risky behaviors.[39] Unfortunately, many families miss meals together because they play it by ear and everyone eats alone on their own schedule. Without deciding to eat together at an

---

[39] Anne Fishel, "The Most Important Thing You Can Do with Your Kids? Eat Dinner with Them," *Washington Post*, (January 12, 2015), https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/01/12/the-most-important-thing-you-can-do-with-your-kids-eat-dinner-with-them/.

agreed-upon time and place, it just won't happen. Hence, it's better to set a day, even if just once a week, for a family sit-down, preferably without devices at the table.

Once set, parents and guardians need to honor the schedule and norms or risk cries of hypocrisy. Getz and her husband work hard to follow the plan they set with their kids at home. Charlie, one of their daughters, says her parents do a great job of following the rules, but if they didn't, she feels comfortable saying to them, "Hey, we got a little off track. You might be busy with something, that's okay, but the rules are still the rules. . . . So if I'm going to follow the rules you should, too." That's powerful advice and precisely the kind of feedback necessary to build trust and empower the kids.

When Charlie grows up, Getz says she wants her daughters to continue to ask themselves questions to self-monitor and self-regulate their behavior: "Is my behavior working for me? Am I proud of myself, in the way I'm behaving?" she says. "I work with a lot of teenagers who will often tell me that they don't want to be distracted, they don't want to be sucked into all this stuff, but they just don't know how to stop." To help kids learn self-regulation, we must teach them how to make time for traction and set a good example in doing so. We don't always have to be perfect, though. In fact, sharing our struggles can be good for our kids.

By showing kids that we too wrestle with distraction and sharing the steps we're taking to put it in its place, we teach them that we improve ourselves through a process and that there is no shame in imperfection. Parents should not fear being vulnerable around their kids and should stop trying to be know-it-alls. Telling kids you're struggling doesn't show them you're weak; it tells them you're a human and that you're on the same team. Vulnerability transforms parents from enemies into allies.

Clearly, helping kids make time for traction shouldn't be all about setting rules. It must also include plenty of play, both with their friends and with you, their parents or guardians. When it comes to their friends, it's important we bring back time for unstructured play. If we want kids to get their need for relatedness met, we need to give them plenty of time to form tight social bonds free from the pressure of coaches, teachers, and parents telling them what to do. Unfortunately, these days, play time won't happen if it's not scheduled.

Conscious parents can bring back play time for kids of all ages by deliberately making time for it in their weekly schedules. Seek out other parents who understand the importance of unstructured play and schedule regular get-togethers to let the kids hang out, just as you would make time for swim class or French lessons. Given the abundance of research indicating how unstructured play time improves kids' ability to focus and builds their capacity for social interaction, it's arguably their most important extracurricular activity.[40]

We also need to make time for kids to have fun with us. In my household, we have a weekly "Sunday Funday" where we rotate the responsibility to plan a three-hour activity of some sort. When it's my turn, I might take the family to the park for a long conversation while we walk. My daughter prefers we play a board game when it's her turn to pick the activity of the week. Whatever the choice, the idea is to set aside time together to practice doing things that require sustained attention and to grow our feeling of relatedness.

Finally, be prepared to make adjustments, just as you would to your own calendar. When Getz's girls' tech use on the family vacation started to impact their relationship, the goodwill they'd built up in the family allowed them to have an honest conversation and, from it, find

---

[40] Alison Gopnik, "Playing Is More Than Fun—It's Smart," *The Atlantic,* (August 12, 2016), https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/08/in-defense-of-play/495545/.

new, better solutions together. “I adjust based on what I’m seeing and what the needs are,” Getz says. “It’s about doing it organically and talking about it as often as possible.”

Establishing regular routines with our kids and coming up with new norms to define traction versus distraction helps us pass down our values by showing children that carving out time together as a family is a priority.

Help Them Hack Back External Triggers

After understanding the internal triggers driving kids to distraction and then helping them schedule their days, the next step is to investigate the external triggers in our kids’ lives. In many ways, it’s easy to blame all the unwelcome cues tugging at kids’ attention. With their phones buzzing, the television flickering, and music blaring, it’s amazing they’re able to get anything done. Many kids pass their days mentally swinging from one thing to the next, constantly reacting to distractions instead of allowing themselves to concentrate and build their capacity for reflection.

The bad news is that we parents and guardians have enabled and allowed this sad state. After all, it’s we who provide permission, and very often the funds, to buy the external triggers that lead to distraction. The good news is there’s no reason kids have to live this way. But parents have bowed to kids’ demands in ways that may not benefit our households.

For instance, giving kids smartphones before they possess the sense of responsibility to use them with intentionality is a bad idea. Many of my daughter’s friends received iPhones from their parents as early as the third grade. Why? Because they asked for them, and their parents caved. But a kid wanting something “really, really bad!” is not a good enough reason. There are all sorts of things we wouldn’t let our kids have access to before they were ready.

If parents want peace of mind knowing they can contact their kids on the way home from school, opting for a feature phone that only makes calls and sends text messages is a better choice than a smartphone and all the external triggers that come bundled with it. Feature phones cost very little—many less than twenty dollars—and don't come with all the digital clutter of a smartphone. It's best to save smartphones with their apps for high school, or later.

The same goes for other potentially distracting screens**.** There's little justification for letting kids have televisions in their rooms. The temptation of turning on the tube is too much to expect kids to manage on their own, especially when they can do so in their rooms by themselves with little oversight.

Carrying a smartphone before they're ready and having a television in their room are unnecessary external triggers that don't justify the potential costs. Principally, kids need good sleep, and anything that flickers, buzzes, or makes noise during sleep time is an external trigger that doesn't serve their developmental needs. Anya Kamenetz, author of *The Art of Screen Time*, writes that making sure kids get enough sleep is "the one issue with the most incontrovertible evidence."[41] Kamenetz strongly advises that "Screens and sleep don't mix" and implores parents to keep all digital devices out of kids' rooms overnight and agree to shut down screens at least an hour before bedtime.

It's equally important to remove unhelpful external triggers at school or during other activities that require sustained attention. Many schools have a policy prohibiting cell phones in class, but even if your child's school doesn't have such a restriction, it's important to teach

---

[41] Anya Kamenetz, *The Art of Screen Time: How Your Family Can Balance Digital Media and Real Life* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2018), 222.

kids to leave their phones in their lockers during the school day. Help them develop the habit to ask themselves "Is the trigger serving me, or am I serving it?"

And finally, for older kids who do get a smartphone or their own laptop, we can teach them the very same techniques covered in the Hack Back External Triggers section of this book to help them remove the pings and dings that unnecessarily pull their attention away from what they really want throughout the day. Easy-to-learn strategies like changing notification settings, using "do not disturb" mode, and reconfiguring apps to prevent intrusions go a long way to helping kids manage external triggers now and as they grow into adulthood.

Prevent Distraction with Precommitments

When my daughter was about four years old, we started a discussion in the way Ryan recommends. We explained simply and honestly that too much screen time comes at the expense of other things. She was learning to tell time, so we could explain that there was only so much time in her day for things she enjoyed, like playing with friends at the park, swimming at the community pool, reading books, or being with Mom and Dad. We also explained that the apps and videos on the iPad were made by some very smart people to intentionally keep her watching and that it was her job to know when to stop, not theirs.

She understood as much as a four-year-old could, and then we asked her the all-important question, "How much screen time per day do you think is healthy for you?" We took a risk in giving her the autonomy to make the decision for herself. I expected she'd say "All day!" but she didn't. Instead, when she was given the logic behind why limiting screen time is important and the freedom to decide, she said forty-five minutes. I couldn't believe it! Forty-five minutes was fine with me.

Many parents want to know if there is a correct amount of time kids should be allowed to spend with their screens, but no such number exists—there are too many other factors at play. Rather, the important thing is to involve the child in the conversation and help them set their limits. When parents impose their rules without input, they're setting up their kids to cheat the system. It's only when kids practice monitoring their own behavior that they learn the skills they need to be indistractable even when their parents aren't around.

Today, as a spirited ten-year-old, my daughter is still in charge of her screen time, and her forty-five minute rule still stands. Recently, I've noticed her using tech to set pacts with herself. She'll ask Amazon's Alexa to set a timer, or she'll use Apple's Screen Time feature to let her know when she's reached her daily limit. The important thing is that it's her rules, not mine, and she's in charge of enforcing them. Best of all, when her time is up, it's not her dad who has to be the bad guy; it's her tech telling her she's had enough.

These tactics are really just pacts kids can set for themselves. There are other ways parents can help prevent distraction with pacts. For instance, when we explained that there can be violent or inappropriate content online and that we wanted to make sure she doesn't see things she doesn't want to see, we started using parental settings to block certain content. When she's older and is ready for a smartphone, we'll install software to block inappropriate sites and apps on her phone as well, but again, not before we discuss the problem and find a solution together. For instance, I'll explain how I use apps like Time Guard to restrict access to potential distractions like social media and only use them during the time I've scheduled in my day. Of course, she may not do everything I recommend, but that's her choice. She may need to experience the consequences of distraction for herself before deciding to do something about them, but I always want her to know I'll be there to help without judgment.

In the meantime, we make other pacts in our home to prevent distraction. For example, we've made a family pact to only watch movies on weekends, and mostly together. If my wife and I don't want to watch a kids' film, we let my daughter watch something else at the same time on a different device. Watching at the same time, and preferably together, allows us the opportunity to discuss what we've seen afterward.

The same goes for video games. My daughter and I agree that games should be played together. She hasn't taken much of an interest in Fortnite or other video games yet, but when she does, I'll be right there playing with her. And the same rules apply to social media. If she wants to try out Snapchat or Instagram with her friends when she's older, she can expect the first friend request to come from me.

No one said iPads should be used as iNannies. Setting your kid in front of any form of media unsupervised and unaware of what they're seeing is risky. However, parents can keep tabs on what their kids are doing online by participating instead of banning. When parents play Fortnite or try out Instagram, they demystify the experience and realize it's not all that bad. They also make time to bond with their child through a new medium. But by making pacts such as agreeing to play together, you remove the temptation of forbidden fruit and the incentive for kids to hide their actions.

Finally, though I recommend diving into the technology your kids enjoy, I also recommend teaching them a healthy amount of skepticism. It's important that kids understand the motives of the gaming companies and social networks—that although these products sell us fun and connection, they also profit from our time and attention. We should teach our kids that these products are built to get us hooked (take it from me) and that people overuse them when their psychological needs aren't being met. They should know that these companies' business

models depend upon users coming back habitually and that some people may even become addicted to using them. Kids also need to know about the dangers of giving up personal information or reading false or misleading news. Clearly, kids encounter many risks online, and learning about these dangers is a fact of modern life.

A frequent question I hear is, “How do you know when your kid is ready to use a particular technology?” The answer is when you can have a thoughtful conversation about the risks. Think of it the way you’d know a kid is ready to drive. Sure, there are legal guidelines, but in my mind a kid isn’t ready to get behind the wheel until they have a healthy fear of how dangerous driving can be. Likewise, if it’s clear that a child isn’t absorbing the potential dangers they may face in using a technology and isn’t enthusiastic about taking precautions to reduce that harm, they aren’t ready.

The challenge of raising an indistractable child is never knowing the fruits of our efforts. You’ll never know the effectiveness of using these tactics because you won’t have anything to compare them to. You’ll never know the hours they might have wasted or the times you wouldn’t have enjoyed together. In fact, utilizing these strategies is not guaranteed to bring domestic harmony. You can expect to still have heated discussions about the role technology plays in your home and in your kids’ lives, just as many families have heated debates over giving a kid the keys to the car on a Saturday night.

Know that such conversations, and the occasional conflict, are normal and healthy. If there is one lesson to take away from this chapter, perhaps the entire book, it’s that distraction is a problem like any other. Whether in a large company or in a small family, when people discuss their problems openly and in an environment where they feel psychologically safe, they can resolve those problems together. However, when families keep their issues in the closet,

pretending everything is fine, or worse yet, when kids believe things are incapable of changing because parents decree the way things should be, that's when problems persist and mutate into even more undesirable habits.

Our job as parents and guardians is never done. When it comes to tackling the problem of distraction, we need to be ready to have further conversations as our kids grow up and the technology they use changes. Discussions, and at times respectful disagreements, are a sign that a family is raising kids right.

One thing is for certain: Technology is becoming more pervasive and persuasive. And while it's important that kids are aware of the way many products, particularly those online, are designed to distract us, we also need to reinforce our kids' belief in their own power to overcome distraction. The most critical thing we can teach our kids is that the power is ultimately in their hands. It's their right as well as their responsibility to use their time wisely. Thankfully, using the tools you've learned in this book and that you'll hopefully teach your children, they will know they are far more powerful than any distraction.

Remember This:

- The answer to the question "Is tech bad for our kids?" is "It depends."
- It depends on four critical questions: What is technology displacing? What are our kids doing with it? How much do they use it? Who is using it?
- Technology may be displacing more harmful behaviors. Teen crime, pregnancy, and drug use are at historic lows, potentially thanks to our kids' technology use.
- According to the latest research, the effect of tech use on kids is U-shaped. Used in the right way and in the right amounts, it's beneficial, while too much (or too little) has slightly harmful effects.
- While teen suicide is on the rise, the connection between that rise and technology is

dubious. Teen suicide is rising primarily in American rural areas and not abroad or in urban areas that tend to have higher cell phone penetration rates.

- Parents and guardians do not need to believe tech causes clinical depression and suicide to justify our desire to help our kids moderate their tech use. Just because tech isn't the root cause of the problems doesn't mean overuse and misuse shouldn't be managed.
- To understand how to help kids manage distraction, we need to start by understanding the source of the problem: the internal triggers driving their behavior.
- According to a widely accepted theory of human flourishing, all people need three things to thrive: a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.
- When our kids' psychological needs are not met in the real world, they go looking for satisfaction in virtual worlds. The companies that build those digital environments are more than happy to offer products to cater to what they're missing.
- Parents and guardians can take steps to help kids find balance through better offline alternatives and teach them methods for handling distraction into their adulthood.
- The four-part indistractable model is a framework that's as valid and valuable for kids as it is for adults. Use it as a source of teaching to prepare kids for the real-world challenges that they're facing today as well as those that they'll face as they grow up.

Do This Now:

- Observe how much time your child is spending with digital devices after school.
- Is the time they spend online coming at the expense of other things they themselves would like to spend time doing, such as playing with other kids?
- Schedule a time to have a conversation about tech overuse with your child. Make sure to not imply any judgment during the conversation, and discuss how you struggle with distraction as well.
- Give your child greater autonomy by asking how much time they think is healthy to spend online.
- Tailor these suggestions to the age of your child. For very young children, consider facilitating the use of a timer or app to tell your child when they've reached their limit. Even for very young children, involve them in the decision making and don't be the bad guy. Let the tech tell them when they're done for the day until they can monitor and regulate their time on their own.
- For older kids, share the four-part indistractable framework discussed in this book. Let

them know the steps you’re taking to remove unhelpful and unwanted distractions from your life. For their sake, set a good example.

- No matter your child’s age, make sure they have time for unstructured play with their friends. Kids need time to just hang out with other kids. They also need time to play with you.
- Be thoughtful about the kind of tech you and your child decide to limit. Don’t ban screen time without knowing what they’re doing online. While you may want to discuss a time box for content that kids consume passively, you may also want to encourage them to spend time creating online. And don’t be afraid to join the fun and create alongside them!
- To build relatedness, let your kids know you are a trusted ally on a parallel journey to conquer distraction so you can be more present with them.
- Make and adjust family tech use norms together. Discussions, and at times disagreements, mean you’re doing it right!