

Digital detox: a parent's guide



Parent Zone has been working with Vodafone and the Diana Award on a project for secondary schools called **Be Strong Online**, helping young people to support each other with some of the challenges they face online. This article is about one of the topics we have been talking to young people about – **Digital Detox**

What does 'digital detox' mean?

First things first, it doesn't mean banning your child from the internet or any device they can access it on. For a start, they would find it very difficult to do their homework.

The term 'detox' can sometimes imply that the thing you are cutting down on is toxic. This isn't the case with either tech or online services, such as social media. They offer many positive things, whether it's opening up a world of knowledge to help young people in their education, an easy, cost-effective way of keeping in touch with friends or absent family members, or a vital communication tool for children with special needs.

And don't underestimate the need for fun and relaxation in teenagers' lives – particularly given the stresses children experience at secondary school as they prepare for exams, go through puberty and prepare to enter adulthood.

A [recent report](#) on screen time from Sonia Livingstone and Alicia Blum-Ross for the LSE concluded that 'media use is no longer an optional extra, something that can be bracketed off from daily life.'

Saying that, parents are naturally concerned when they see their child hunched over their smartphone for hours, and worry they are spending too much time in the virtual rather than the real world.

Recent reports have highlighted the amount of time people spend on screen – and it's a lot! [Research](#) from media regulator Ofcom in August 2016 found that people spend more time online than they do sleeping.

In the same report, it found that 30% of adults had undertaken some kind of digital detox themselves, indicating their concerns at the effect of too much tech on their own lives. There are now companies offering '[digital detox holidays](#)' for adults who want to get away from their devices completely.

These concerns for themselves will naturally be passed on to the amount of time their children spend online.

So what can parents do to help their child strike the right balance?

Starting a conversation about digital use

By the time children have reached secondary school age, it can be difficult to change ingrained habits of any kind, but the best thing to do is have open and honest discussions with your children about your concerns and find positive solutions together.

Encourage them to reflect on their own use of technology – as well as comment on yours (because that's only fair!) Discuss the amount of time they spend online and the effects frequent use of technology can have on them.

Do they have trouble sleeping after looking at their screens? Using smartphones before going to bed can [delay your sleep](#) by at least an hour. [Lack of sleep](#) can lead to health problems, make people moody or mean they're less able to concentrate, both at school and while doing outside activities.

Constant social media use can affect relationships with friends and family. 40% of people in [one study](#) said they felt ignored by a friend or relative whose attention was entirely on their smartphone. Ask them how they would feel if someone did it to them?

Do they put off important tasks because they are watching YouTube or looking at Snapchat?

Many young people suffer from FOMO – fear of missing out – if they aren't constantly connected to social media. Ask them what they think will actually happen if they aren't online – and encourage them to think of things they may be missing out on in the real world.

Tips on what to talk about

Ask them if they feel in control of their online activity. If they think they spend too much time online, or that their internet use may be making them ill and they want to moderate it, here are some topics to discuss with them:

Use activity apps. [Research has suggested](#) that 'remaining seated for too long can be bad for your health,' so ask them to think about whether they are spending long periods of time sitting down when using technology. There are some great health apps around which can encourage them to get active and help them track their achievements.

Close apps. Are there any apps which they spend a lot of time on but which make them feel frustrated or angry, rather than help them in a positive way? Encourage them to uninstall them for a set time to see how they feel without them. If they genuinely miss them, they can always install them again.

Suggest they switch off notifications. Notifications can be particularly intrusive – deliberately so as they are designed to get you back onto that particular app. And they work brilliantly.

But they are also incredibly distracting when one pings up on your phone or tablet's home screen. Ask your child if they *really* need to be alerted about all of them? A lot of apps activate notifications automatically when you download them. Ask them to think about which ones they actually need – and switch off the rest. Again, they can always turn them back on again if they feel they need to.

Encourage them to use a timer. If they have an important task to do and want to focus, suggest they schedule internet breaks. Set a timer or alarm to let them know when their designated internet use time is up, then set airplane mode or turn the phone or tablet off while they complete the task.

Be a role model

Of course, it's not just children and young people who use technology. Many parents are active users too.

It's very difficult to encourage your children to cut down on the time they spend online if you are constantly updating your Facebook status or checking how your current eBay auctions are doing on your smartphone in front of them.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with doing either of these things, but if parents want to encourage their children to modify their internet use, it helps if you can do the same yourself.

In their book *Parents and Digital Technology: How to Raise the Connected Generation*, Suzie Hayman and Dr John Coleman argue: 'Your children do as you do, not as you say. We cannot over emphasise the importance of the parent as a role model. Even as teenagers, when friends become an important focus, they will still listen to you and watch what you do.'

This doesn't mean giving up your smartphone or never using your laptop in front of them, just moderating your use, keeping to set times and set spaces at home, and being seen to enjoy doing things that don't involve technology.

Encourage tech-free moments

With younger children, it's easy for parents to suggest family days out or activities together that don't involve technology. As children get older, their lives become more independent from you and it's neither right nor possible to control what they do all the time.

Even if you were at home with them when they are younger, parents often return to work when children move up to secondary school which means they are likely to spend time at home on their own after school. Short of taking away their phone and removing the Wi-Fi router from your house, you won't be able to stop them going online. (And even this can be circumvented by going to a friend's house or the local library.)

So it makes much more sense to encourage their interest in activities in the real world that don't require access to the virtual world to be fun.

That could mean supporting them to take up a sport, learn the guitar, go skateboarding with their friends or attend a local drama group, or encouraging them to join a youth group or organisation like the Scouts. Local authorities will often have information about free activities for young people on their websites, so encourage them to take a look at what's going on in their local area.

**For more information on Be Strong Online, a peer-to-peer programme produced by Vodafone with the Diana Award and Parent Zone, go to www.antibullyingpro.com/vodafone-sign-up.*