PREVENTION 101

SUMMER PARENTING

Helping your children stay safe and thrive

EDITED BY RABBI YAACOV BEHRMAN
AND DEVORA KRASNIANSKI

Wishing a complete and speedy recovery

to Rabbi Sholom Dovber ben Chava Hecht

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FOREWORD

My father, Rabbi Jacob J. Hecht, OBM, founded Operation Survival in 5747 (1987). His goal was to counter a growing tide of drug abuse that was beginning to seep into our communities. In those years, it was still taboo to speak openly about issues such as addiction, and many believed that substance abuse posed no real danger to their own children.

Mr. Michoel Behrman, OBM, was chosen to develop and lead the program. He fulfilled this role with great dedication until he passed away some thirty years later.

Changing perceptions about the dangers of addiction was not easy. Baruch Hashem, in recent years, we have seen a significant increase in awareness, with more individuals seeking help for mental health challenges and addiction.

Today, Operation Survival teaches critical life skills in local yeshivas and public schools. Through its wide range of programs from art initiatives to rap groups, the organization promotes positive alternatives and provides crisis support to thousands of young people each year. Operation Survival also collaborates with other agencies to share information with clergy, educators, social service providers, medical professionals, and community organizations.

With the help of an experienced staff, including Rabbi Yaacov Behrman, Program Director; Miriam Simon, Assistant Program Director; Dena Gorkin, Director of Community Outreach; Shlomo Mahana, Prevention

Educator; Leontine Thompson, Prevention Educator, Operation Survival has helped expand awareness and support for mental health and addiction services throughout our community.

I believe you will find this book both informative and practical. At the same time, while the guidance offered here is important, we must also remember the essential role of *emunah* and *bitachon,* faith and trust in Hashem. Ultimately, everything comes from Hashem, and experience has shown that faith can play a meaningful role in mental health by providing comfort, peace, and strength through tefillah and emunah.

Rabbi Shea Hecht
Chairman of the Board
N.C.F.J.E.

INTRODUCTION

This project, Prevention 101, was launched several years ago to provide families with the tools needed to help prepare their children for real-world challenges. We invited parents to submit their questions regarding addiction and mental health, and we connected with qualified mental health professionals who provided honest, informed responses. These responses were then shared through weekly video and print publications.

Since then, we have published two books compiling those answers and addressing critical issues facing families today. One book was focused on bullying, and the second on trauma following the events of October 7th. This third book focuses on summer safety. In it, we explore how to prepare children for camp, equip them with tools to stay safe, and help parents address challenges such as screen time and peer pressure.

This book is intended to serve as a practical resource for parents, helping guide their children toward making healthy and responsible choices.

This project is the result of the dedication and professionalism of the staff of Operation Survival, to whom I am deeply grateful. I would also like to thank the Board of the National Committee for the Furtherance of Jewish Education including the members of the Executive Committee: Rabbi Sholom Ber Hecht, Chairman of the Executive Committee; Rabbi Shea Hecht, Chairman of the Board; Rabbi Shimon Hecht, Executive Committee

member; and Rabbi Shloma Leib Abramowitz, Executive Committee member for their ongoing support, as well as the interviewees, Amy and Evelyn Guttman, OTR/L; Rivki Jungreis, LCSW, MS.E.d; Debbie Fox, LCSW; and Shmuel Klein, EMT.

I would also like to thank Devora Krasnianski for her role in managing the project, including conducting several of the interviews and overseeing the editing process.

Finally, I want to thank Senator Zellnor Myrie, who has been an unfailing ally to Operation Survival and to the communities we serve.

Rabbi Yaacov Behrman
Director, Operation Survival

THE FIRST SUMMER AWAY: WHAT PARENTS WORRY ABOUT, AND WHAT ACTUALLY MATTERS

The following content is based on a conversation with Shmuel Klein, who has served for many years as the infirmary director at Gan Yisroel New York. The views expressed are his own and should not be interpreted as representing official camp policy.

Shmuel Klein is an EMT and veteran member of Hatzalah. He has served for many years as the Infirmary Director at Camp Gan Yisroel Parksville in Parksville, New York, overseeing the camp's medical care and safety.

I'm sending my child to camp for the first time and want to stay connected without hovering. What's appropriate when it comes to how often we're in touch?

Most camps allow phone calls once a week, often on Fridays, though some camps are adjusting because of heavy phone traffic. In many camps, counselors carry a flip phone and pass it around so each child gets about 10–15 minutes to call home.

Most kids do call; it's unusual if they don't, and counselors make sure it happens. If you don't receive a call, email the camp office; do not reach out to the counselor directly. Almost all camps have a parent liaison who can check in on your child, help with homesickness if needed, and make sure your child calls. If necessary, the parent liaison can also arrange additional calls if it would help with homesickness or another issue.

We recommend waiting a week or a week and a half before the first phone call. This gives children time to settle in and adjust, which helps reduce homesickness.

In some camps with good reception, staff create a WhatsApp group to share photos and updates. These groups are meant for viewing only; parents should not message or call the counselors once they have their contact information.

A few things you should avoid: some parents who live nearby have placed Apple AirTags in their child's shoes and "happen" to run into them on an excursion or trip, or offer tips to counselors for extra access to their child. Aside from being unfair to staff and disruptive to camp routines,

it is often unhelpful for your child. We've seen kids become homesick after an unexpected visit. These visits can also affect other campers who become homesick after seeing a fellow camper receive special attention.

One more reassuring point: if the camp isn't calling you, that's usually a good sign. Camps generally reach out only if there's a concern. For example, many campers visit the infirmary over the summer, but unless there's something significant, there's typically no need to notify parents.

Finally, when you speak to your child about personal safety, tell them that if they ever feel the need, they should go to a responsible adult, such as a head counselor, the parent liaison, or the infirmary, and ask to call you about the safety issue.

Are there common issues that tend to come up every summer that parents should be aware of ahead of time?

Paperwork and health requirements. Make sure all your paperwork on the camp portal is up to date. In Upstate New York, where Gan Yisroel is located, the New York State Health Department is very strict. A few years ago, we actually had an audit. Three representatives from the state came to camp and spent several hours reviewing every medical record. When the camp says that a child turning 12, or entering the Bar Mitzvah division, needs a meningitis shot, this isn't something the camp just decided. These are state requirements, and camps must comply.

Traveler's insurance. Before your child even arrives at camp, especially if you're coming from out of state, it's a good idea to purchase traveler's insurance. Many families overlook this.

Regular insurance usually covers emergency room visits, but you don't want to send your child to the hospital for every minor issue just because they are from out of state. Emergency Room visits can involve long waits, a staff member must accompany the camper the entire time, and it's often not the most comfortable environment for a child. The good news is that Upstate New York has many urgent care centers with very experienced staff. Traveler's insurance can make it easier to use these when needed.

Traveler's insurance can also reimburse visits to the camp doctor for issues like strep or other minor illnesses. The doctor visits the camp weekly, and I am in touch with him all the time regarding treatment prescriptions and follow-up care. (I can administer a strep test and call the doctor anytime if medication needs to be prescribed.)

In rare cases, traveler's insurance can be invaluable. For example, one camper needed stitches. Instead of going to a crowded ER where you don't know who will be doing the stitching, I was able to take him to a well-known plastic surgeon to ensure it was done properly. Thanks to his traveler's insurance, the family didn't have to pay out of pocket and was later reimbursed.

Tick awareness. Deer ticks can carry Lyme disease, and many camp areas may have disease-carrying ticks, even when camps take precautions like spraying. It's important to show your child how to check for ticks and to stress the importance of checking every day - in areas like behind the knees, armpits, behind the ears, and other warm, darker areas. In most cases, a tick needs to be attached for about 24–36 hours to transmit Lyme disease, so daily checks are very effective. Children will need a friend's help to check harder-to-see areas, like behind the ears.

If your child finds a tick, they should go straight to the infirmary so trained staff can remove it properly. The camp will then contact you to discuss next steps based on your pediatrician's recommendations.

After camp, if your child develops flu-like symptoms, be sure to tell your doctor that your child was in Upstate New York, where ticks are common. This helps ensure the right evaluation and care if needed.

Bathroom issues. Another issue that comes up every summer is that some kids won't use the camp's bathroom. It's important to have a conversation ahead of time: holding it in for long periods isn't healthy. Encouraging your child to feel comfortable using the facilities can prevent unnecessary discomfort or emergencies.

How can I tell the difference between normal homesickness and something more serious? When should I step in, and how should I handle it?

Coordinate with the parent liaison. First, we have a very experienced parent liaison who works with families on homesickness. It's important to coordinate with him so everyone stays on the same page. Parents should not sneak their child a phone. When a child calls home crying, and parents begin making promises or deals that the camp cannot realistically keep, it can undermine the process and make it harder to help the camper adjust.

How common is homesickness? Typically, when camp begins, about 10% of campers show signs of homesickness. For some, it's their first time at camp; for others, it may be their second or third year, but they still struggle at the beginning.

Signs of homesickness. Homesick campers might say things like, "This isn't the bunk I was supposed to be in," or simply that they miss their parents. Sometimes they come to the infirmary complaining of headaches or stomachaches.

Reassurance works. Most of these kids just need TLC and reassurance. I usually explain that missing their parents is completely normal. It doesn't mean anything is wrong. It simply means they love their parents and their parents love them. I remind them that their parents sent them to camp to have fun, and that camp is also a place where kids grow and gain independence.

For about half of homesick campers, a short conversation with the infirmary staff or parent liaison, plus a little time, usually solves the issue.

The other half may struggle more. Within the first couple of days, the parent liaison works with the head counselors and counselors to identify campers who may need assistance. If your child is having a hard time, the parent liaison may contact you to discuss the situation.

Often, the issue is that the camper has not yet allowed themselves to settle in. Most children adjust once they realize they are safe, that they are with friends, and camp is not as intimidating as it first seemed.

More serious cases. A small number of campers struggle more seriously. Staff may spend significant time encouraging them to participate in davening, meals, and activities. Sometimes they are offered the chance to message home earlier if they begin participating.

Rare extreme cases. But a handful of campers still have difficulty. They may insist they were forced to come and refuse to join activities or eat with the group. At that point, it becomes much harder to resolve.

In most cases, things work out. But every summer, within the first week to ten days, a very small number of campers, usually two or three out of roughly 400, do end up going home. It is rare, and the camp does everything possible to help them stay in camp.

Am I supposed to be in touch with the counselor, learning teacher, or head counselor?

Not really. In the past, parents met their child's staff on visiting days. Lately, many camps don't have visiting days anymore. So theoretically, you could go the whole summer without speaking to the counselor. (After about two weeks, camps will often send out Zelle information for parents who want to give tips.)

Usually, on the first or second day of camp, they send out the bunk information, so you find out right away who the counselors are. You can reach out to the counselors if you want to. Some parents like a quick check-in with the staff who work with their child once or twice a month to get updates, which is reasonable. If you want to do that, coordinate through the camp office, and they'll help arrange it.

In general, camps have clear rules. Kids can't just borrow a phone and call home. Counselors aren't supposed to be in regular contact with parents. If you need something, you should go through the liaison, the infirmary, or the camp office.

If there is ever a reason for the learning teacher or counselor to contact you, they will. Otherwise, you can assume your child is doing fine and having the typical camp experience. Part of that experience is understanding that things won't always be perfect. When ten kids in the bunk take showers, your child's turn might not be piping hot. That's part of being upstate, and part of camp.

My child is ten and still struggles with bedwetting. Is camp still a good option, and how should I communicate this with the staff?

Be upfront with the camp. It's really worth speaking to the camp. Camps have dealt with this many times and often have creative ways to handle it discreetly. Your child is definitely not the first camper with this issue.

You need to be forthcoming and have the conversation in advance, not send him and then two weeks later say, "Oh my G-d, this never happens at home."

In Gan Yisroel, if you're honest with them, they will usually work with you unless it's something the director feels the counselor simply cannot manage and would be too much stress or a burden on the staff. In that case, they may say they can't take him. It may be hard to hear, but if the counselor can't handle it, you probably wouldn't want to send him there anyway.

The camp will ask what he does at home. If he takes medication, you must inform the camp. It will absolutely remain confidential. A camper cannot keep medication in his bunk; first of all, it's not allowed, and it's against the law, and second, it can get lost or forgotten. Some medications can also be unsafe for other children, so all medications must be kept locked in the infirmary.

Discreet management at camp. Many kids have this issue. In our camp, we handle it very discreetly. Sometimes the parents send a package of pull-ups before camp. The camper might come to the infirmary during night activities or when kids line up for daily medications. Sometimes, the pull-ups are kept in a closet where he can slip in quietly. He takes one

in a black shopping bag, puts it in his pocket, and goes back to the bunk. At night, he changes under the covers or in the bathroom when he puts on pajamas. In the morning, he goes to the bathroom, puts the used pull-up back in the black bag, and throws it in the garbage.

Bottom line: Be honest with the camp, and they will help you work it out.

How are medications handled at camp? Do I tell the camp?

Listing medications. Parents should clearly list all medications on the camp's medical forms before the summer. The camp needs to know what the child is taking, how often it should be taken, and at what time of day.

Storage rules. In New York State camps, campers may only personally carry emergency medications, such as an inhaler or an EpiPen. Anything else, even over-the-counter medication, cannot be kept in the bunkhouse and must be stored in the camp infirmary behind a double lock, in accordance with health department regulations.

Daily medication routine. Right after the morning lineup, before davening, campers who take daily medication come to the infirmary. Depending on the year, there might be 15 to 25 campers each morning. These may include boys taking ADHD medications like Adderall, allergy medication, or even something simple like MiraLax.

While the rest of the camp heads to shul, campers needing medication come to the infirmary. I have the medications prepared and will see the boys one at a time. They take the medication with water, and the bottles are returned to a secure container.

Confidentiality. Confidentiality is taken very seriously. Aside from campers seeing each other come to the infirmary, no one knows what medication another camper is taking or why he is there.

The counselor is told only that a camper in the bunk needs to go to the infirmary each morning, so he can remind him after lineup, but the counselor does not know what medication he is taking. According to the guidelines, campers should be under staff supervision at all times, so counselors are aware that the child needs to go.

If a camper doesn't show up, we follow up by locating him or asking a staff member to send him to the infirmary, without disclosing what medication he needs.

If parents feel it would help the counselor or the learning teacher to know more details, they can give permission. Otherwise, I don't share that information. If I believe it would help staff understand a camper's behavior, for example, if ADHD medication wears off later in the day, I would first call the parents and ask their permission.

Managing side effects. One common side effect of ADHD medications is suppressed appetite. Because of that, I keep cereal, milk, cookies, and simple food available in the infirmary and sometimes arrange for a camper to eat something before taking the medication.

Why supervision matters. We once had a camper taking medication for anxiety who didn't turn it in and was taking it on his own in the bunkhouse. One day, he accidentally took a quarter pill too much. About an hour later, he came to the infirmary feeling faint. We laid him down and checked him, and it eventually became clear he had been taking the medication himself and had taken too much. It was a dangerous situation, and thank G-d he came to the infirmary and told us. This is exactly why all medications must be turned in and supervised at camp.

How should parents handle peer pressure around the canteen and personal items at camp?

Peer pressure and personal items. It really depends on your child and his needs. I have five boys, and each one is different. One year, one of my sons was very into having good sneakers. He went online and found a pair on the Nike store for about $70 that I could have probably found elsewhere for $35. I saw that it really mattered to him, so I turned to my wife and said, "Let's splurge on this one, I think he needs it." But when it came time to buy t-shirts for camp, we went to an outlet mall and paid about three or three and a half dollars per shirt.

What I've found is that once kids are actually in camp, they tend to be more themselves. Most kids end up hanging out with the friends they're comfortable with, and there's usually very little peer pressure about what they're wearing. Something that feels like a big deal before camp often turns out to no longer matter once camp starts.

Canteen and spending. Camps usually recommend around $50 per month for the canteen. Some kids need a little more and some a little less. It's really only a small percentage of campers who line up every day for pizza or extra food.

If a camper has allergies, camps can usually work with the waiters and kitchen staff to make sure he eats food he's allowed to have. The canteen isn't the solution for that. The staff needs to know about any allergies, especially serious ones, and in some cases, campers may require daily medication as well.

BODY SAFETY: HOW TO PREPARE YOUR CHILD

The following content is drawn from a transcribed conversation with Debbie Fox, LCSW

Debbie Fox, LCSW, is a clinical social worker and gerontologist. She is the founder and director of the Magen Yeladim International Child Safety Institute and has lectured worldwide on safe communities and the protection of children and families. She has published a book and many chapters within her areas of clinical focus, and conducts a private practice for consultation and psychotherapy.

Camp is an incredible opportunity for children to gain independence, build friendships, and explore new experiences. It is also a great deal of fun. At the same time, camp, whether overnight or day camp, is a different environment from school, with less formal structure and greater independence for children. This increased independence makes it important to put thoughtful safety measures in place.

Children should be taught to recognize potentially unsafe situations and protect themselves. Education and communication should be approached in ways that help children build resilience, confidence, and the ability to advocate for themselves, rather than to instill fear.

With proper awareness and preparation, summer camp can remain both safe and joyful. It is especially important for children to hear these messages directly from their parents, so they know they can come to them with questions or if something ever makes them uncomfortable.

What specific safety concerns should parents be aware of when sending children to camp?

Camps are generally very positive environments, but it is still important for parents to be aware of potential vulnerabilities. Camp settings often have less structure than school. The counselors are younger and less experienced, bunk arrangements have limited privacy, and informal social environments may lend to experiences where boundaries can sometimes be blurred. These factors can occasionally create opportunities for inappropriate behavior, which makes awareness, education, and teaching children to communicate openly especially important.

It is important to clarify that this behavior is **not rampant**, and camps work very hard to create safe and structured environments. Many camps have strong policies, staff training, supervision systems, and safeguards in place to protect children. The purpose of outlining these possibilities is not to create fear or suspicion, but to increase awareness. When parents and children understand what inappropriate behavior can look like, they are better equipped to recognize warning signs early and address concerns if they arise.

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The primary concerns are inappropriate relationships and boundary violations between campers and counselors, or other staff members. It can also occur between older and younger campers, and at times even between same-age peers. These situations often begin with grooming, where someone tries to make a child feel uniquely special, gradually tests boundaries, and encourages secrecy.

Grooming may involve observing how a child responds to subtle boundary tests, seeing whether the child resists or can be manipulated, and building trust in ways that isolate the child from peers or parents.

In a camp environment, inappropriate behavior can take different forms. A counselor or older camper may seek private conversations or unnecessary time alone with a child. They then might "accidentally" show inappropriate images or videos, ask for or give massages, or engage in physical contact framed as games. They may introduce inappropriate language about body parts, engage in playful but inappropriate physical contact, such as slapping or touching a child's backside during celebrations, instead of appropriate gestures like high-fives. They might give expensive gifts or special privileges, or provide access to phones or devices where children can be exposed to inappropriate content.

Peer-to-peer situations can also occur, where older children target younger campers, or even peers their own age, pressuring them into conversations or games that cross normal boundaries. They may attempt inappropriate physical contact as well.

It is important for parents to be aware of these potential vulnerabilities so they can have appropriate conversations with their children before camp and be better positioned to recognize concerning behavior if it arises.

While camps provide staff training and supervision, it is equally important for parents to understand the camp's safety protocols and reporting systems. Parents should feel comfortable contacting the camp and asking specific questions about staff training, supervision, reporting procedures, and how concerns are handled. Open communication and awareness are key components in helping parents ensure that camp remains a safe and positive experience for every child.

Are there core messages that I should communicate to my child about personal safety?

Every child needs to know one simple, powerful truth: **Your body belongs to you. You are in charge of it.** Everyone is in charge of their own body.

Children should understand that the private areas of their body, which include anything covered by a bathing suit, are theirs and theirs alone. Nobody should touch these areas - even through clothing, nor should anyone look at them, talk about them, or take pictures or videos of them. Children should also understand that they should not do any of these things to anyone else.

Children should understand that the private areas of their body, which include anything covered by a bathing suit, are theirs and theirs alone.

In addition, no one should ask them to touch, look at, talk about, or take pictures or videos of someone else's private areas, and they may not ask anyone else to do these things either.

There are **no exceptions, no games, jokes, or secrets.** Even if someone says it's okay, it isn't. Secrets about private parts, touching, pictures, or conversations are never acceptable. If someone says, "Don't tell," that is exactly when a child should tell a trusted adult.

The core message children should hear clearly is: **"Your body belongs to you. Nobody should touch, look at, or talk about your private areas, and secrets about these things are never okay."**

Children should also hear clearly from their parents: "You can always come to me. Even if you're not sure whether something was okay or not okay. Even if you just feel uncomfortable about a person or situation. I will help you think it through. I will always believe you, and I will always help keep you safe."

That reassurance gives children the confidence to speak up, and it is one of the strongest protections we can give them.

How should parents have the conversation about personal safety?

Your intention and mindset will come through in the conversation. The goal is to show your child that you care and that you are approachable, not only about personal safety, but about any potentially uncomfortable topic. If you bring it up calmly and comfortably, your child will be more comfortable coming back to you later. The real foundation you are building is not just rules, but **trust and open communication**.

Many parents fall into the trap of saying, "We need to sit down and have that conversation about safety before camp." This can immediately raise a child's defenses. They roll their eyes and prepare themselves for another lecture they feel they have already heard. Approaching the topic as a formal obligation, rather than an act of care, can shut down genuine dialogue.

Similarly, if parents raise the topic too frequently, children may push back and think, "My parents are so anxious." The key is not to make the conversation about your anxiety. It should be about supporting and educating your child.

It is important for **fathers to speak directly with their sons** about personal safety, especially regarding physical boundaries, changes in their bodies, and navigating social situations at camp. Fathers can model openness by saying something like: "If you ever have questions or if something makes you uncomfortable, you can come to me. Even if you're not sure whether it was okay or not, we can think it through together."

It is important for **fathers to speak directly with their sons** about personal safety, especially regarding physical boundaries, changes in their bodies, and navigating social situations at camp.

Modeling that adults can handle these conversations, even when they are uncomfortable, helps create a foundation of trust and safety.

The goal is to **spread the conversation across multiple interactions** rather than delivering one long lecture. Give children space to respond, ask questions, and process information. Conversations should feel natural and ongoing. Avoid making the discussion feel like a checklist. Instead of saying, "First we're going to talk about this, then pictures, then secrets," allow topics to arise naturally in everyday conversations.

It is also helpful to start these discussions **several weeks before camp**, not the night before departure. Early conversations give children time to process the information and ask follow-up questions. Waiting until the last minute can make the conversation feel rushed or anxiety-driven. Starting earlier communicates that this topic is important and that you are comfortable discussing it.

What tools can I give my child in conversations about personal safety?

In addition to the abovementioned core principles, that their body belongs to them, that private areas are off-limits, that pictures require permission, and that secrets about bodies are never acceptable, children also need **practical tools and language** so they know exactly what to do if something feels uncomfortable.

Standing Up for Boundaries.

Children should know they are in charge of their bodies in all situations, even ones that may appear innocent. If someone wants to give them a massage, braid their hair, or initiate physical contact that makes them uncomfortable, they have the right to decline.

Help your child practice simple phrases such as: "Thanks, but I'm not comfortable with that." "I'm good, thank you." "I don't want that right now." It may feel awkward for a child to say no, especially in a group setting, but being able to maintain those boundaries is important. Practicing these phrases beforehand helps children feel prepared if the situation arises.

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Identifying a Trusted Adult.

Before camp begins, identify a **trusted adult at camp** that your child can turn to if they feel uncomfortable. This could be a camp mother, a division head, the camp director, or another staff member you trust. If you have sent children to this camp before, you may already know who that person is. If it is your first time, ask the camp who would be appropriate for your child to approach with concerns. Make sure your child knows this person's **name and role**.

Tell them clearly: "*If you ever feel uncomfortable about something, whether it's safety, bullying, homesickness, or anything else, I want you to go talk to [name]. They are there to help you.*"

The Family Password System.

Another useful tool is establishing a **family password** before camp, a single word or short phrase your child can use as an emergency signal.

Explain it this way: "*If you ever call me and say this password, I won't ask questions on the phone because you might be in a situation where you can't explain what's happening. When you say that word, I'll know you need help right away.*"

This system has worked in real situations. In one case, a boy struggled to get just 30 seconds on the phone from the camp office late at night. When he reached his parents, he said the family password. They immediately understood something was wrong and took action.

The password gave him the ability to signal that he needed help, even when he couldn't explain the situation.

How should a parent respond when a child reports an uncomfortable incident at camp?

The most important thing is that your child sees that when they tell you something, you take it seriously and do something to help keep them safe. Research shows that many children who experience inappropriate touch never tell anyone. Of those who do speak up, a large percentage feel that no one truly heard them did something about it, and then they don't tell again. Make sure your child knows you hear them and listen, you care, and their safety matters enough for you to take action.

In most situations, children don't lie about being touched. They might, understandably, dramatize a little, but they generally don't make it up. Err on the side of listening and trusting your child, and take their words seriously.

What to Say in the Moment. Stay calm. Your tone and body language should communicate: "I'm here. I can handle this. I'm the adult." Start simply and calmly: "Can you tell me about that?" Let them speak in their own words.

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Mirror back what they say without adding interpretation: "He touched you on your backside." Pause there. As they continue, use gentle prompts like, "Tell me more about that," or "I see." When they finish, thank them: "Thank you for trusting me. Thank you for telling me." Always validate: "I'm so sorry that happened. I'm so sorry someone did that to you."

If this comes up during a short camp phone call and there isn't enough time to finish the conversation, don't try to rush or force it. Reach out to the camp director and request time to speak with your child more fully: "My child mentioned something concerning, and I need time to continue the conversation." Let your child know ahead of time that you'll be contacting the camp to arrange this, so they aren't surprised or embarrassed if someone approaches them.

What NOT to Do. When your child calls or tells you about something concerning, your immediate reaction matters enormously. Do not become hyper or overly dramatic. Avoid reactions like, "Oh my gosh, what do you mean? Who did what?" That kind of response signals that you're overwhelmed, which can make your child feel unsafe bringing things to you.

Do not ask a lot of leading questions or try to extract every detail immediately. Avoid interrogating them with questions like, "What were you wearing? What was he wearing? Who else was there?" This can cause children to shut down or fill in details just to satisfy you. Don't try to get the complete story in one conversation, especially during a short camp phone call.

Taking Action. After listening, explain your next steps: "This is what I need to do to help keep you safe. I think I need to call the camp director." If your child says, "Don't tell anyone," respond calmly: "I need to be concerned about your safety. You can tell me how you'd like me to say it, but I need to do what I need to do as your parent to keep you safe."

Allow them a say in how you move forward, while making it clear that taking action on their behalf is part of your responsibility.

Following Up with Camp. When you contact the camp, be direct about your concerns so that they can further investigate the situation in camp. Depending on the situation, you may need to insist on specific steps—separating children, addressing staff behavior, or increasing supervision. At the same time, work collaboratively with the camp, allowing them the space to conduct their own investigation and determine appropriate next steps.

Update Your Child. This is what matters most. Let your child know who you contacted and what the plans are. Show them that when they speak up, you hear them, you care, and you are there to make sure they are safe and to help in any way you can.

What if I am sensing an unhealthy relationship?

If you're at camp for visiting day or if you hear about relationships developing, stay alert without being intrusive. Is your child able to maintain multiple friendships, or does one relationship seem to dominate their time and emotional energy? Do they seem anxious about pleasing a particular person? Has an older camper or counselor taken an unusual interest in your child?

These observations don't automatically mean something inappropriate is happening, but they do warrant a gentle conversation: "I noticed you've been spending a lot of time with [name]. Tell me about that friendship. How does it feel? Do you still get time with your other friends? Is there anything about it that ever makes you uncomfortable?"

After camp, how can parents stay alert and respond appropriately if something feels off?

Start with this: trust your instincts. If something feels off, don't dismiss it as "just adjusting back from camp." Parents need to stay engaged and observant. Your attention and follow-through after camp are just as important as the conversations you had before camp began. If your child seems different in a way that concerns you, pay attention and explore it thoughtfully, through conversation, consultation with professionals, or contact with the camp if necessary. Your awareness and willingness to act can make all the difference.

> Trust your instincts. If something feels off, don't dismiss it as 'just adjusting back from camp.'

Showing Interest Without Being Intrusive. When your child returns after being away for weeks, show genuine interest without overwhelming them. Too often, the conversation stops at "How was camp? and the child responds, "Great." Your child was away for several weeks; don't let that be the entirety of your connection.

Ask open-ended questions over several days rather than all at once. "What were the highlights? What did you like best? How were the trips? Who were your favorite staff members? How was the food? What was their role in the camp play or color war?" Show that their experiences matter to you, but avoid a rapid-fire barrage of questions that feels like

an interrogation. Find the balance between genuine curiosity and giving them space. Often, it's this steady, interested engagement that creates the opening for a child to share something deeper or more concerning that may have happened.

Red Flags: Behavioral Changes. Pay attention to significant shifts in behavior or mood. If your child left for camp doing well, sleeping fine, engaged with friends, generally happy, and returns showing marked differences, take note. Warning signs may include: increased anxiety or appearing on edge, not wanting to go to school, difficulty concentrating, trouble focusing on tasks or conversations, withdrawal from friends or activities, signs of depression, or changes in sleep patterns.

These symptoms could indicate that something happened at camp. They could also reflect anxiety, depression, or even a medical issue unrelated to camp. They are signals that something needs attention, not proof of a specific incident.

When to Seek Professional Help. If you notice significant behavioral changes, consider consulting a mental health professional. You might say: "My child left for camp this way and came back this way. These are my concerns. How should I handle this?" Look for a therapist who works with children or teens and has experience with sexual abuse issues, not because you are certain that it occurred, but because you want someone skilled in exploring concerns carefully, without jumping to conclusions or overlooking important signs.

Concerning Contact After Camp. Be alert to inappropriate ongoing contact. If a counselor is calling your child multiple times a day after camp ends, that is a red flag. Ask your child calmly: "Can you tell me about your relationship with him? What do you think is making him call so often? Do you think that's appropriate?"

You may also contact the camp director: “I’ve noticed this counselor is calling my child frequently. Can you tell me what’s going on?” If needed, be direct with the counselor: “It’s not appropriate. Please don’t call my child.” A counselor should not have that kind of ongoing, intense contact after camp is over.

HELPING CHILDREN THRIVE AT SUMMER CAMP

The following content is drawn from a transcribed conversation with Rivki Jungreis, LCSW, MS.E.d.

Rivki (Renee) Jungreis, LCSW, MS.Ed., is a licensed clinical social worker and trauma specialist with over 20 years of experience in treatment, prevention, and education. She is the Founder and Director of Advanced Psychological Trainings, LLC, where she leads the development and delivery of EMDR intensives and advanced clinical trainings for professionals worldwide.

Camp isn't just a fun break from school; it's a rich environment full of opportunities for real growth and change. It's a place where children can develop, try new things, and learn about skills and strengths they may not have known they had or could acquire. Children learn to navigate social challenges, make decisions, and especially how to tolerate discomfort. Camp offers varied pathways towards social growth. When children make new friends outside of their usual circles, it builds flexibility and social courage. Camp provides spaces for change and countless opportunities for independence, resilience, and self-discovery.

Beyond the excitement, camp also brings normal feelings of homesickness and anxiety, especially for first-time campers. Being away from home and adjusting to a new environment can feel overwhelming—but these challenges are part of the experience, and they can be supported and addressed with the right preparation.

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An EMDRIA-approved consultant and EMDR child specialist, Rivki has trained in Internal Family Systems (IFS), Somatic therapy, and play-based modalities in her work with adults, children, and families. She is an international speaker and trainer, recognized for her work at the intersection of clinical practice, trauma recovery, and community-based mental health initiatives.

An author and educator, Rivki has published on trauma prevention, treatment, and informed parenting. She serves as a Board Member and Training Coordinator at NEFESH International, is a member of the Association of Jewish Psychologists, and is Director of Outreach and Counseling at the Hineni Heritage Center in New York, as well as an Executive Board Member of the New York City Trauma Recovery Network.

In what ways is the camp experience important for a child's development?

The camp experience can be incredibly important for a child's development because it offers opportunities that are hard to replicate at home or in school.

Independence. Camp provides children with many diverse opportunities to develop autonomy. They'll manage their own routines, make decisions without parental input, and learn to solve problems independently. Whether it's something as simple as doing laundry or as complex as navigating social dynamics, these experiences build competence and confidence.

Resilience. At camp, children may face challenges like homesickness, frustration, or boredom that help them develop resilience. They learn to "become comfortable with the uncomfortable". Navigating these ups and downs teaches them that they can cope with difficulties, adapt to new situations, and bounce back from setbacks, which is an important life skill that will serve them long after camp ends.

Identity Development. Camp gives children the chance to explore different sides of themselves and even reinvent themselves. A child who feels shy at school might step into a leadership role, or one who doubts their athletic abilities might discover new strengths. They can take on leadership roles they were embarrassed to attempt at home or simply be seen fresh without the baggage of their usual classroom image. These experiences help shape identity in a flexible, supportive environment.

Real-World Skills. Children learn all sorts of real-world skills from building fires to fixing loose screws, from doing laundry and pacing their snack consumption, from making friends outside their usual circle to experiencing different cultures. These aren't just "fun activities", They're life competencies that kids will draw on for years.

Do some kids do better at camp than others?

Much of it comes down to resiliency, environmental factors, support systems, and previous traumas already experienced. Understanding your child's personality, needs, strengths, and weaknesses will help you anticipate how they might handle camp. It also helps you know how to support them, what works for your child, and what doesn't. This information helps counselors to guide and scaffold your child's experience.

Attachment Style as the Primary Predictor. A person's resiliency is closely tied to their attachment history. Children with secure attachments who experienced consistent, attuned parenting with availability, love, and clear communication tend to have positive experiences at camp. They can regulate their emotions and approach new challenges with confidence.

Children with ambivalent attachment, whose parenting was inconsistent, may be clingy and anxious, constantly seeking reassurance. Avoidant children, who learned early to rely on themselves, often act like they don't need help and may resist guidance from counselors. Children with disorganized attachment, whose caregivers were frightening or unpredictable, can struggle with frustration or even destructive behavior.

Resiliency Matters Too. Past experiences navigating challenges with independence are also key. Children who have been allowed to figure things out for themselves develop the tolerance for the inevitable discomforts that may come up at camp. Kids who have been rescued from every challenge may approach camp feeling it's impossible before it even begins.

When Parental Experiences Become the Child's Anxiety. A child's readiness is also affected by parents, often unintentionally. Anxiety is transmitted, and this significantly affects camp adjustment. Parents who loved camp can become desperate for their children to have the same experience, creating enormous pressure on shy or introverted kids. Parents who had terrible camp experiences become too sympathetic when challenges arise, too quick to attune with their child's inability to overcome bumps. I had a mother in my office who was frantically shopping for her child's first camp experience. Her husband had commented on the 24 T-shirts and the excessive amount of clothing. When I asked about her own camp experience, she broke down, describing how her mother sent her to camp with cheap clothes that looked like potato sacks and with very few undergarments. She recalled having to wash items in the sink and how those clothes never dried properly in the cold air. She was overdoing it because of her own unfortunate experiences. The mother came to see that her own anxiety and past camp experiences were influencing her daughter's feelings of stress about going to camp.

Your child is not you, and they're going to have their own experience. You have to manage your own triggers and not project your camp story onto theirs. Your child's camp experience is theirs alone.

Practical Readiness: The Baseline Test. There are also practical indicators of readiness. If your child really can't sleep alone in their own room at home, sleepaway camp may be too much without some therapeutic intervention. You can't expect camp to work miracles if your child hasn't mastered basic separations at home.

Similarly, if a child is highly perfectionistic or self-critical, like the kid who got a 98 bowling score instead of a 100 and couldn't move past the disappointment, they'll struggle more with activities where they're not

immediately excellent. And if a child is dealing with active, unresolved trauma, they simply have less capacity to handle the normal challenges of camp adjustment.

Some children need a step-by-step approach before they can thrive away from home. Once they develop emotional self-regulation, independence, and a tolerance for frustration, they are much better positioned to benefit from camp. Let the camp know about your child's needs so they can provide the right support.

What should I talk about with my child to know if they are ready for camp?

Have an honest conversation with your child. Some kids are genuinely not ready, and pushing too hard can backfire. However, don't confuse "I'm comfortable at home" with a genuine inability to handle camp. Many kids who express mild reluctance end up thriving when given encouraging support rather than an escape route.

You need to talk to your child and get a sense of how comfortable they feel. This isn't about letting them make the final decision, but it is about understanding where they're starting from emotionally. The goal of the conversation is to assess whether this is mild reluctance that needs encouragement or genuine unreadiness that needs more time and skill-building.

The conversation shouldn't be, "Do you want to go or not?" Instead, it should sound more like: "Tell me what worries you. Let's talk about what camp will be like. What would help you feel more ready?" This opens a dialogue and gives you real information to work with.

You also want to explore specific concerns. If there are practical challenges, like sleeping away from home or something like bedwetting, you need to talk through whether the child feels they can handle it. Ask how they would feel managing it, and how they would feel if others knew. Every child is different in what they can tolerate, so it's important to have an honest and respectful conversation about both the practical and emotional realities.

At the end of the day, the key is truly knowing and understanding your child and being honest about who you're sending to camp. Is this a child who feels anxious but is still capable of pushing oneself to try, or a child who genuinely doesn't yet have the tools to manage the experience? Having that clarity can guide your decision: whether to gently encourage them, spend more time preparing, or wait until they're more ready.

I had a terrible camp experience growing up. How do I not pass on my anxiety to my child?

The Mirror Effect. Children look into their mother's face as a mirror to themselves. If you're smiling, encouraging, and believing in them, that's what they see reflected. If you're negative, upset, or anxious, the child sees that as a reflection of their own capability, or lack thereof.

Understanding Mentalization. This is about holding your child's emotional state while managing your own. Can you stay regulated when your child gets dysregulated? Or do you fall into what's called a "trauma vortex", where their distress triggers you to relive your unresolved trauma?

Separate Your Story from Theirs. Your child is not you. They're going to a different camp, in a different era, with different support systems. Even if you send them to the same camp you attended, they will still have their own unique experience. Your job is to communicate: "This could be really great for you, even though it wasn't for me."

When Past Trauma Makes You Too Sympathetic. Parents with negative camp experiences often become overly sympathetic to every bump or adverse feeling. They are too quick to connect with their child's inability to overcome humps and to be overly sympathetic. This isn't helpful either. Your child needs you to believe they can handle challenges, not to rescue them from every moment of discomfort.

How do I prepare my child for camp in the weeks before?

Start talking with your child about camp four to six weeks before it begins. This gives you time to address concerns gradually, rather than rushing everything at the last minute. Early conversations let you introduce ideas slowly, giving your child space to process, ask questions, and work through worries together.

As you prepare your child (and yourself) for camp, remember that your belief in their ability to handle challenges comes through. Not just in your words, but in your tone, your actions, and how you get ready together. It comes through in what you pack, the arrangements you make with camp, and the choices you support. When children feel that confidence reflected consistently, they're more likely to approach new experiences with courage and resilience.

Normalize the adjustment period. Let your child know, "The first couple of days might feel weird or uncomfortable, that's completely normal. Give it a few days, and it'll get easier." Don't just reassure them with vague statements like "you'll do fine." Provide concrete strategies they can actually use.

Role-play potential situations. Help your child practice words and strategies for scenarios they are worried about. For example, suggest ways to make friends: "Can I sit next to you?" or "What activity are you going to do today?" Remind them that friendships at camp take a few days to form, so they shouldn't expect instant best friends.

Encourage proactive ways to manage anxiety. Talk about it. "If you're feeling nervous, go try a new activity. Anxiety sits with you if you do nothing, but action can distract it." Set realistic expectations. "You don't have to love every activity. If you're not sporty, that's fine, pick what you do enjoy, like art or swimming."

Practice separations. If your child has never spent a night away from home, a night or two at a cousin's or grandparent's house can give them the experience of being away from you and realizing they can be okay.

Packing thoughtfully also helps with adjustment. Include familiar comfort items, such as their own bedding rather than brand-new sheets or old 'camp sheets', and favorite snacks with a note from you. Avoid overdoing treats or sending excessive items that might set up comparisons with other campers.

Address potential money and peer-pressure issues upfront. Explain that some kids will have more than they do. Their friends may come to camp with more money, more clothes, more stuff, and some will have less. That's just part of life. What truly matters isn't what you own, but the kind of person you are. Other kids will remember how you made them feel: how kind, funny, and helpful you were, not how many sweatshirts and trinkets you had. Long after grades are forgotten and things wear out, it's your character that stays with people.

Friendships. Encourage your child to build connections, but also set boundaries. "Camp is a great place to make friends, and it can be a lot of fun. But it's also important to know your limits. If another camper tells you something that feels uncomfortable or too big for you to handle, I want you to tell a counselor or another adult you trust, even if they ask you to keep it a secret. You don't have to fix anyone's problems. Your job is to be a friend and stay safe."

Talk about body safety. Frame it as one of many safety lessons, like wearing a helmet when riding a bike. Present it in a positive, empowering way. Keep the tone calm and reassuring: "I'm not telling you this to scare you, I'm teaching you so you always know how to stay safe and who to go to for help." [Editor note: See the Body-Safety Conversations guide on page 59, which combines insights from Debbie Fox and Rivki Jungreis. It's a handy reference to help you find the words and strategies that feel right for your family.]

What not to do. Equally important is what not to do. Don't keep asking, "Are you still nervous?" or over-analyze their worries, as this can amplify anxiety. Avoid frantically shopping for every little thing or acting as though they need a million items to be okay. The goal is to give them tools, confidence, and support, not to micromanage or overprotect.

What to Say: "This is a new experience, it may feel a little scary at first, but give it a few days, it will begin to get easier, and I know and believe you can handle it." Let them know how proud you are of them for trying something new and overcoming their worry or fear.

What NOT to Say: "I'll miss you sooo much too and will think of you every day, you can call me whenever, especially if you are sad. Try it for a few days, and if you hate it, I'll pick you up." Don't try to convince them with long emotional speeches about how this is the best thing for them. Don't keep reassuring or saying "Don't worry, don't worry," repeatedly and anxiously.

What should I say (and NOT say) when dropping my child off at camp?

Keep It simple and confident. It's not just what you say, it's how you say it. Are you calm or overly emotional? Confident or hesitant? Your body language and tone communicate your true beliefs about their capability, and most importantly, if you're too worried, they get the idea that they might have something to be worried about.

If they get upset, acknowledge the feeling without magnifying it, "I know this is hard for you. I'm going now, and I know you're going to be okay." Don't linger, don't keep coming back for one more hug. A clean, confident departure is kindest.

Never make the "Rescue Deal". Offering to pick your child up if things don't go well significantly reduces their chances of success. Firstly, it sends the message that you agree there might be something to worry about, and it tells them you have little confidence in their ability to cope, and that the only solution to difficulty is escape. This undermines both your child and the camp staff.

What if they get very upset at drop-off? Acknowledge the feeling without intensifying it.

What should I share with my child in letters and phone conversations?

The way you communicate with your child during camp can either support their adjustment or make it harder. Every letter, email, or phone call should be intentional, aimed at helping them feel encouraged, capable, and connected, without pulling them back into homesickness.

What to share: In your messages, keep the tone warm, positive, and steady. Let them know you're proud of them for starting camp and trying something new. Normalize what they may be feeling: "It's okay to miss home, you're doing great", while still expressing confidence in their ability to handle it. Share simple, neutral updates from home, like news about everyday life, and ask about their activities, friends, and what they're experiencing. This keeps the focus on their growth and their life at camp.

What not to share: At the same time, be mindful of what not to include. Avoid talking about exciting things happening at home that they're missing, like special outings or family events, for example, the amazing barbecue that everyone loved. Try not to send overly emotional messages like "I miss you so much," or anything that suggests you're worried about them or unsure if they can handle it. Even subtle messages can make going home feel more appealing, and camp feel harder.

The underlying message in every interaction should be clear and consistent: ***"I'm thinking of you, I'm proud of you, and I believe you can do this."***

If the camp lets you know your child is struggling, you might increase contact slightly, sending a few more short, supportive notes or having an extra check-in. But too much contact can sometimes make homesickness worse, so it's important to find the right balance and work together with the camp staff to support your child most effectively.

My child called me crying and begging to come home. What do I do?

When children hear your voice, it can trigger all their homesick feelings at once. They might be participating in activities, making friends, and generally doing okay, but the moment they speak to their parents, everything comes rushing up, and they fall apart. This is actually very normal and doesn't necessarily reflect how they're functioning the rest of the day.

To understand what you're dealing with, it's helpful to think in terms of frequency, intensity, and duration. **Frequency:** Are the calls happening every day? Or are they begging the camp every day to be able to call home? **Intensity:** Is the distress mild sadness or a full emotional breakdown? **Duration:** How long during the conversation is the focus on how hard camp is? Does it pass after a few minutes, or is it persistent? These factors help you distinguish between typical homesickness and something that needs more attention.

Normal homesickness. This often sounds like: "I miss you", "I don't like the food", "I don't have friends yet." These children are usually still able to engage in activities, can be distracted by what's going on around them, and tend to improve within the first few days. As they settle in, friendships and routines begin to help, and they're often able to talk about at least something they enjoyed.

Pay attention to red flags. While some homesickness is normal, certain signs may indicate your child is experiencing some level of **separation anxiety disorder** and needs extra support. Physical symptoms can include refusing to eat, frequent stomachaches, nightmares about separation,

or extreme fear of being alone. Behavioral signs may include ongoing withdrawal or social isolation, repeated refusal to join activities, frequent begging to call home, difficulty being comforted or redirected, persistent crying despite staff support, or challenges in interacting with peers. Noticing these cues can help you distinguish typical homesickness from a situation that requires additional attention.

The most important thing is how you respond. Stay calm and grounded, using a "peanut butter voice" (as if simply asking the child if they would like peanut butter): smooth, steady, and not reactive. Ask gentle questions like, "Was there anything you did like today?" to help them see that the experience isn't all negative. Normalize what they're feeling: "It's okay to miss home. That's part of being at camp." And at the same time, give it a little time: "Let's see how the next few days go." It's also important to stay in communication with the camp staff, who can give you a clearer picture of how your child is actually doing throughout the day.

My child is crying on the phone. How do I respond without making it worse?

When your child is crying, the most important thing is to offer a calm, steady presence. Be the anchor. Don't get emotional or sound uncertain. Keep your voice regulated and the call short.

For younger children (7–11), the goal is safety and simplicity. They need to feel safe and not alone. Ask about one thing they may have liked; hopefully, they can share; if not, that's okay. Tell them you love them, you know they miss home, and you also know they can do this. Redirect them and give a simple plan for after the call: find a friend, join a group activity, or go to their counselor, who is there to help. The goal is to move them from feeling alone to feeling connected and supported, with the belief: I'm safe, and my parents believe I can do this.

With teenagers, the approach shifts toward validation and collaboration. They may say, "I hate it here" or "I don't fit in," and the first step is to acknowledge their feelings without rushing to rescue. Let them talk. You can ask, "What's been the hardest part?" Listen, then help them move forward: "What's one thing that might make it even a little easier tomorrow?" The message is: you're not coming home, but we can figure this out together. Help them consider options, without offering solutions; let the ideas come from them when possible. The goal is not to solve it for them, but to build confidence in their ability to handle discomfort.

The principles are the same for all ages: stay calm, keep the call short, and don't offer solutions. Avoid phrases like 'If it gets worse, I'll come' or 'Let's see how you feel tomorrow,' which create uncertainty. This is about trust and respect; you're not fixing it, you're reinforcing their ability to handle it.

My child came back from camp acting different, with new attitudes, slang, and even some defiance. Should I be worried?

Some change is not only normal, but it's also the point. Camp exposes the children to new experiences, people, and ideas, giving them space to grow in ways they might not at home. Being away from their parents' direct influence allows them to test independence, explore new interests, and absorb new ideas from peers and the camp environment.

Along with this growth, you may notice common post-camp shifts: picking up new slang, showing a bit more defiance, becoming more focused on appearance or clothing, changing friendship preferences, trying new habits, both positive and negative, or having emotional reactions like withdrawal or anxiety. These changes are usually a natural part of development and don't necessarily indicate a problem.

What matters most is how you respond as a parent. Your reaction sets the tone for how your child integrates their new experiences. Staying curious rather than judgmental helps them reflect and make sense of what they've learned, while overreacting, judging, or criticizing can shut down communication. Criticism doesn't really change the child; it often just teaches them to absorb shame. Remember this: children who feel criticized don't hate their parents, they hate themselves.

Be curious about the new words they're using or the behaviors they're showing. The right response is to stay curious and open and ask questions rather than lecture. Instead of reacting with "We don't do it that way!" try something like, "Oh, really? That's interesting, tell me more about that."

Ask open-ended questions to learn more about their experience: "What surprised you about camp?" "What was hard?" "Did you feel pressure to do things you didn't want to do?" or "What did you learn about yourself?"

After listening and staying open, you can gently guide them toward your family values or expectations if needed. For example: "I hear you. In our family, we handle that differently because..." Avoid lecturing; this should be a conversation, not a sermon. Keep in mind that your response models how they process change and new experiences, helping them integrate what they learned in a balanced way.

The critical principle is that if you overreact to what your child shares, they may start hiding things. Staying open, curious, and supportive allows them to process not only their camp experiences but also future experiences safely and confidently.

Seek professional support if you notice persistent withdrawal, major personality shifts that don't improve, or signs of trauma. These are indicators that your child may need extra help in healthily integrating their camp experiences.

How to talk to your child about body safety

Key takeaways from the sections based on conversations with Debbie Fox, LCSW and Rivki Jungreis, LCSW, MS.E.d.

Tone in these conversations:

- Make it as normal as talking about bike helmets or pool safety.
- Use your 'peanut butter' voice.

Describing Body Autonomy:

- "Your body belongs to you. No one should touch, look at, or talk about your private parts without your permission. And you shouldn't touch or look at other people's private parts."
- "Private parts are the areas covered by your bathing suit." Use the proper names for all body parts so your child can talk about them clearly if they ever need to.
- "Private parts are private because they are yours. Only parents (for cleaning or care) or doctors/nurses (for health reasons) may need to touch them."
- "It's important to respect other people's spaces, just like you want them to respect yours."

Safe Touch vs. Unsafe Touch:

- "Safe touch helps you feel loved, like hugs from family. Unsafe touches make you feel scared or uncomfortable."

Private/ Secret vs Surprises:

- "Surprises are fun and positive experiences shared with others, and revealed at a specific time (like a surprise party or surprise gift). Secrets are kept hidden forever and can make you feel worried or uncomfortable."
- "If someone asks you to keep a secret that makes you feel bad or scared, tell a trusted adult."
- "If someone says something is 'private between us,' that's the same as a secret."

Encourage Open Communication:

- "You can always tell me if something feels wrong, scary, or yucky. You won't get in trouble for telling me."
- "If someone tells you to keep a secret, that's a warning sign. We don't keep secrets from parents."

Identify a Trusted Adult:

- "If you ever feel uncomfortable about something, whether it's safety, bullying, homesickness, or anything else, I want you to go talk to [name]. They are there to help you."

The Family Password System:

- "If you ever call me and say this password, I won't ask questions on the phone because you might be in a situation where you can't explain what's happening. When you say that word, I'll know you need help right away."

After the child tells you about something:

- Stay calm. Your tone and body language should communicate: "I'm here. I can handle this. I'm the adult." Start simply and calmly: "Can you tell me more about that?"

UNDERSTANDING SCREEN TIME: WHAT IT'S REALLY DOING TO YOUR CHILD

The following content is based on a transcribed conversation with Amy (Friedy) Guttmann-Singer and Evelyn (Roizy) Guttmann, OTR/L of Hands on Approaches.

Amy and Evelyn Guttmann, OTR/L, neurodevelopmental pediatric occupational therapist, are most known for getting to the root of anxiety and productivity challenges. They have been treating families and children with over 50 years of experience between them. Better known as the "Guttmann Sisters", their focus has been on educating and empowering the community on the prevention of anxiety and social-emotional delays.

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Graduates of SUNY Health Science Center of New York, Amy and Evelyn currently run Hands on OT Rehab, a private practice focused on treating children with anxiety and processing delays, as well as a practice focused on training and educating therapists, pediatricians, educators, and parents. They have evaluated over 12,000 children and have been guest lecturers in some of the most prominent universities around the world. Founders of **Hands on Approaches** and the **non-profit, the H.O.P.E. (Hands on Parent Empowerment) Foundation**, their specialties include Sensory Integration, NDT training, reflex integration, auditory processing specialization, and behavioral management. They are the authors of internationally recognized articles on screen time and anxiety in children and are currently conducting research on sensory processing disorder and anxiety diagnosis.

Their **weekly talks**, **"Quiet the Noise"**, have gathered a community of over 800K listeners each week, as they answer questions live and provide education and awareness. Feel free to join their community here: www.handsonapproaches.com/join-us-live/

Their online closed community, "Transcend™ ", has allowed them to support hundreds of parents, therapists and individuals, looking to maximize the implementation of self-development goals. It has also been gaining attention from national institutions on the impact of prevention of physiological anxiety. Join here: www.handsonapproaches.com/transcend/

To learn more about their work, check out their podcast "Quiet the Noise" and follow them at www.instagram.com/handsonapproaches.

If you are not on social media, join their WhatsApp group.

We tend to think carefully about our children's physical safety. We make sure they eat, we childproof our homes, we teach water safety, and we watch them closely at the playground. But screen time, which slowly affects brain development, sleep, emotional regulation, attention, and even long-term functioning, often slips under the radar. Not because we don't care, but because we don't fully see what's happening beneath the surface.

We live in a world where screens are unavoidable. They're everywhere - in stores, restaurants, schools, and daily life. And sometimes, they offer parents a few much-needed moments to take care of other responsibilities. The goal isn't to deny that reality, but to understand it, so we can make intentional choices, especially during the years when children's brains are still forming their foundation.

In the summer, when school ends, much of a child's daily structure falls away. The rhythm, movement, and transitions soften. In that open space, screens easily take center stage. What starts as a convenient solution can quietly become hours of daily use, replacing the movement, play, and exploration children need for healthy development.

This same season also opens a door. Summer brings a breathing room we don't have during the year, more flexibility, fewer pressures, and more capacity to notice what's going on. Without the constant push of schedules, we have a rare chance to shift patterns, try something different, and create a rhythm that can last beyond the summer.

Before the school year begins again, summer offers a window, an opportunity to pause and reset. Whether that means making bigger changes, setting clearer boundaries, or simply understanding your child in a new way, the pages ahead are here to guide you not toward perfection, but toward awareness, clarity, and choices that truly support your child's growth.

What are the real downsides of screen time for children, and why does it affect them so strongly?

This isn't about what children are watching; it's about what screen viewing itself does to them. There's an important distinction here. Even when content is appropriate, educational, or aligned with our values, the *experience* of being on a screen has its own impact on a child's brain and body, especially in younger children whose systems are still developing.

Screens don't just entertain kids; they overstimulate their developing brains. Modern video content floods the brain with fast-moving images, bright colors, and constant changes that a child's visual system has to work hard to process. While the eyes and brain are busy taking all this in, other important systems that help a child feel grounded in their body - like the vestibular system (spatial awareness and balance) and the proprioceptive system (body awareness) are suppressed. This also directly impacts their emotional regulation.

In a sense, your child is in a kind of "tuned-out" state. It can even feel calming to them, because all the other sensory input is muted. But when the screen turns off, those systems suddenly have to come back online all at once. Instead of a smooth transition, it can feel disorienting and overwhelming. The brain is trying to reorient: Where am I? What's happening? That internal overload can come out as crying, yelling, or even hitting.

Screen time also disrupts the body's natural rhythms, especially sleep. The blue light from screens lowers melatonin, the hormone that helps us fall asleep. This makes it harder for children to wind down and get deep,

restorative sleep. Using screens before bed is especially challenging, often increasing anxiety and making bedtime struggles more likely. Over time, this throws off the body's natural sense of day and night.

There's also a powerful brain chemistry piece happening behind the scenes. Screens create quick dopamine spikes, the brain's "feel-good" chemical, without any effort or internal motivation. This can lead children to rely on screens to feel calm or regulated, needing more and more over time. When screens are taken away, the dopamine drop can feel uncomfortable in their bodies, even leading to withdrawal-like reactions. It can also interfere with other important chemicals like serotonin and melatonin, which support mood and self-regulation.

For younger children, screen time can interfere with critical stages of development. In the first two years of life, children learn best through real hands-on experiences, touching, moving, exploring, and interacting with people. Screens don't provide that. Instead, they can shape the brain to expect constant external stimulation rather than building curiosity and internal engagement. Even beyond toddlerhood, heavy screen use can make it harder for kids to focus, be patient, and stay with slower-paced activities.

Emotionally, screens can make it harder for kids to build real regulation skills. When children rely on screens to fill boredom or soothe discomfort, they miss the chance to learn how to handle those feelings themselves. They don't get as much practice transitioning between activities or generating their own ideas. So when the screen is removed, the emotions can come out big and fast, not because the child is being difficult, but because they haven't yet built those internal tools.

And over time, it impacts how kids function in the real world. Less face-to-face interaction means fewer opportunities to learn social skills like turn-taking, reading cues, and managing conversations. Less physical

play affects both the body and the brain. Daily habits can also shift; starting the day with screens can lower motivation, disrupt routines, and make everything from getting dressed to eating more of a struggle. Over the long term, this can affect confidence, relationships, and the ability to manage responsibilities.

The key idea is this: children's reactions to screens aren't just behavioral - they're physiological. It's their nervous system. Their brains and bodies are responding in real ways that they can't yet control. This isn't about blame or judgment, it's about understanding what's happening underneath, so we can support kids in building healthier patterns that truly help them grow.

It's so much easier to give my kids screens in the morning while I get ready, or at night, so they settle down. What's the harm?

We get it, and there's no judgment here. While screens can feel like the easiest option in the moment, they often come with a cost: harder mornings, more resistance, disrupted sleep, and a child who feels less regulated overall.

Morning. In the morning, a child's body is naturally trying to wake up and get organized. This is when they build internal momentum - figuring out what comes next, tuning into their body, and easing into the day. When a screen is introduced right away, it replaces that internal process with an immediate external burst of dopamine. Instead of slowly waking up, their system gets overstimulated. So when it's time to turn off the screen and get dressed, they're not more cooperative, they're less. Transitions feel harder, motivation drops, and simple tasks can turn into power struggles. What feels like a shortcut often creates a harder morning.

Instead, think in terms of gently helping their system wake up. Music, singing, or even a simple routine, like washing up, getting dressed, and choosing clothing, can support a more natural build of momentum. These kinds of inputs work with the child's system, not against it, making the morning flow more smoothly over time.

Nighttime. At night, screens can seem calming, but they actually work against the body's ability to fall asleep. The blue light from screens suppresses melatonin, the hormone that signals it's time to sleep. But beyond the light itself, it's also the overstimulation. As we discussed earlier, screens flood the brain with fast-moving visual input, keeping

the system alert and activated. When a child is in that state, they can't easily tune into their body's natural cues of tiredness. Instead of winding down, their brain stays engaged, stimulated, and "awake."

Even "calm" activities like reading on a Kindle can have this effect. While it feels like a quiet activity (and it is reading), the LED screen still stimulates the brain and interferes with sleep signals. Children may look relaxed, but their system isn't actually shifting into rest mode. Instead, they should be reading from a physical book. Holding a book engages the senses in a calming way and helps them tune into their own tiredness. If they're exhausted, they drift off quickly. If they need to unwind, the reading itself helps them regulate.

Professionals often recommend stopping screens at least an hour - ideally two - before bedtime. It allows the body to settle and begin producing melatonin naturally.

Every time I turn off the screen, my child melts down. What's actually happening, and how should I handle it?

First, take a breath. This isn't about bad behavior, and it's not a sign that something is wrong with your child. What you're seeing is a real physiological response.

As stated above, when children are watching screens, their visual system is working overtime to process fast-moving images, bright colors, and constant changes. Then, when the screen turns off, those "other" systems (such as vestibular, proprioception, etc.) "wake back up," which can look like sudden dysregulation, restlessness, or emotional outbursts.

This is why the reaction can feel so intense. Your child isn't just upset that the screen time ended; their whole system is dysregulated. And in that state, they don't have access to the part of the brain that can stay calm, be flexible, or respond to reasoning. That's also why what we do in that moment matters so much.

What not to do. What *doesn't* help is trying to explain, lecture, or reason. Saying things like "You knew the rule," or "It's not a big deal," or even asking them to calm down usually backfires. Their brain simply isn't in a place where it can process language or logic, and more input can actually increase the overwhelm.

What *does* help is focusing on regulation first, not behavior.

Start with the body. Your child needs help getting grounded again. Physical input can be very regulating. Things like a firm hug, jumping, pushing or pulling something heavy, or even eating a snack can be helpful. These kinds of sensations help bring their system back online in a more organized way.

At the same time, keep your words simple and calm. You're not explaining, you're reflecting. "You're really upset." "That felt hard." "You didn't want it to turn off." This helps your child feel understood without adding more to the process.

Then, give clear direction for what comes next. Not as a question, and not as a negotiation, just simple, steady guidance: "We're going to the kitchen," "Let's go set the table," or "We're going outside."

In that moment, your child needs you to hold the structure for them until their system settles.

It's not realistic for me to fully eliminate screen time at the moment. How can I minimize the impact?

We hear you! This is real life. Screens are part of the world we live in, and sometimes we need those 20 minutes to get things done. The goal isn't perfection. It's being intentional about how screens fit into your child's day.

The most powerful tool you have is movement. Screens overstimulate the visual system while quieting the body. Movement does the opposite; it brings the body back online. When children move, they're not just "burning energy." They're releasing a counterbalance of chemicals that support mood, focus, and regulation, while reactivating the systems that screens suppress. Ideally, the child is doing some gross motor activity like jumping, running, pushing, pulling, or carrying something heavy.

Think in terms of before, during, and after. If screens are going to happen, what surrounds them matters just as much as the screen itself.

Before: Give their body what it needs first. Regulate the system ahead of time. Even 10–15 minutes of movement can make a significant difference. This creates a stronger baseline, so the impact of the screen will be less intense.

During: Reduce the "zoned-out" effect. Whenever possible, choose content that encourages movement or interaction. Even small shifts like standing instead of sitting, marching in place, or engaging with what they're watching can help prevent that fully disconnected state that leads to harder transitions.

After: Don't leave a gap - move immediately. This is often the most important piece. When the screen turns off, the body needs help resetting. Go straight into something physical like jumping, carrying, helping in the kitchen, or going outside. That input helps the system reorganize before dysregulation sets in.

Keep it shorter than you think. Every child has a limit. The goal is to stop *before* they become completely absorbed and disconnected. Once they hit that "glazed-over" state, the transition becomes much harder. Ending earlier often prevents the meltdown entirely.

Make screen time part of a day's structure. Invite your child into planning: "We have a few chores, some screen time, and some movement time. Let's figure out the schedule together." When children are part of the planning and know what to expect, their system handles transitions much more easily.

Make it social when possible. Watching together - even briefly - can turn screen time into a shared experience. Parents can comment, ask questions, or notice things with their child, making it interactive and connected rather than zoned out and alone.

Be mindful of timing. Certain times of day are more sensitive. Screens first thing in the morning or close to bedtime tend to have a stronger negative impact on focus, mood, and sleep. When possible, avoid those windows.

Build strong alternatives outside of screens. Children are much more likely to move away from screens when they have something else they genuinely enjoy. Games, outdoor play, building, and creating don't just fill time; they build internal motivation and give children a better way to feel good.

Model the relationship you want them to have with screens. Children notice how we use our own devices. When they see limits, presence, and balance, it shapes their expectations and habits more than anything we say.

If you can't do it all, start where you can. Some days will be messy. That's okay. Even adding one piece - like movement after screens or shortening the time - makes a difference. Small, consistent shifts add up.

What does the "glaze point" look like?

It's when your child looks completely zoned out and disconnected from everything around them. Their eyes are fixed on the screen, their bodies are very still, and they may not respond when you call their name. They seem "glued" to it - unaware of what's happening around them and unable to easily pull away.

It's important to know that this isn't about a specific amount of time; it's about your child's *state*. Some children reach this point quickly, especially younger ones. It can also happen faster if a child is already tired, hungry, or dysregulated. Every child is different, which is why observation matters more than the clock. Over time, you'll start to recognize your child's patterns and early signs.

What's happening underneath is significant. At this point, the visual system is in overdrive, while the systems that help your child feel grounded in their body, like balance and body awareness, are largely shut down. The parts of the brain that support emotional regulation are not easily accessible, and the dopamine "pull" of the screen is at its peak.

That's why transitions are so much harder once a child reaches this state, and why stopping a little *before* this point makes such a big difference.

How can I prevent meltdowns when screen time ends?

Building on what was shared above, the most important thing to understand is this: meltdowns are often preventable. When we set up screen time intentionally, we can avoid much of the fallout that comes afterward.

Know your children's limits. Some children can handle more, some much less. Pay attention to patterns: how long before they get dysregulated, what helps them recover, what makes things worse. Then set limits based on the child who needs the most support.

Start by preparing your child's body *before* the screen ever turns on. Think of this as priming their nervous system. Screens are overstimulating, so we want to give children regulation first. Even 10–15 minutes of movement can make a big difference. When their body starts from a more regulated place, the "spike" from the screen is lower, and the crash afterward is less intense.

Make screen time more active, not fully passive. Whenever possible, choose content that encourages movement - dance, exercise, or interactive engagement. Even having a child stand, march, or move while watching helps. The goal is not perfection, but reducing the fully zoned-out state that leads to harder transitions.

Keep screen time shorter than you think you need. Every child has a limit, and it's often earlier than we expect. The key is to stop *before* your child hits that glazed, disconnected state. Once they're there, the transition will be much harder. It's better to end a little early than a little too late.

Set the structure *before* you start. Don't turn on a screen without a clear plan. Let your child know what comes before, during, and after: "We're going to do some movement, then watch for 20 minutes, then set the table." This creates predictability and removes the shock of "it's over already?" It can be helpful to set a timer that the children can see so they have a sense of how much time is left. And it is the timer that announces that it is time to get off the screen, not the parent.

Frame screen time as a privilege, not a given. When screen time is something children *earn* - by doing movement, helping, or participating - it shifts the dynamic. It becomes part of a sequence, not the center of the day. This also builds internal motivation instead of reliance on the screen itself.

Have a clear, immediate transition plan. The moment the screen turns off should not be empty. Move straight into something physical or engaging - helping in the kitchen, going outside, carrying something, setting up for the next activity. The body needs input right away to re-regulate.

Use warnings and follow through. Give children time to prepare: "10 minutes... 5 minutes... last one." This helps their brain begin the transition. But once it's time, follow through consistently. Negotiating in that moment makes future transitions harder.

Create simple systems that make this easier. Some families find it helpful to have a visual list of movement ideas or routine: a few go-to activities before and after screens. It doesn't have to be complicated—just consistent enough that children know what to expect. (Scan the QR code at the end of this section for handouts and exercises to help you implement, as well as additional resources.)

If you can't do it all, start small. There will be times when you just need those 20 minutes. In those moments, aim for a "minimum version": have a plan for after, give some physical input, stay calm, and guide the transition. Even partial prevention helps.

Expect it to be harder before it gets easier. The first few days of changing screen habits can feel intense. But with consistency, children adjust. You're not just managing their behavior, you're helping their nervous system learn a new pattern.

The goal isn't just fewer meltdowns, it's long-term regulation. When we approach screen time this way, we're helping children build the ability to transition, regulate, and function without relying on external stimulation. That's a skill that carries far beyond screens.

I understand screens are problematic, but my kids say they're bored, and I don't know what else to offer them. What activities actually work?

Screens will always be tempting because they are so easy, but by offering a mix of stimulating, purposeful, and social alternatives, we can guide the kids toward balance, resilience, and genuine joy in their day-to-day lives.

Boredom is actually a powerful developmental tool. It sparks problem-solving, creativity, and internal motivation. I remember telling our mother I was bored, and she often said, "Go stand on your head." Reluctantly (and painfully!) I tried it, didn't love it, but it inspired me to figure out what *I could* do by myself. I discovered new hobbies and ways to entertain myself. Screens, by contrast, give an immediate dopamine hit without encouraging curiosity or internal engagement. Once the screen is off, kids often want more.

Physical movement is one of the strongest alternatives. Activities that get the body moving - jumping, running, climbing, trampoline time, or carrying laundry baskets across the room- release dopamine, endorphins, serotonin, and adrenaline. This not only feels good, but it also regulates the nervous system in a way screens can't. Even chores like moving cushions, helping with groceries, or rearranging a room provide the "heavy work" that helps children feel grounded and focused.

Activities that combine learning and movement are also ideal. Playing musical instruments, cooking, building Lego or fort projects, gardening, and hands-on art engage both the mind and body. Unlike screens, these activities provide internal motivation. When kids see the results of their

effort, they feel capable, and often want to keep going. Household tasks can serve a similar purpose: setting the table, organizing snacks, helping with dinner, or tidying up can all be framed as fun, physical, and purposeful ways to reset the system. Kids feel useful, capable, and proud.

Social and outdoor activities are equally important. Board games, card games, and active games teach turn-taking, cooperation, and social skills, while outdoor play exposes children to fresh air and natural light, which regulates serotonin and melatonin cycles. Simple walks, playground visits, biking, or creative errands - like mailing a letter - turn routine movement into exploration and connection. When children experience a variety of stimulating, hands-on, and social alternatives, they begin to see that life beyond screens can be engaging, fun, and deeply satisfying.

Resources from Hands on Approaches related to Screen Time, and beyond.

www.handsonapproaches.com/operation-survival/

Can I show my toddler family photos on my phone?

It's best to wait until around age 2. Even something as simple as looking at photos exposes babies to blue light and screen stimulation that their developing systems aren't ready for.

When my daughter turned 2, her older brother was most excited that he could finally show her pictures on the phone. We had intentionally waited until that point to introduce any screen exposure, even photos, because of the developmental impact.

What about FaceTime with grandparents? Is that different because it is a connection, not just entertainment?

While FaceTime is different from passive screen time, how it's used matters. When it's interactive, it becomes more like a real conversation. A grandparent can pause, respond, and engage, which is very different from watching a show.

To make it more beneficial: Have a parent present to support the interaction; narrate and engage: "Look what Bubby is doing!" Keep it shorter rather than longer. Avoid right before bed (blue light still affects sleep). For children under 2, even FaceTime should be limited and highly interactive.

My child is on the spectrum, and screens really *do* calm him. Should I still limit it?

Yes - but with understanding, sensitivity...and a bit more grace on yourself. For many children on the spectrum, screens feel regulating because they reduce overwhelming sensory input. The visual system takes over, and everything else quiets down. That can feel like real relief.

But there's a trade-off. When the screen turns off, all those systems come back online at once, often leading to even more intense dysregulation. Over time, this can create deeper dependency and harder transitions.

What helps: Be extra intentional about movement before and after. Expect a longer recovery time. Provide more physical input (deep pressure, have them do heavy work like carrying heavy objects). Thoughtfully consider how much screen time is actually helping vs. costing.

We'd like to make one important point here: parents, highly sensitive children often need more from us. If using a screen for a short time helps you stay regulated and get through the moment, it's okay to give yourself that flexibility. Just go in with awareness. Those 30 minutes may come with a cost. It may bring more dysregulation or a harder transition afterward, and that's something you can be prepared for and handle.

What about 'educational' apps or shows? What about learning technology? Aren't those good for development?

Especially under age 2, children learn through their bodies. They learn through movement, touch, and interaction, not from watching a screen. Even older children don't need early exposure to "learn technology." Whenever they're introduced, they pick it up almost instantly.

What they *do* need in those early years: Physical play, social interaction, sensory exploration, and movement-based learning. Those are the real building blocks of development.

We give our kids screen time during long trips. Is that bad?

Again, life happens. Long trips are one of those times when screens can feel necessary, and that's okay. Just remember that the effects of screen time don't change just because you're traveling. The same impact on the brain and body is still there.

What helps is breaking it up. Build in pauses during the trip, especially movement breaks when possible. Plan ahead with simple games or activities for the car or plane. The goal is to avoid long, uninterrupted stretches of screen time, especially for developing brains.

Practically speaking, if this is occasional, you're likely fine. It's less about perfection and more about being aware and balancing it where you can.

Will eliminating screens altogether turn my child into the "weird kid" or create a forbidden fruit effect?

When something feels totally off-limits, it can become more desirable, and that is a real concern. But when screens are always available, they can take over. What matters most is the tone we set. It's less about avoiding screens completely and more about how we relate to them.

If screens are just one small part of life and not the center of it, or a constant default, children absorb that. They don't feel deprived; they feel grounded in a different normal.

It also helps when children understand *why*. Not in a heavy or lecturing way, but in a simple, matter-of-fact way: "Screentime doesn't make our bodies feel so good," or "We're choosing other things that help us feel better."

And just as important: how we parents carry it. When we're confident and calm about our choices, children tend to follow that lead. What might feel "different" at first often just becomes their version of normal.

In the end, it doesn't create a weird kid. It creates a child who's a little more anchored, a little less pulled, and more comfortable being in their own space.

My teenager is already deep into screen habits. Is it too late?

It's not too late, but it does require a different approach.

With teens, it's less about control and more about awareness. Instead of stepping in during moments of conflict, the real conversations happen when things are calm. That's when you can gently help them notice patterns. Ask them how they feel after being on screens for a long time, how it affects their sleep, their mood, or their focus.

It also helps to bring them into the process. When teens feel like something is being imposed on them, they tend to push back. But when they're part of the conversation, thinking through boundaries, they can notice what works for them, and they're more likely to take ownership.

And more than anything, they're watching us. The way we use our own devices, the limits we set (or don't set), and the presence we bring, shape them more than any rule.

This isn't about flipping a switch overnight. It's about slowly helping them become more aware of their choices, so over time, they begin to relate to screens in a more intentional and balanced way.

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