

PREVENTION N

SUMMER PARENTING

Helping your children stay safe and thrive

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

Based on a transcribed interview conducted by
Devora Krasnianski with Amy (Friedy) Guttman-Singer
and Evelyn (Roizy) Guttman, OTR/L, of Hands On Approaches.

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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.

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

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.

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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.

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.