FORENSIC COUNSELING SERVICES

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Guidelines for screens and devices for co-parents

1. Any device children have at a parent's home is something the parent should have full audit access to (being able to see everything the kid is visiting, everything they're communicating, etc.). *Parents who are unable to monitor their children are unable to parent appropriately*.

2. Any device children have at a parent's home is something the parent can remove access to. Whether this is setting healthy dinner time rules (e.g. no phones at the table), limiting the amount of screen time, or taking up the device as a consequence, simply because it is "the child's device" does not mean the child sets the rules. *Healthy co-parents support each other's autonomy and are clear to children that each co-parent is in charge during their respective parenting time.*

3. Healthy children generally have limited screen time, and such access generally occurs in communal areas, rather than bedrooms. Some kids take a short "decompression" time when they first get home from school to have a snack, watch TV, and then start homework, while other families hold off on screen time until tasks like chores or homework are done. *There's a basic principle of teaching children responsibility here and a balanced diet, whether it is what kids put into their bodies or into their minds, is important.*

4. When not in use, children's electronics should be left on a communal charging spot that is in easy view of the adults. *Removing unnecessary temptation helps children better meet expectations.*

5. Don't try to dictate how devices are handled in your co-parent's home, regardless of who got what devices for the children. *Just like you are in charge of what happens for the children in your home, your co-parent is in charge of what happens in theirs.*

6. Healthy co-parents negotiate differences of opinion about what services, apps, and sites are appropriate for their children. This includes tracking programs,[1] such as Life 360 and Find My Phone. *The ever devolving online social media cesspit is often a toxic distraction that studies suggest children are better off without.*

[1] Tracking cell phones and smart watches provides a quick and easy way for parents to know where children are, but may be inappropriate in some cases, such as where a Protective Order has been issued.

7. Apps and services which allow anonymous or hidden communication may be great for fighting oppressive foreign governments, but they are a conduit for many unhealthy behaviors for children and should be deleted. *Parents who are unable to monitor their children are unable to parent appropriately.*

8. Parents should set clear cut rules for cell phone use, including addressing explicit messages, sexting, and who should have access to the device. *A child who is old enough to have a cell phone is old enough to set up behavioral contracts.*

9. Share with your co-parent what devices the children are using each home so everyone is aware of what's going on with them. *The more you and your co-parent share about what is going on for your kids the less you leave them in the middle of adult issues, technological or otherwise.*

10. Talking to children about safety, privacy, and online behavior is an ongoing task, not a one-off lesson. Ask them to show you the latest so you can see how they are living their online lives! *It's amazing what we can learn in talking to children and demonstrating genuine interest in their lives.*

Further reading:

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry publication 54, Screen Time and Children. https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Children-And-Watching-TV-054.aspx

American Academy of Pediatrics Screen Time Guidelines and parent resources. https://shorturl.at/esGvR

Charmaraman, L., Doyle Lynch, A., Richer, A., and Grossman, J. (2022). Associations of early social media initiation on digital behaviors and the moderating role of limiting use. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 127. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2021.107053
TL:DR – Teenagers are more responsible, less secretive, and engaged in less unhealthy behavior than their younger counterparts.

Why checking your kids' devices is not snooping. From Child Rescue Coalition. https://childrescuecoalition.org/educations/why-checking-your-kids-devices-is-smart-not-snooping/

Family Media Template (behavioral contract) from Common Sense Media https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/research/report/common_sense_family_media_agreement.pdf

Haidt, J. (2024). The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness. Penguin Press.