

The  
**Screen-  
Free**  
Family

A Guilt-Free Guide to Raising Kids  
with Less Tech and More Joy



Martha Reck

THE  
SCREEN-FREE  
FAMILY

**A Guilt-Free Guide to Raising Kids  
with Less Tech and More Joy**

**Martha Reck**

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## INTRODUCTION

### **The Moment You Realize Something's Off**

It usually doesn't happen in a dramatic way. There's no siren, no dramatic thunderclap to mark the realization. It sneaks up slowly—on an ordinary Tuesday, maybe, when the noise in your home feels heavier than usual. Your child is sitting in front of a screen, again, and you've stopped really noticing how long it's been. You've stopped counting the minutes, or the shows, or the videos. You're just trying to get through the day.

And then, all at once, something shifts. You look up from your own screen, maybe for the first time in a while, and you *really* see them. Slumped. Still. Eyes glazed over. Zoned out in that unmistakable way that only a screen can produce.

You say their name. Once, twice. No answer. You raise your voice slightly, and they finally blink, slowly, as if surfacing from deep water.

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And that's when it hits you.

This isn't how it's supposed to feel.

You didn't picture parenting like this. You didn't dream of afternoons filled with bright screens and blank stares, of family dinners punctuated by notifications, of battles over screen time replacing board games and long walks and messy, beautiful conversations.

You didn't set out to raise a child who relies on a device for calm, or distraction, or comfort. But somehow, between naps and snacks and work emails and everything else, the screens slipped in and settled down, becoming as ordinary as the light switches or the refrigerator.

It wasn't intentional. It never is.

It started with survival. With needing a few moments to finish a task or catch your breath or just be still. And technology was there, always ready, always reliable. It didn't complain, didn't tire. It worked.

Until it didn't.

Until you realized your child asks for it before breakfast. Until you noticed they fall apart when it's taken away. Until the noise began to crowd out

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the connection, and the moments you used to love—the small, golden ones—started to disappear.

You began to wonder: *What is this doing to us?*

You're not alone.

We are the first generation of parents raising children in a fully digital world. There is no blueprint. No collective wisdom passed down. We're figuring it out in real time—navigating glowing rectangles in our pockets and on our kitchen counters and strapped to car seats and strollers. And while we were told technology would make parenting easier, many of us are quietly realizing it may have made connection harder.

We were promised learning. Enrichment. Education at our fingertips. But what many of us got instead were kids who can't sit still. Who get angry when a show ends. Who resist sleep and struggle with play. Who lose themselves in games but can't find joy outside of them. And parents who feel burned out, overstimulated, and disconnected from the very children they love.

This book isn't about guilt.

It's not about banning screens or pretending technology doesn't have a place. It's about *noticing*. It's about remembering that just because

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something is everywhere doesn't mean it belongs *everywhere* in our homes.

It's about asking: *What kind of childhood are we creating?*

And more importantly: *What kind of family life do we want to live?*

Because screens aren't inherently bad. But they are designed to be irresistible. And if we don't guide our children—and ourselves—toward something more grounded, more intentional, more *real*, we may wake up one day to find that the time we meant to fill has simply slipped away.

You are here because you've started to see it. You've felt it. That quiet pull back toward slowness. Toward face-to-face time. Toward unhurried afternoons. Toward laughter that doesn't come from a show, but from a shared moment you almost missed.

You want to reclaim what's yours.

The connection. The attention. The presence.

This book is your guide.

Not to perfection, but to possibility.

You'll learn how to spot the subtle ways screens shape behavior and how to gently undo the patterns

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that no longer serve your family. You'll learn what to say when your child melts down at the word *no*, and how to build a home where screen-free doesn't mean fun-free. You'll rediscover the joy of ordinary things—card games, nature walks, kitchen dance parties, stories told at bedtime with the lights low and no background hum.

You'll learn how to reset—not just your child's habits, but your own mindset. How to live with technology *without* living in it. How to lead your family with presence, not pressure.

There's no one right way to do this. Only your way. And you'll find it not in a list of rules, but in the rhythm of your own home.

Because the goal isn't to live without screens. The goal is to live *with each other*.

So if you've ever felt that tug—the one that whispers, *This isn't how I pictured it*—you're in the right place.

You haven't missed your chance. You haven't fallen too far. You're not too late to build something beautiful.

You're just in the middle of the story.

And you're about to turn the page.

## CHAPTER 1

### **How Screens Took Over Our Lives**

It didn't happen with a grand decision. No one gathered the family around the dinner table to declare, "From this day forward, screens will be a central part of our lives." There was no formal vote, no big moment. Just small ones—quiet, quick, almost invisible.

It started innocently enough. A video here. A tablet there. Maybe your child was teething and cranky, and you needed five minutes to breathe. Maybe you were waiting at the doctor's office with a tired toddler and handed them your phone to get through the last stretch. Maybe it was dinner prep, or laundry, or simply the need to sit down and hear your own thoughts. You weren't choosing screen time—you were choosing survival.

And it worked. The glow of a screen bought you space. Quiet. Calm. For a moment, things felt

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manageable. You weren't trying to build a habit. You were trying to get through the day.

But those moments added up. A show after nap became part of the routine. A quick video turned into an hour. The tablet became a fixture in the car. Cartoons played in the background while you got dressed, folded laundry, or sent a few emails. What was once occasional became automatic.

There was no grand shift. Just a quiet drift. And by the time you noticed, screens had become woven into nearly every part of daily life.

You weren't alone. It happened everywhere. Across kitchens and living rooms and minivans. Across households filled with love and intention. Technology slid in the side door while no one was looking and offered something that modern parents desperately needed: relief.

No judgment. Just help. Just a break.

But slowly, something else crept in. Something harder to name.

Maybe you saw it in your child's face—the way their eyes glazed over, locked onto the screen, unblinking, unfeeling. Maybe it was the way they reacted when the show ended: the tears, the yelling, the sudden storm of frustration. Maybe it was the

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way playtime felt shorter, attention spans felt thinner, or the joy of a regular afternoon faded into the background hum of passive entertainment.

It didn't feel right. And still, the pull was strong.

Because life is busy. Parenting is constant. There's always something that needs your attention. Screens offered a way to buy time. But time, it turns out, comes at a cost.

What started as occasional became habitual. What once filled gaps began to fill entire days. And what was once a tool quietly turned into a tether.

You didn't plan for it. But here you are.

And here is where things can begin to change.

Because naming what's happening is not failure. It's clarity.

It's noticing how many hours have disappeared into scrolling, how many dinners have gone quiet under the hum of background shows, how often your child asks for "just one more" and how often you say yes because you just don't have the energy to say no again.

It's looking at the morning routine and realizing screens are the first thing your child sees and hears each day.

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It's hearing yourself say "not now" with your eyes fixed on your phone.

It's watching your family move through the day in parallel instead of together—everyone connected to something, but not to each other.

These moments sting. Not because they're rare, but because they're familiar.

We didn't grow up this way. Our childhoods were filled with different kinds of boredom, different kinds of connection. There were fewer buttons to press, fewer devices in our hands, fewer distractions vying for our focus. We were bored, but we were also present. We played without instruction. We wandered through our own minds. And somewhere in the back of our memory, that kind of childhood still calls to us.

But we are parenting in a different time.

The digital world isn't coming—it's here. It's built into our homes, our schools, our social lives. It surrounds our kids from the moment they're born. And it's not going away.

So the question is not: *How do I get rid of all this?*

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The question is: *How do I live here—with my eyes open? How do I raise a child who can grow up in a world full of screens and still see clearly?*

That's what this book is about.

Not turning away, but turning inward.

Not removing all technology, but reclaiming our place at the center of our families.

Not perfection—but presence.

Because the truth is, it's not too late. It's never too late.

You can shift your family's rhythm. You can step off autopilot. You can invite your children—and yourself—into something different. A home that isn't anti-technology, but one that honors attention. A family culture that remembers the joy of looking each other in the eye. A life where stillness and imagination are welcome again.

This doesn't require a total overhaul.

It starts with a pause.

A choice to notice.

To ask: *What are we doing? And is it helping us become who we want to be?*

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Most families don't make this shift because someone told them to.

They do it because something inside them whispered, *This isn't the life I pictured.*

And the whisper became a wake-up call.

And the call became a path.

And the path became a new way of living.

That's what you're stepping into now.

Not a rulebook. A return.

To the kind of life you thought you were building all along.

And maybe—just maybe—to something even better.

## CHAPTER 2

### **What Too Much Screen Time Really Does**

It starts off feeling harmless. Sometimes even helpful. A cartoon that keeps your child occupied while you answer emails. A tablet that settles them during a car ride or soothes them in a waiting room. A video that gives you a few precious minutes to cook or just sit down and breathe. Screens often arrive in our lives like quiet allies—always there, always working, always just one tap away.

And for a while, it works. They're quiet. Content. Engaged. You breathe a little easier.

But then something begins to shift. Not all at once, but in pieces.

You notice your child isn't playing the way they used to. They drift past their toys and ask for the iPad. Again. And again. And again. They seem bored faster, unsettled more often. They bounce from show to game to show again, but their mood

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doesn't really improve. They become frustrated more easily, explosive when the device is taken away, inconsolable after you say no.

You start to realize: this isn't just about what they're watching.

It's about what they're missing.

It's about what's quietly changing in their brains and bodies, and what's slowly disappearing from their lives.

You see it in the mornings—when the screen is the only way to ease them out of sleep and into the day. You see it in the evenings—when the show ends and a tantrum begins, or when they collapse into tears over something small. You see it in the way they can't seem to sit still, can't finish a puzzle, can't play by themselves for more than a few minutes before begging to be entertained again.

You tell yourself it's just a phase. That they're tired. That other kids are on screens, too. But the pattern persists.

And beneath all the rationalizing, something in your gut tightens.

Because deep down, you know—this isn't what childhood is supposed to feel like.

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Your child's mind is built to explore. To experiment. To try, fail, get bored, create something new. They're wired to connect—to look you in the eye, to ask endless questions, to test boundaries, to push against boredom until imagination kicks in.

But when a screen steps in too often, those systems don't get built. They don't need to. Why struggle to build a tower when a video provides instant reward? Why learn to navigate disappointment when a game resets with a tap? Why wait, wonder, or invent when every second of stimulation is preloaded?

It's not just screen *time* that's the issue.

It's screen *dominance*.

It's what happens when screens become the default, not the exception. When they replace—not support—the very things that help a child develop into a regulated, curious, grounded human being.

Too much screen time isn't measured only in hours. It's measured in missed chances.

The chance to get bored and work through it. The chance to make a mess and solve it. The chance to sit with uncomfortable feelings instead of escaping them.

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It's also measured in sleep lost to blue light, in tantrums caused by dopamine crashes, in attention spans frayed by overstimulation. You see it in the way your child jumps from one thing to the next, the way they melt down after long screen sessions, the way they seem both exhausted and restless all at once.

And you start to understand: screens aren't just filling time. They're filling space your child *needs*—space to grow.

None of this means you've done something wrong. You were surviving. You were making the best choice in hard moments. And the truth is, sometimes screens really do help. They buy us time when we're stretched thin. They offer laughter when things feel heavy. They connect us to family far away. But when that help becomes a habit, and that habit becomes dependent, it starts to change the texture of home.

You feel it in the silence when the devices go off—and your child doesn't know what to do next.

You feel it in your own heart, when the connection between you feels... dimmed. Not gone, but quieter. Like it's waiting for something.

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And still, the guilt tries to creep in. The shame. The worry that you've missed your chance, or done too much damage, or can't go back.

But that's not the truth.

Because you can always go back.

You can always begin again.

Children are resilient. So are families. You are not stuck in the habits you've created. You are simply standing at a turning point—and noticing. That noticing is a gift. It's the moment everything starts to shift.

You don't need to throw out every device. You don't need to swing into extremes. You just need to ask a different question:

*Is this helping us become the family we want to be?*

You'll begin to see more clearly.

You'll notice that your child is calmest after playing outside, not after an hour of shows. That their laughter is deeper when they're chasing the dog through the yard than when they're watching cartoons. That their imagination doesn't bloom from consumption, but from creation.

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You'll begin to feel the texture of life returning—real life. The one with muddy shoes and sticky fingers and long stretches of quiet punctuated by spontaneous joy.

You'll notice your own body softening in those moments. Your voice changing. Your energy returning.

Because screen fatigue doesn't only affect children. It wears on parents, too. The guilt, the nagging, the power struggles. The feeling of being second place in your child's attention. The subtle ache of watching them slip behind a screen when you just want to see their eyes again.

You want your child to grow up in the real world. To feel real things. To have real skills. To look someone in the eye and hold a conversation. To lose themselves in a book, build something from nothing, sit in the sunshine and watch the clouds.

You want them to know that life—actual life—is enough.

And they *can* know that.

But first, they have to experience it again.

That's what you're working toward now. Not just less screen time—but more *everything else*. More

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boredom that leads to play. More presence that leads to connection. More silence that leads to wonder.

You're not depriving your child.

You're reintroducing them to what was always waiting.

And the beautiful part is, it doesn't take much. The moment the screen fades and the quiet returns, something opens. They might resist at first. They might complain. But eventually, they'll pick up a crayon. Or dump out the blocks. Or wander into the backyard.

And in that moment, something ancient stirs.

Something they were born to do.

And something inside you exhales.

Because this is what you were made for, too.

Not to fight a never-ending battle with devices.

But to lead with intention.

To remember what matters.

And to offer your child the kind of life that doesn't have to be downloaded—because it's already here.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Take a Look Around – Your Family’s Digital Habits**

Change doesn’t begin with rules. It begins with awareness.

Before we can make meaningful shifts in the way our families interact with technology, we have to see clearly. Not through a lens of guilt or panic, but through curiosity. Gentle, honest curiosity. What is really happening in our homes when it comes to screens?

Most of us are moving too fast to notice. The days are full—school drop-offs, meals, work calls, sibling squabbles, bedtime routines. We’re juggling so much that screens often slip in like background noise. We don’t mean to rely on them, but we do. We don’t intend for them to become the centerpiece of our children’s day, but somehow they are.

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And when we finally do stop to look, it can feel disorienting. The numbers surprise us. The patterns startle us. We see just how much of our lives has become shaped—not intentionally, but unconsciously—by the presence of a screen.

But there's no shame in that realization. In fact, it's the beginning of real freedom.

Because once we can *see* our habits clearly, we can *shape* them deliberately.

Think about it: how many times a day does someone in your home pick up a device without even thinking? When you add it all up—the quick check of a message, the background show during dinner prep, the tablet that “just helps us get through bedtime”—you might be shocked to see how often screens are filling the quiet spaces of your life.

And it's not just about quantity. It's about quality. It's about asking: *What are we missing when screens are always on?*

The first step in this journey isn't to set a timer or create a chore chart. It's to pause. To slow down enough to *observe*.

Start with yourself.

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Try watching your own behavior for a day or two. No need to judge it—just notice. How often do you reach for your phone? What triggers it? Boredom? Stress? Habit? A moment of silence you weren't ready to feel? Pay attention to the transitions: when you wake up, when your kids get home, while they play. Where are your eyes? Where is your attention?

You might be surprised by the patterns. Many parents find that they're on their phones more than they thought—especially during moments that could otherwise be used for connection or rest. A few minutes here and there, multiplied over the course of a day, becomes hours. Hours where we're not really with our children, even when we're physically present.

Then, gently turn your attention to your kids. What does screen time look like in your home—not just the hours, but the *energy* around it?

You might notice that your child becomes irritable when they don't get a device. That they're always asking “what can I watch?” instead of “what can I do?” That play feels shorter. That eye contact is rare. That transitions—bedtime, leaving the house, mealtime—are becoming battlegrounds when a screen is involved.

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These are the clues. They're not indictments. They're invitations.

And yes, you can take it a step further. If you feel ready, jot it down. Keep a screen journal for a couple of days. Write what devices are used, for how long, and for what purpose. Who initiated the screen time? What was the mood before and after? Was it helping, or just filling time?

Sometimes this process alone sparks deep clarity. You might see, with new eyes, that screen time has become a crutch in your home—not because you're lazy, but because you're human and overwhelmed and doing the best you can.

But the best we can do starts to change when we start to *see*.

The goal here isn't to eliminate every moment of screen use. The goal is to *understand* it. To bring it into the light. To take a passive habit and make it conscious again.

Because the truth is, most screen time starts from a place of good intention. We use it to calm, to distract, to entertain, to teach. But when it becomes the default response to everything—boredom, conflict, exhaustion—it stops serving us and starts steering us.

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And that's when our kids get lost.

They lose out on the chance to be bored and then push through to creativity. They lose out on opportunities to work through conflict with a sibling instead of zoning out side by side. They lose the micro-moments of connection that happen when a parent looks up instead of down.

Now, let's be clear: this awareness process is not about constant surveillance. It's not about tracking every minute and obsessing over every use. That leads to burnout, not progress.

It's about tuning in. About making space in your day to ask: *Are we using screens, or are screens using us?*

And this reflection isn't just for parents. Kids can be part of it, too.

In age-appropriate ways, start having conversations with your child about how screens make them feel. You might ask:

- “Do you feel better or worse after using your tablet?”
- “What do you like most about watching shows?”
- “Do you ever get tired of screens?”

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- “What else could we do when we feel bored or upset?”

You may be surprised by what they say. Kids are often more aware than we give them credit for. They know when they’re zoning out. They notice how hard it is to stop watching. And many, deep down, miss the very things we do: attention, play, connection.

These conversations don’t have to be lectures. They can be invitations. You’re not demanding change—you’re opening the door to it. And the more you reflect as a family, the easier it becomes to shift together.

Because screen habits aren’t just individual. They’re *relational*. One person’s tech use affects everyone else. When a parent is constantly distracted, children behave differently. When one child is glued to a device, others feel left out or become agitated. The tone of the home is set by *how we spend our attention*.

And attention is one of the most powerful forces in your home. Where it goes, energy follows. Connection follows. Behavior follows.

So the work of observation isn’t just about logging time. It’s about reclaiming attention—yours, and your child’s.

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And once you've done that—once you've looked gently, honestly, and without fear—you'll find yourself in a powerful position.

You'll be able to name what's working and what isn't. You'll spot the trigger moments: the rush to hand over a device when tension rises, the TV that stays on all afternoon out of habit. You'll see the patterns that need changing—and the ones that are already bringing light.

And from there, you can begin to build.

Not from a place of shame. Not with an iron fist. But from clarity. From strength. From the calm knowing that you're ready to shape something new.

That's what we'll do in the next chapter.

You've taken stock of your habits. Now it's time to reset them—with compassion, intention, and tools that work for your real life.

Let's begin again, one day at a time.

## CHAPTER 4

### **The Screen Reset – One Week to Break the Cycle**

It's one thing to know your family's screen habits need to change. It's another thing entirely to take that first step.

Even if you're motivated—even if you're clear on your values—there's often a moment of hesitation. The questions creep in: *Can we really do this? Will my kids melt down? What if we fail? And, quietly: What if I miss it, too?*

That fear is real. Because you're not just taking away a screen—you're interrupting a rhythm. You're inviting a new kind of presence into your home, and that can be both thrilling and intimidating. Especially if screens have been a buffer for your energy, a crutch for hard moments, or a substitute for peace and quiet.

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But here's the beautiful truth: you don't need to overhaul your life. You don't need to make a permanent vow. All you need is one week.

Seven days. One intentional pause. A temporary reset that allows you to take stock, reconnect, and rediscover what life looks like without a screen between you and your family.

It's not about punishment. It's not about being anti-technology. It's about creating space—so you can remember what's been buried underneath the noise.

And it's absolutely possible. Even if your kids are glued to their devices. Even if you are. Especially if you are.

Because this reset isn't just about breaking a habit. It's about breaking the spell.

You don't need to do it perfectly. You just need to begin.

There's no one "right" way to do a screen reset. Some families go cold turkey—turning off all non-essential screens for the entire week. Others take a gentler approach—cutting back gradually, removing screens during specific parts of the day, or choosing to be screen-free for evenings only. You know your family best.

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The key is to define your *starting point*. What would feel like a stretch—but not a setup for failure? What’s just uncomfortable enough to create change, without sending everyone into meltdown mode?

For some, that means removing all entertainment screens for seven days. For others, it might mean eliminating screens in the mornings and evenings, while keeping essential use (like work and school) intact. The reset doesn’t have to look extreme to be powerful.

The goal isn’t perfection. The goal is *presence*.

So let yourself be flexible. Let your kids have a voice. And remember—you’re not doing this *to* them. You’re doing this *with* them.

Frame it as an experiment, not a punishment. Tell them the truth: that you’ve noticed screens are taking up more space than you’d like, and you want to see what life feels like without them for a little while. That you’re curious, not controlling. That this isn’t forever—just a window of time to reset.

You might be surprised how open they are. Especially if you’re clear that the whole family is participating—including the adults.

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Because your kids are watching you. If they see you reaching for your phone every time there's a lull in conversation, they learn that stillness is something to avoid. If they see you choosing distraction over presence, they do the same.

But if they see you putting your phone away, looking them in the eye, stepping outside without a device in your hand—that speaks louder than any rule ever could.

This reset is not about what you're taking away.

It's about what you're bringing back.

The first day is usually the hardest. The novelty of “no screens” wears off fast, and what comes next can feel like withdrawal. Your kids might be bored, irritable, whiny, clingy. They may act like they've forgotten how to play. You might feel the same way.

That's okay. That's expected. That's the moment you're breaking through the automatic cycle.

And that's why you need to *prepare for the pause*.

Before you start your reset, stock up on simple, screen-free activities. You don't need to reinvent your home or buy anything new. Just think in categories: books, puzzles, art supplies, building

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toys, card games, outside gear, baking ingredients. Dust off the board games. Set up a reading nook. Put together a “boredom bin” with open-ended toys.

Don’t worry about filling every minute. Boredom is not your enemy—it’s the doorway to creativity. But giving your kids *options* helps bridge the gap between instant stimulation and deep play.

And don’t forget yourself. Prepare your own mini toolkit: a book you’ve been meaning to read, a journal, a playlist, a project you’ve been putting off. If you’re used to filling your downtime with screens, you’ll need something to help you stay grounded, too.

Because as you’ll see, this reset is as much about *you* as it is about your kids.

By day two or three, something starts to shift.

Your child’s play becomes more independent. Their complaints taper off. Their imagination kicks in. You notice them making up games, lingering at the breakfast table, asking you to join in a puzzle or go outside. You see them re-learning how to entertain themselves—and reconnecting with the world beyond the screen.

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You may also notice yourself reaching for your phone out of habit, only to pause. You might feel the itch of distraction—the momentary discomfort of not having something to check. But slowly, your mind quiets. You start to settle into your own rhythms. You begin to see your children more clearly. You hear things you used to miss: the giggle from the next room, the deep questions, the little stories about their day.

This is the moment that presence begins to feel natural again.

Not forced. Not artificial. Just *normal*.

And you start to wonder how you ever lived without it.

By the end of the week, your home feels different. The air is softer. The tone is calmer. You're eating meals together, playing more, fighting less. You've rediscovered the quiet joy of being in the same room without a device between you.

That doesn't mean everything is perfect. Your kids will still have moments of resistance. You'll still have days when you miss the ease of handing over a screen. But now you've tasted something better. You've proven it's possible.

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And that's the power of the reset—not just that it interrupts the habit, but that it reawakens your *choice*.

You no longer reach for screens by default. You reach for them by design.

You use them when they serve you, not just when you're tired. You say yes to tech when it adds to your life—and no when it takes something away.

That's the difference. That's the shift.

And now that you've made it, you can build on it.

When the week is over, sit down with your family. Reflect together. What was hard? What was surprisingly fun? What do you want to keep going?

Let everyone share their experience. Make a short list of new habits you want to carry forward—whether it's screen-free dinners, quiet mornings, or designated device-free playtimes.

Maybe you decide to keep screens off until after breakfast. Maybe you commit to family game night on Fridays. Maybe you limit video games to weekends and replace weekday evenings with something creative.

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Whatever you choose, let it be intentional. Let it reflect what you now *know*—that your family can thrive without screens running the show.

You don't have to go back to how things were.

You can move forward—with clarity, purpose, and a renewed connection to what really matters.

This week wasn't the end. It was the beginning.

And in the next chapter, we'll explore how to turn that beginning into a lifestyle. One that honors technology, but never bows to it. One that helps you lead with vision, not just reaction.

Let's build a family culture where screens are tools—not traps.

## CHAPTER 5

### **Making Tech Intentional, Not Automatic**

The reset is over. You did the hard part—you paused, you paid attention, and you pulled your family out of the reflexive hum of screen time long enough to see what was really going on. And now, as the glow of the past week starts to fade, you're likely asking yourself: *What now?*

Because as beautiful and restorative as a week without screens can be, real life comes rushing back. School demands, work calls, group texts, notifications, rainy afternoons, tired mornings—it all returns. You can't hold your breath forever. You're not trying to live in a bubble. You're trying to live in this world—with all of its noise—and still stay connected to the people right in front of you.

And that's where intention comes in.

The purpose of a reset isn't to create a perfectly screen-free home. It's to reclaim your power of

## The Screen-Free Family

*choice*. You're no longer stumbling through the day reacting to whatever screen-based convenience presents itself. You've slowed the momentum, and now you get to choose what comes back—and how.

This chapter isn't about rigid routines or endless lists of “dos and don'ts.” It's about a deeper shift. One that begins not with a schedule, but with a *mindset*. A mindset that says: screens aren't inherently bad—but they need to earn their place. They need to serve something larger than themselves.

When technology becomes intentional, it becomes useful again. Grounded. Aligned. It takes its place as a helpful part of your family's rhythm—not the core of it.

But here's the challenge: for most of us, screens don't feel like a conscious decision. They feel automatic.

We turn them on without thinking. We scroll while waiting in line. We hand over a tablet before we even register the whine. We default to Netflix, not because it brings us joy, but because it's easy. Predictable. Familiar.

This autopilot behavior is exactly what needs to shift.

## MARTHA RECK

So how do you go from automatic to intentional?

Not with guilt. Not with overcorrection. But with attention.

Begin by asking: *What purpose is this screen serving right now?*

That simple question is like flipping on a light in a dark room. You start to see what's behind the habit. Is the screen helping your child unwind—or just numbing them out? Is it calming a meltdown—or avoiding an emotion that needs to be felt? Are you watching a show together because it connects you—or because no one knows what else to do?

You'll begin to notice the difference between use that supports your family, and use that replaces something important.

You'll begin to see that not all screen time is created equal.

Because there is a difference between passive consumption and active engagement. A difference between scrolling mindlessly and watching a movie as a shared ritual. A difference between tech that isolates and tech that brings people together.

And intention lives in that difference.

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You might start saying things like, “Let’s choose one episode, then go play outside,” or “I’ll put my phone away while we do this puzzle.” These small moments of mindfulness ripple outward. They start to rewire not just behavior—but identity. You’re becoming a family that *thinks about* tech, not one that just absorbs it.

And that begins to reshape your rhythm.

Intentional families don’t use screens *less* because they’re disciplined. They use them less because they’ve redefined what they’re for.

They see technology not as the center of their time together, but as a tool that supports what matters most. And when something no longer supports the values of the home, it quietly begins to fade.

So instead of making “less screen time” the goal, ask: *What kind of experiences do we want to fill our time with?* What kind of atmosphere do we want in the morning? What kind of tone do we want at dinner? What kind of connection do we want at bedtime?

When you build your family’s life around the answers to those questions, screens fall into place naturally.

## MARTHA RECK

You may decide to designate certain parts of the day as screen-free anchors. Mornings, for example, might become a time for quiet reading, a short walk, or slow breakfast music instead of cartoons. Evenings might be reclaimed as device-free zones for board games, baths, and conversations. You don't need to block out every hour. Just pick a few key times and protect them.

Because rhythm is more sustainable than rigidity. It allows for imperfection. It makes room for human mess. But it also provides a shape—one your kids can feel, one you can come home to, even when everything else is chaotic.

Another powerful shift? Deciding in advance how you'll use screens—so that you're never negotiating in the moment.

Create a simple family tech plan—not a contract, just a shared understanding. It might include things like:

- We only use screens after [homework, playtime, or dinner].
- No phones at the table.
- We turn off screens 60 minutes before bed.

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- We pick shows ahead of time so we don't get stuck watching endlessly.
- Parents model screen boundaries too (yes, even on weekends).

These expectations should be clear, consistent, and agreed upon as a team. When your kids help shape the boundaries, they're more likely to respect them. And when those boundaries are predictable, they feel safe—even when your child pushes against them.

Of course, no plan works unless you live it out. Which is why this shift toward intention isn't just about your kids. It's about *you*.

Children learn what's normal by watching. If they see you constantly reaching for your phone, they learn that constant stimulation is standard. If they see you checking out during hard moments, they learn to do the same. But if they see you pause, make eye contact, sit in stillness, or put your device down mid-scroll—they learn something different. They learn presence.

This doesn't mean you can never check your email in front of your kids. It doesn't mean you need to ban social media or unplug completely. It just means being honest.

## MARTHA RECK

Let them see you noticing your own habits. Say things like, “I’ve been on my phone a lot today. I think I need a break.” Or, “I’m putting this away because I want to focus on you.” These aren’t confessions. They’re modeling. And that kind of leadership is more effective than any rule you’ll ever write.

As you make these changes, remember: resistance is part of the process.

There will be days your child complains. Days you feel the tug of easy entertainment. Days when screen time creeps in out of convenience. That’s not failure—it’s feedback. A chance to pause, reflect, and begin again.

Because intention isn’t about perfection. It’s about *awareness*. The moment you notice, you’ve already succeeded.

So be gentle with yourself. Celebrate progress, not just outcomes. When your family manages one more screen-free meal this week—celebrate it. When you catch yourself reaching for your phone and choose not to—acknowledge it. When your child plays without asking for a video—smile, even if it only lasts ten minutes.

These are the signs of something shifting.

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And over time, those moments become a new normal. A home where conversations replace background noise. Where boredom becomes an opportunity. Where attention flows toward each other instead of being scattered across screens.

That's the power of intention. Not in the rules it creates—but in the atmosphere it restores.

You're not just managing screen time. You're modeling how to live with technology *without losing yourself to it*. You're showing your kids how to lead their lives with thoughtfulness, presence, and purpose. And in doing that, you're building something far more meaningful than a screen-free schedule.

You're building a family culture that remembers what matters. That honors the spaces between distractions. That values real-time connection over curated content.

A culture that doesn't need to reject technology—but one that knows when to turn it off.

## CHAPTER 6

### **What to Do Instead – Life Beyond the Screen**

The moment the screen goes dark, the silence that follows can feel enormous.

At first, it's a little jarring. There's no theme song filling the room, no background noise humming along with daily life, no digital characters narrating the rhythm of your child's day. It's just... quiet. Still. Unfilled.

For a lot of parents, that silence feels like a cliff. A wide, empty stretch of time that needs to be filled. Something about it makes you uneasy—because for so long, a screen has been the go-to solution. To occupy, to soothe, to entertain, to pacify. So when you take that away, the question comes fast: What now?

And not just from you. From your child, too.

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You'll hear it quickly. "I'm bored." It may come with crossed arms, a dramatic flop onto the couch, maybe even a suspicious glance—as if they're waiting for you to give in and bring back the screen.

That phrase—I'm bored—used to carry weight. A real emotion. A signal. Now, it's often a placeholder for discomfort. For the disorientation of not being passively entertained. For the unfamiliar space between structured tasks and digital distraction.

But here's the secret: boredom is the beginning.

It's the door to creativity. To movement. To discovery. And like many doors, it sticks a little when you first try to open it. It creaks. It resists. It asks for a little effort.

Let it.

Resist the urge to fill that silence too quickly. Let your child linger in it. Let their body twitch, their mouth pout, their feet pace. Let their nervous system recalibrate. What they're feeling isn't the absence of fun. It's the presence of potential.

It starts small. A glance toward a box of blocks. A shuffle toward the bookshelf. An old stuffed animal suddenly becomes interesting again. A cardboard box becomes a robot, then a spaceship. You watch

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as their play begins—clumsy at first, maybe—but slowly it unfolds. It stretches.

And suddenly, they're in it.

Not just passing time, but living in it. Lost in a world of their own making.

This is the life that was waiting.

It was always there, just behind the screen.

It looks like a child lying on their belly, crayons spread everywhere, narrating a story as they draw. It looks like a backyard transformed into a wild animal safari. It looks like two siblings arguing over couch cushion forts and then laughing so hard they fall over. It looks like a family dinner where stories are told instead of watching a show. A card game played slowly, with giggles. A long walk where questions rise and fall like birds.

It looks like rhythm returning.

Not a schedule, but a feeling. The kind of slowness that isn't empty, but rich.

You begin to notice it in the small choices. Your child asking to bake something instead of watching something. Pulling out the magnetic tiles instead of asking for a device. Making a comic book, a dance, a puppet show with paper bags and kitchen spoons.

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At first, these moments might be fleeting. You'll still hear requests for screens. That's okay. You haven't failed. You're simply in the process. They're remembering. You're remembering.

Because life beyond the screen isn't just about your child. It's about you.

You, reclaiming your role—not as entertainment director, but as witness. As participant. As guide.

And it's not always easy. Some days, you'll be exhausted. You'll step on a Lego and curse under your breath. You'll suggest ten ideas before one finally lands. You'll long for the ease of a screen while the baby cries and the pasta boils over and someone is yelling about losing a sock.

But ease is not the same as peace.

Screens offer ease. But this—this messy, imperfect, human interaction—this is where peace lives. Real connection. Real joy.

It's in the mess of the living room after a pretend restaurant takes over the coffee table. In the trail of blankets down the hall after a make-believe parade. In the pile of rocks your child insists on keeping, because each one is secretly magic.

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And your role is not to curate or direct every moment, but to open the door.

Sometimes literally—just open the front door. Let them out. Let them get muddy. Let them dig, jump, yell, run. Nature doesn't demand attention—it invites it. The wind pulls on their hair. The dirt clings to their fingers. The bugs become characters in long, complicated games. A stick becomes a sword, then a wand, then a fishing pole.

You watch it happen. The light comes back into their eyes. Their bodies softening, their attention lengthening. You realize they don't need a structured nature program. They need time and space to be wild and small and curious.

And then you come back inside, and maybe you sit with them. You don't always need to play. Sometimes your presence is enough. You read your own book while they play beside you. You fold laundry slowly while they build a tower at your feet. You put on music instead of a video. You light a candle before dinner and everyone lingers just a bit longer than usual.

You start to create anchors in the day that don't rely on screens. Maybe mornings begin with a walk around the block, or a kitchen dance party. Maybe you declare the hour after dinner to be “no-screen

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family time” and let it be loose—puzzles, stories, nothing fancy. You build rhythm by repeating small, real things.

And you make space for rest—not just sleep, but real rest. Unstimulated, undirected time.

Maybe it’s called quiet time. Maybe it’s just “everyone picks something to do alone.” You let your child practice sitting in stillness, drawing, daydreaming, even complaining a little. You model it, too. You pick up your book. You drink your tea. You show them that being still is not failure. It’s part of being human.

And when the house gets loud again, you let it. You let there be noise and boredom and laughter and frustration and all the emotion that used to be flattened by a glowing screen.

Because this is the kind of life that builds resilience.

Not because it’s perfect—but because it’s real.

The more you live like this, the more you realize: you’re not just avoiding screens. You’re rebuilding something. Attention. Connection. Time.

And yes, there will be days when it unravels. When you put on a show so you can get through the evening. When everyone’s sick and the tablet buys

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you thirty minutes to rest. That's okay. Those are choices made from care. The difference now is that they are choices—not defaults.

You come back. You always can.

And every time you do, your child follows a little faster. Their tolerance for stillness grows. Their capacity for boredom stretches. Their willingness to look up, to try something new, to reach for something other than a screen—it deepens.

They may still ask. They may still test the boundary. But you'll hear it less. And when you say no, you'll notice the protest softens. Not gone, but quieter.

Because deep down, they want this, too.

Children want connection. They want rhythm. They want to be seen and known. They don't always have the words for it. Sometimes they ask for shows when what they really want is attention. Sometimes they act out when what they really need is presence. But you see it now.

You see it in the way they curl up next to you with a book. In the way they hum while they draw. In the way their play has a rhythm again.

And you begin to trust the silence.

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Not as a threat, but as a gift.

This chapter of your family's life doesn't require more activities. It requires more being. Being together. Being present. Being okay with the slow, the awkward, the unstructured.

You realize that life beyond screens isn't about doing more.

It's about noticing more.

Noticing the way the light shifts through the window. The way your child's laugh has changed. The way their face lights up when you say yes to hide and seek, even for five minutes. The way time opens when no one is rushing to get back to the next episode, the next click, the next screen.

You don't need to have it all figured out.

You just need to begin again, every day.

Choose the book over the show. The backyard over the app. The silence over the noise.

And when the screen does return, you meet it with awareness.

You say: "Yes, we'll watch this together. Then we'll turn it off."

And you do.

Because now you know what's on the other side.

You've lived in the quiet.

You've seen your child come alive again.

You've remembered what it means to be here.

And you won't trade that for anything.

### **Ideas for Screen-Free Activities:**

#### **Rediscovering the Joy of Free Play**

- Blocks, train tracks, magnets, LEGOs
- Dress-up clothes, cardboard boxes, kitchen utensils
- Dolls, stuffed animals, action figures
- Art supplies: crayons, tape, paper, glue, scissors

#### **Outdoor Adventures**

- Nature scavenger hunts
- Mud kitchens and water play
- Blanket forts outdoors
- Painted rock hunts
- Sound walks in the neighborhood

### **Family Fun (No Wi-Fi Needed)**

- Board games and card games
- Cooking and baking together
- Build-a-story nights
- Puzzle table tradition
- Dance parties
- Themed dinner nights

### **Creative Corners**

- Art corners with accessible supplies
- DIY building zones
- Science exploration shelves
- Writing nooks
- Quiet reading spots

### **Boredom Busters**

- Boredom jar with written ideas:
  - Make a treasure map
  - Write a letter to your future self
  - Stack cups into the tallest tower
  - Build a zoo from stuffed animals
  - Invent your own board game

### **Let Kids Lead**

- Pretend vet clinics

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- Homemade racing tracks
- DIY cooking shows
- Cardboard castles or robot factories

### **Reconnecting Together**

- Go for family walks
- Ask dinner table questions
- Snuggle and read aloud
- Sit beside each other and do nothing
- Simply *be* in the same space, unplugged

Remember: even 30 minutes of screen-free family time a day is enough to begin rewriting the script. Over time, it becomes a rhythm—and the rhythm becomes the heartbeat of your home.

In the next chapter, we'll talk about what happens when novelty wears off and resistance shows up.

**CHAPTER 7**  
**When They Push Back**  
**(and They Will)**

You were proud of the progress. The screens were off more often. Your home felt lighter. Your children rediscovered toys and puzzles you thought they'd outgrown. There was laughter again during dinner, a kind of ease in the air you hadn't realized was missing. You sat on the couch together in the quiet evening light, books open, music humming in the background, and you thought, *This is it. This is what I wanted.*

And then it happened.

Maybe it was subtle at first—your child asking for the tablet “just for a minute,” or sneaking your phone off the counter. Maybe it was more defiant—a full-body protest when you said no to another episode, a door slammed, a meltdown that spiraled fast and hard. Maybe the pushback didn't even

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come from your child but from your own mind: a nagging exhaustion, a whisper of, *It would just be easier to turn on a show right now.*

That's the moment every family hits. The edge. The part where changing habits meets the full resistance of the nervous system, the brain's cravings, the unpracticed muscle of emotional regulation. It feels like a test—and it is. But not a test of your willpower or authority. A test of your steadiness. A test of your vision.

Because it is in this exact moment, when your child is the loudest, the mood is the messiest, and the temptation to give in is strongest, that your decision matters most.

This is not the part to power through with clenched fists. This is the part to meet with calm. With empathy. With confidence that says, *This is hard—and we're okay.*

It's easy to think that if your child pushes back, something must be wrong. That the change is too much. That you've made a mistake. But pushback doesn't mean the approach is broken. Pushback means the old pattern is cracking—and that can feel scary. To your child, the familiar routine of screen time wasn't just entertainment. It was comfort. A reliable, stimulating, self-soothing experience.

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Removing or reducing it can feel like a loss, even if it's temporary. And like all loss, it brings grief, in its own childlike form—sadness, frustration, protest, negotiation.

They may say you're being unfair. That everyone else gets to play. That you're ruining their fun. They may call you mean, slam a door, burst into tears. They may truly believe they *can't* get through the afternoon without their show. And in that moment, you may begin to doubt yourself.

This is where you stay steady.

You breathe. You anchor.

You look at your child—not with frustration, but with compassion. You see not manipulation, but dysregulation. Not disobedience, but discomfort. You remember that their nervous system is learning something new, that they're reaching for an old coping tool, and that they haven't yet built the muscles to replace it.

Your job isn't to silence their feelings. It's to hold them.

You can say, calmly, "I know you're upset. I get it. This is different, and different can feel hard." You don't have to explain your reasons a hundred times. You don't have to convince them. You just have to

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remain rooted in the boundary you've already set, and remind them that the boundary doesn't mean they're unloved. It means they're safe.

You don't need to be perfect in these moments. You'll have your own triggers. You might raise your voice, roll your eyes, feel the urge to abandon the plan altogether. That's okay. You're human, too. If you mess up, repair it. Say, "That didn't come out how I wanted. Let's try again." Let them see that even grown-ups have to work through frustration, and that we do it without disappearing into a screen or exploding in anger.

Sometimes the pushback lasts five minutes. Sometimes it lasts five days. The length doesn't matter as much as the consistency of your response. The more they realize you mean what you say—not because you're trying to control them, but because you're trying to protect something precious—the less they'll fight it.

And don't be surprised if the pushback comes when everything else is already hard. When the baby is crying, when you're running late, when no one slept well the night before. Those are the moments when old habits come knocking the loudest. And those are the moments when you may have to make a call: to bend, or to hold.

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Sometimes, you'll bend. You'll put on a movie to survive the stomach flu. You'll hand over a phone at the airport. You'll break your own rule because the alternative is pure chaos. That's not failure. That's reality. Flexibility is part of any sustainable rhythm.

But sometimes, you'll hold. You'll let the whining rise, and you won't reach for the remote. You'll ride the wave of your child's disappointment, and you won't try to fix it. You'll say, "We're not doing screens right now. Let's figure out something else." And you'll wait. Not with tension—but with trust.

Because here's the truth most parents don't hear enough: children can handle disappointment. They can handle boredom. They can handle not getting what they want. In fact, it's essential that they learn to. Emotional resilience isn't built by giving a child everything they ask for. It's built by helping them navigate the space between *wanting* and *waiting*. Between *craving* and *coping*.

Your home is the perfect place to practice that. It's where they learn that it's okay to feel big things. That boredom is survivable. That creativity often hides behind the quiet. Those feelings aren't problems—they're signals. That love holds firm, even when limits are firm too.

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Eventually, the protest fades. It always does. The tantrum ends. The tears dry. And there, in the stillness that follows, something amazing begins to emerge. Your child reaches for a book. They grab their markers. They wander outside and start balancing rocks or tracing patterns in the dirt. They remember how to play. How to be. How to exist in the world without needing to be fed content every minute.

They remember themselves.

And you'll remember, too—why you started this. Not to be the “mean parent,” but to be the *present parent*. The grounded one. The safe one. The one who says, “I see what this is doing to us. And I love you enough to try something else.”

You are not depriving your child when you reduce screen time.

You are freeing them.

Freeing their attention. Their nervous system. Their creativity. Their ability to be in the world without escaping it.

And it might take time for them to see that. But they will.

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They'll see it in the way your eyes light up when they talk and you're really listening. In the way the house feels softer, even when it's louder. In the way their boredom leads to discovery instead of despair.

One day, the pushback will feel like a distant memory. You'll be sitting at the kitchen table, playing cards or painting or just talking about the day, and you'll realize something has shifted. Not just their behavior—but the whole energy of your home.

You'll realize you're not fighting screens anymore.

You're living beyond them.

And you got there not by being perfect—but by being present.

That is what your child will remember.

Not the shows they didn't watch—but the time you showed up.

That is the power of staying steady.

That is the long reward of the short resistance.

And it is so, so worth it.

## CHAPTER 8

### Slipping Up and Starting Again

There's a moment that comes after the breakthrough. After the screen reset. After the rituals are in place, the routines are humming, and the house feels lighter. It might come quietly, maybe even with a shrug. A Saturday morning where you're just too tired to argue. A rainy afternoon where the whining wears you down. A stretch of sick days and no backup plans. The rules bend, then blur. And before you know it, the screens are back. Not in a dramatic flood, but in slow, familiar drips—until suddenly the house feels like it did before, and you wonder, *Did we just undo all of it?*

The answer, of course, is no. You didn't undo anything. You just slipped.

And that's okay.

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Because slipping isn't the end of the story. In fact, it's part of it. Any family who has ever tried to make lasting change—whether with food, sleep, discipline, or screens—has hit this place. The place where the progress falters. The structure loosens. The old habits start creeping back in like vines you thought you'd already pulled.

The mistake is not the slip. The mistake is thinking the slip means you've failed.

You haven't.

You're human. Your child is human. Your household has good days and hard days and messy, exhausted, "just-survive-it" days. And in those moments, screens often feel like the easiest answer. That doesn't make you weak or lazy. It makes you a real person trying to find equilibrium in a noisy world.

What matters is not whether you fall out of rhythm. What matters is how you find your way back.

And the way back is simpler than you think.

You don't need a grand reset. You don't need to announce a new seven-day challenge or gather everyone for a family meeting (unless that helps). You just need one small act of awareness. One

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moment where you stop, look around, and say, *Okay. We drifted. Let's come back.*

That sentence—spoken with grace instead of guilt—is the start of something powerful. It invites everyone, including yourself, to return without shame. To shift gently instead of swinging dramatically. To remember that rhythm is something you build, not something you cling to.

Maybe that means turning off the TV after one episode instead of letting it run. Maybe it means leaving your phone in another room while your child plays. Maybe it means reclaiming one screen-free meal today—not all of them. One walk without devices. One hour of quiet play. That's all it takes to signal to your family, *We are still living the life we want. Even now. Even after.*

Because what you're building isn't a strict plan. It's a resilient culture. One that can stretch when it needs to and bounce back when it's ready. One that adapts to life instead of being broken by it.

Slips offer valuable information. They show you where your systems are vulnerable. Where routines aren't strong enough. Where the day needs more structure, or where you need more support. They're not failures. They're feedback.

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You might notice that screen time starts to creep up during certain windows—like the after-school stretch when everyone is tired and hungry. Or right before bed, when energy is low and patience is thin. Or first thing in the morning, when no one's quite ready to interact. These are clues. They tell you where your family needs scaffolding. Where you might introduce a new ritual, a new expectation, a new tool.

Maybe the solution is preparing a snack station, which kids can access themselves. Maybe it's creating a “quiet corner” for decompressing after school. Maybe it's setting out a puzzle or building set before bed instead of reaching for a remote. Small tweaks. Big shifts.

And as you make those shifts, talk about them openly. Not like consequences, but like discoveries. Say, “Hey, I noticed we've all been on screens more lately, and I miss how we used to play after dinner. Want to try something different tonight?” Or, “I realized I've been checking my phone a lot this week. I'm going to take a little break and see how it feels.”

This kind of honesty models something essential: that rhythm is dynamic. That self-correction is part of strength. That it's okay to try again, again and again.

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Sometimes, the slipping doesn't come from you—it comes from your child. They beg. They sneak. They push. And you start to question whether the effort is worth it. You wonder if you're just delaying the inevitable, if you should stop trying to fight a world so saturated in screens.

But here's what's true: your effort *does* matter. Even if it's imperfect. Even if it wobbles. Even if it doesn't look the way you pictured it. Every time you say no to defaulting and yes to intentionality, you are teaching your child something they won't learn anywhere else. That real life is enough. That relationships deserve undivided attention. That joy doesn't need to be plugged in to be felt.

That lesson doesn't require perfection. It requires persistence.

You don't need to start over. You just need to start *again*.

Not with shame, not with drama—just with a simple breath and a small step.

That's the path forward. Not a straight line. A spiral. A series of circles that always bring you home. Home to your values. Home to connection. Home to the kind of life you're working to build—not flawless, but rich. Not rigid, but grounded. Not

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screen-free in every moment, but screen-wise in every choice.

So if this is the chapter where things fell apart a little—good. It means you're in it. It means you're living a real story, with setbacks and recoveries and all the glorious middle that comes between.

And the most important thing to remember is this:

You can begin again at any time.

Even today.

Especially today.

## CHAPTER 9

### **Raising Kids Who Use Tech Wisely**

At some point, the focus shifts. The bedtime routines, the screen resets, the weekend rituals—they start to feel familiar. You’ve built a rhythm. You’ve created a home where screens don’t dominate the day, and your child is finally playing again, talking more, sleeping better. There’s still resistance now and then, but something is different. Lighter. More spacious. And that’s when the bigger questions begin to surface.

It’s no longer just about how much screen time your child has. It becomes about who they’re becoming. Because eventually, they won’t need your permission to log in. They’ll have their own devices, their own passwords, their own digital identities. They’ll be navigating a world of endless content, curated personas, clickbait headlines, targeted ads, anonymous comment sections, and messages that move faster than their still-

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developing minds can always process. And they'll be doing it without you right there beside them.

That thought is sobering. Not because the world is inherently bad, but because it is so unrelentingly loud. There will come a time when you won't be able to block the noise, but you will be able to teach your child how to listen for the quiet inside themselves.

That's what raising a screen-wise child is about. It's not just about limiting screen time. It's about strengthening their internal compass. Giving them the tools not just to survive in a digital world—but to move through it with discernment. To ask better questions. To set better boundaries. To feel when enough is enough—and to trust that feeling.

That begins long before they ever hold a phone.

It begins in how we speak about technology in our homes. In the stories we tell. In the boundaries we hold with compassion, not control. It begins when a child learns that screens are powerful, yes—but so are they.

It might start with a conversation during a walk. You point out how every billboard seems to be selling something. Your child asks why ads show up in their game. You explain that companies want to keep them watching, clicking, buying. That the

internet isn't just a library—it's a marketplace. And that every tap is a vote. They look at you a little differently after that. Like they're being let in on something adults usually keep quiet.

Later, they notice an ad that feels off. They tell you about it. You talk through it together, and you see it happening—your child thinking critically. Asking why instead of just absorbing. That's digital literacy. That's wisdom forming.

It grows in tiny moments like that. A shared YouTube video that sparks a discussion. A game they want but you don't feel is age-appropriate, and instead of just saying no, you explore the content together and explain your reasons. You don't shame them for wanting it—you invite them to help decide what fits their values. Even if they don't agree, you've planted a seed.

As they grow, the questions get bigger. Should they get their own phone? Which apps should they use? What's okay to post? What do they do when someone sends them something that feels wrong? What if they feel left out because everyone else has something they don't?

These are not just logistical questions. They're identity questions. And how we respond to them

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shapes how our children see both the digital world and their place within it.

Sometimes we want to protect them by saying no to everything. But what they really need is someone to say yes—*yes to guidance*. Yes to conversation. Yes to helping them practice, stumble, adjust, and try again.

If we want our children to self-regulate, they need chances to regulate.

That means not just turning things off for them, but helping them feel what happens when they've had too much. "How do you feel after watching that?" "Did that help you relax or make you more wound up?" "Do you notice it's harder to fall asleep when you play right before bed?"

These questions don't blame. They *build awareness*. And with awareness comes autonomy.

You might notice your child choosing to pause more often. Saying things like, "That game was fun, but I feel weird now." Or deciding not to bring their device on a family walk because they don't want to miss it. These are small, sacred shifts. Don't overlook them. They're signs that your child is starting to listen to themselves—not just the pull of the screen.

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This is the goal. Not to raise children who never use technology. But to raise children who use it with care. Who know when to plug in, and when to log off. Who can recognize manipulation, even when it's wrapped in cartoons. Who can ask, *Does this align with who I want to be?*

That means we have to model it, too. Not perfectly. But honestly.

It means saying, "I've been on my phone too much today, and I don't like how I feel. I'm going to put it away." Or, "That video made me feel anxious—I think I need to step outside." It means letting them see that we're still learning, too. That grown-ups get distracted, and confused, and overstimulated. And that we can still choose to come back to ourselves.

Children don't need digital perfection. They need digital humility. Adults who are willing to look inward, set limits, and start again.

When you teach your child to use technology wisely, you're not just preparing them for screen time. You're preparing them for life. For friendships and peer pressure. For marketing and media. For hard decisions when you're not there to guide them.

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You're giving them the tools to tune out the noise and hear the small voice inside that says, *This doesn't feel right. I don't need this right now. I'm okay without it.*

That voice is hard to hear in a world designed to drown it out.

But when it gets strong enough, it stays.

And it carries them.

It carries them into adolescence, where likes and follows try to replace identity. Into high school, where phones promise belonging but often deliver distraction. Into college, where independence means choosing how to spend their time, their energy, their attention.

You'll see the fruit of your work in how they carry their devices. In how they speak about what they consume. In the way they pause before they share something. In the way they set down their screen to make eye contact with someone who matters.

These aren't just behaviors. They're beliefs in action.

And they started with you.

With the way you rewrote the role of screens in your home. With the way you built something

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intentional instead of accidental. With the conversations you had when it was hard, and the quiet strength you offered when everyone else was checking out.

That work will echo.

Because raising kids who use tech wisely isn't about having all the right rules. It's about raising kids who know they are more than what they see online. That they can trust their instincts. That they are allowed to step back, to breathe, to choose something different.

That's the freedom you're giving them.

Not a fear of screens—but a faith in themselves.

## CHAPTER 10

### **The Long Game – Building a Screen-Savvy Home**

You've come a long way. You've questioned your family's habits, invited your child into new rhythms, navigated meltdowns, and rediscovered what life feels like when you're not constantly competing with a screen. And now you're standing at the edge of something bigger—not just a phase or a reset, but the beginning of a new normal.

The real work of a screen-wise family doesn't live in the dramatic moments. It lives in the ordinary ones. In the way a Tuesday unfolds when the weather is gray and no one feels like talking. In the way the kitchen feels when breakfast is slow and no one's reached for a device. In how you handle a hard day—whether you numb it with noise or walk into it, open-palmed and steady.

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This is what it means to build a screen-savvy home. It's not about managing a list of dos and don'ts. It's about shaping the air your child breathes. The tone of the house. The messages that hum under the surface, unspoken but constant: *Here, we talk. Here, we rest. Here, we pay attention to each other. Here, we play without permission. Here, we let life unfold at its own pace.*

Culture always wins over rules. You can make the best plan in the world, but if the underlying culture still whispers that screens are the easiest way to cope, connect, or escape, that plan will eventually collapse under the weight of daily life. But when the culture shifts—when attention becomes the family currency, when rituals anchor the day, when presence becomes the baseline—then even the hard moments start to feel different.

Children rise to the culture they live in. Not always immediately, and not without protest—but over time, consistently, they lean into what surrounds them. They grow toward what is repeated.

And that repetition starts with you.

Maybe it's in the way you wake up and open the blinds instead of checking your phone. Or the way you brew your coffee and sit quietly for a few minutes instead of turning on the TV. Maybe it's

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the way your child comes into the room and sees your face, unfiltered, waiting. These aren't grand gestures. But they are signals. They say, *You matter more than anything happening on my screen.*

Every time you make a choice like that, you're not just modeling behavior. You're building a home where technology is present but not dominant. Useful but not addictive. Accessible but not assumed.

You start to notice how certain parts of the day shape everything else. The way your mornings feel sets the tone. The way your evenings end lingers in the air. And so you protect those times—not with tension, but with care. Maybe you keep mornings screen-free, letting them stretch out slowly with music, food, and light. Maybe you reclaim the hour after dinner as a time for connection: a walk, a game, a shared chore. You're not filling time. You're shaping it.

Ritual becomes your scaffolding. You don't have to plan something special every day. You just need to create a rhythm your family can return to when everything else is loud. Taco night. Family clean-up dance party. Saturday hikes. Story hour. Even fifteen minutes of Lego building after school can become sacred if it happens with consistency and warmth.

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And because life is unpredictable, you let those rhythms bend without breaking. There will be travel days, sick days, survival days. But the rhythm is always there to return to. That's the long game.

You'll see the culture shift in little things. Your child starts asking for a board game instead of a show. They go outside without prompting. They build something from cardboard and tape instead of reaching for your phone. These aren't just behaviors. They're signs that your child is becoming comfortable with stillness again. With effort. With boredom and what comes next.

They don't get there overnight. And neither do you. There will be regressions. There will be weekends that feel like a wash, afternoons where the iPad wins, arguments that drain you, and days when you just want to tap out. That's okay. Rhythm isn't ruined by one skipped beat. It's rebuilt in the return.

And as your children grow, the challenges change. You'll move from managing YouTube playlists to navigating social media. From bedtime cartoons to text chains at midnight. You'll have new conversations about privacy, safety, ethics, empathy. But the foundation remains: connection over consumption. Thoughtfulness over impulse. Real life over digital noise.

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When those deeper choices arrive, your child won't be making them from scratch. They'll be drawing on years of quiet practice. Of seeing their parent pause before reacting. Of learning that they're allowed to say no—to others, and to themselves. Of understanding that what feels good in the moment isn't always what leads to peace.

That's the power of a screen-savvy home. It doesn't protect your child from every temptation. It prepares them to choose something better.

Not because they're scared of screens.

Because they've tasted something more satisfying.

And so have you.

The longer you live this way, the more you'll start to feel it. The calm of evenings where no one is being entertained and yet no one is bored. The joy of weekends where the hours stretch wide open and your child knows how to fill them. The depth of conversations that happen not because you forced them—but because there was space for them to emerge.

This isn't about building a screen-free fortress.

It's about building a home that's awake.

A home where presence is the default.

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A home where screens are welcome—but not worshipped.

A home where your child learns that the world is not something to watch—it's something to *live*.

You've already started. Every time you said no with love. Every time you said yes to play. Every time you turned your face toward your child instead of toward a screen. Every time you reminded your family—gently, again—that this is the kind of life we're making here.

Not a perfect life.

But a real one.

That's the long game.

And you're already playing it beautifully.

## CHAPTER 11

### **What About School, Friends, and the Real World?**

You've started making changes. You've set boundaries, reclaimed the living room, maybe even heard your child say, "I had fun playing today" without any mention of a screen. Things are shifting, and it feels good—better than you expected.

And then, out of nowhere, comes the pressure.

It might be a text from another parent: "Is your daughter on Roblox yet? The whole class is."

Or a school assignment that *requires* an app, a login, a browser extension you've never heard of. Or your child comes home from a playdate saying, "They watched three movies—why can't we?"

Suddenly, your calm little screen reset starts to feel like an island. A beautiful one—but isolated.

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Because the world outside your home? It's buzzing. Always connected. Always online. And the questions start coming fast:

*Will my child be left out? Will they fall behind? Am I holding them back?*

These are real concerns. And if you're feeling them, you're not overreacting. You're paying attention.

The truth is, raising screen-wise kids doesn't happen in a vacuum. You can't just create boundaries and expect the rest of the world to support them. Classrooms are increasingly digital. Kids bond over video games. Teenagers form friendships through group chats, shared YouTube humor, and online in-jokes. Technology isn't a side issue—it's the fabric of modern life.

So how do you protect your child's brain, body, and attention... without isolating them?

You start by remembering this: the goal isn't to raise a child who never uses tech. The goal is to raise a child who knows *how* to use it—when to engage, when to step away, and how to do both with confidence and care.

That means building internal skills, not just external controls.

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When your child is young, yes, you'll guide their access. You'll say no to the second show, yes to one carefully chosen game, maybe delay the device a bit longer than other families do. That's not just okay—it's healthy. It gives their brain time to develop the tools they'll need later: focus, patience, frustration tolerance, boredom navigation.

But you'll also talk. Not just once, but often.

You'll explain why you made these choices. You'll say, "Other families do things differently, and that's okay. But here, we're practicing something important. We're growing strong brains. We're learning to listen to our bodies and pay attention to the world around us."

You won't always get nods and hugs in response. Sometimes you'll get eye-rolls. But the message will sink in—not just in words, but in the calm they feel in their own bodies when life slows down.

Then, as they grow, you let them practice in small ways.

You might say, "Let's try this game together and talk about how it makes us feel." Or, "You can join that class group chat, but let's check in about how it's going."

You make tech a conversation, not a battleground.

## MARTHA RECK

And that's how you prepare them for the real world—not by shielding them from it, but by *equipping* them to meet it on their own terms.

You also remind yourself that not all screen time is equal. A kid watching a cartoon alone for hours is not the same as one working on a shared Google Doc with a classmate, or FaceTiming Grandma, or coding their own game. The *purpose* of the screen matters.

You become your child's interpreter—helping them understand that tools are only as helpful as the ways we use them.

And when they say “But everyone else is doing it”—and they will—you breathe. You remember what you value. You say something like, “A lot of people are. That doesn't mean it's best for *you* right now.” Or, “That might work for their family, and I respect that. We're trying something different here. Something that works for us.”

You will not always be popular. And that's okay.

Because slowly, your child will begin to understand that boundaries are not restrictions. They are *protections*. And when they get used to living with them, they begin to build boundaries of their own.

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You'll see it one day when they walk away from a game that's making them anxious. Or when they put their device down because they'd rather draw. Or when they speak up and say, "I don't really like that show—can we do something else?"

That's the long game.

Yes, they'll still want to be included. And yes, they might be out of the loop sometimes. But what they gain instead is clarity. Identity. Agency.

They become the kind of person who knows that fitting in isn't worth losing yourself.

And you? You keep listening. You stay flexible. You make space for nuance.

You say yes to digital school tools when they support learning. You say yes to a video call with friends, even if it goes a little long. You make popcorn and watch a movie on Friday night—not as a bribe, but as a ritual. Because balance isn't about avoidance. It's about attention.

You keep showing them how to choose.

Not perfectly. Not forever. Just one day at a time.

And you model the life you want them to live.

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You put your own phone away during meals. You show them how to pause. You say, “That video made me feel weird. I think I need a break.” You live your values out loud, not just for them—but for you.

Because in the end, the real world doesn’t belong to screens.

It belongs to *humans*.

And your child is one of them.

Capable. Smart. Whole. Ready.

You’re not raising them to be sheltered. You’re raising them to be *awake*.

And that makes all the difference.

## CHAPTER 12

### **Real Families, Real Changes**

Sometimes the best encouragement isn't in research or recommendations—it's in the quiet stories of other families who've stood where you are. Parents who didn't have it all figured out, who didn't change everything overnight, but who made one small shift, and then another. Who found a different rhythm, sometimes messily, but meaningfully.

These are real families. Their names may be changed, but their stories are true. They remind us that progress doesn't have to be perfect to be powerful.

#### **Amy and the Six-Hour Saturday**

Amy never meant for weekends to become screen marathons. But with two kids under seven, a demanding remote job, and a partner who often worked Saturdays, it was just easier to hand over the iPads and power through her to-do list.

Then one Saturday, she glanced up from her laptop and realized her daughters hadn't moved in nearly six hours. The same show was still playing. Lunch had come and gone. And no one had even asked to go outside. Her stomach dropped. "That was the moment," she said. "Not the guilt—the grief."

The next weekend, Amy cleared her calendar. No screen bans. Just a picnic blanket in the backyard, a stack of board games, and a "let's try this" attitude.

The first few hours were rough. Her younger daughter kept asking for the tablet. Her older one kept hovering by the door. But by late afternoon, they were playing "store" with old paper bags and scribbled signs. Amy joined them. They made a mess. They burned dinner.

But no one asked for a screen.

"We didn't solve anything that day," Amy said. "But it was the first time I felt like we were *together* in weeks."

They now call those weekends "unplugged Saturdays." Not strict. Just different. More human.

### **Liam's Meltdown and the Power of One Change**

Liam was five when his parents began to worry. Every time the tablet was taken away, he

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exploded—screaming, crying, sometimes even throwing things. At first, they thought it was age. Then they wondered if something deeper was going on.

The pediatrician asked one question: “What happens if you don’t give him the tablet at all for a few days?”

It had never occurred to them. They’d always used it to manage transitions—morning wakeups, dinner prep, post-school fatigue.

That weekend, they braced themselves. They told Liam ahead of time: “We’re taking a break from the tablet for a few days. We’ll do other things instead.” He screamed. He refused breakfast. He lay on the floor, sobbing.

But by day two, something changed.

He pulled out a bin of toys he hadn’t touched in months. He made up a silly dance. He started helping in the kitchen, just to be close to his parents.

The shift wasn’t easy. But it was real.

Now, screen time in their home is simple: 30 minutes in the afternoon, no more. And it’s never the first or last thing in his day.

“It’s not about the rule,” his mom said. “It’s about the reset.”

### **The Olsons and the Great Digital Dinner Rescue**

The Olson family used to eat dinner with the TV on. Not out of laziness—but because it kept everyone calm. Four kids, loud voices, different ages. Dinner was the most chaotic part of the day. So they watched while they ate, and no one fought.

Until one night, the power went out. They had to eat in the quiet. It was strange. Awkward. The kids didn’t know what to do with their hands. One of them started crying over peas. Another got up three times in ten minutes.

But by dessert, they were telling stories. Silly ones. True ones. Embellished, dramatic, full of laughter.

That night, when the lights came back, they all agreed to try one week of TV-free dinners. Just to see.

Four years later, it’s still going.

Now, each dinner begins with a question from a “jar” they made:

What’s something weird that happened today?

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If you were invisible for a day, where would you go?

What's one thing you're proud of?

Dinner is still loud. Still chaotic. But it's theirs.

And the TV? It's never missed.

### **Jasmine and the Phone in Her Pocket**

Jasmine thought the screen time battle was all about her kids. Until one day, her daughter looked her in the eye and said, “You love your phone more than me.”

It wasn't said with anger. It was said with sadness. Jasmine didn't know what to say.

That night, she looked through her camera roll. So many pictures of her kids, so few *with* them. So many videos, but so few memories of how those days actually *felt*.

She made a promise—not to quit her phone, but to stop letting it be the first and last thing she touched each day.

She started leaving it in the bedroom when she played with her kids. She took walks without it. She began reading again, instead of scrolling.

She even started saying it out loud: “I’m putting my phone away so I can be here with you.”

At first, her kids didn’t notice. Then, slowly, they did.

They started asking for her to play more. To listen more. To watch their games, their silly shows, their made-up songs.

And she could. She was there.

“Screens weren’t stealing my time,” she said. “I was *giving* it away. I didn’t even realize it.”

Now, she’s more protective of her attention than ever. Not because she’s trying to be perfect. But because she remembers what it’s like to be gone, even when you’re in the room.

### **Marco and the Five-Minute Game**

Marco worked full-time and hated that most of his evenings were spent saying, “Not now, buddy. I’m tired.” He felt guilty, but didn’t know how to fix it. His son begged for the iPad every night, and Marco gave in more often than he wanted to admit.

One night, after a long day, he offered a different idea: “Let’s play a five-minute game.”

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It was simple. They sat on the floor. His son picked a card game. They played badly. They laughed.

And at the end of the five minutes, his son said, “Can we do that again tomorrow?”

They did. Every night.

Sometimes it stretched to ten minutes. Sometimes it was just five. But something about knowing there was one *guaranteed* moment of connection changed everything.

Now, they call it “our five”—short for “our five minutes.”

Marco still works full-time. But he no longer feels like he’s missing the most important part of the day.

There are thousands more stories like these.

Some full of struggle. Some simple. Some still unfolding.

They all share one thing in common: a parent who decided to pause. To notice. To try something new—not perfectly, not forever, but just long enough to feel a change.

This isn’t about overhauling your life overnight.

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It's about shifting it, gently, in the direction of presence.

And letting that presence grow into a new way of being—one moment, one choice, one day at a time.

## CHAPTER 13

### Conversation Starters

You've done more than just read a book. You've stepped into a new way of seeing. Of choosing. Of leading your family toward something slower, deeper, more connected. Along the way, you've questioned patterns, invited resistance, made space for boredom, and created rhythms that make presence feel possible again.

But some days, even with all the clarity in the world, you'll want a little structure. Something to fall back on when the noise starts creeping back in. Something to guide your next step when you're too tired to remember your intention.

That's what this chapter is for.

Not to give you a perfect system, but to offer you prompts—gentle rails on the path. Ideas you can return to when the air gets foggy. Tools you can use when the day feels long. Words you can speak

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when everyone forgets what this whole journey was about.

There's a difference between being rigid and being rooted. These tools aren't here to lock you in. They're here to remind you of who you already are.

Maybe you come back to a family ritual you loved and lost track of. Maybe you use a weekly check-in to re-center after a chaotic weekend. Maybe a few conversation starters at dinner open the door to a connection you didn't know you needed.

These are small things. But small things, repeated with care, become culture.

You might start with a family reset day—not to punish, but to pause. One day a month where you turn screens off and tune in. Maybe it becomes sacred. Maybe it's messy. Either way, it brings everyone back to the table.

Or you might print out a little sign for the dining room: “No phones live here.” It doesn't need to be fancy. It just needs to be seen.

You might try a boredom jar—strips of paper with silly ideas scribbled on them, pulled out in a moment of frustration. Build a blanket fort. Make a fake menu and play restaurant. Invent a new holiday. Pretend you're a family of cats for fifteen

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minutes. None of it needs to be perfect. It just needs to be *yours*.

One evening, you might light a candle and say, “Let’s do a screen check-in.” Not a lecture. Just a quiet moment. “What felt good this week?” “What felt too much?” “What should we try next?” These aren’t strategies—they’re invitations. And when children feel invited instead of corrected, they lean in.

There’s also power in the pause between questions. When you ask your child, “How do you feel after playing that game?” and then just... wait. Sometimes the answer takes a while. Sometimes it surprises both of you.

Over time, you’ll find the tools that stick. You’ll invent your own.

Maybe a Sunday walk becomes sacred.

Maybe you write your family tech values on the fridge.

Maybe your child starts asking their own questions before choosing what to watch.

That’s the moment when the tools become something more. Not just things you *use*, but things you’ve *become*. A family that notices. That asks.

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That pauses. That remembers what it's here to protect.

The templates, the questions, the rituals—they're only as powerful as the love behind them. And that love is already here.

You've built something beautiful, even on the days it felt shaky. You've returned to the heart of your home, again and again. You've chosen what matters. And you've done it not with perfection, but with presence.

So if you ever feel lost, come back here. Come back to the breath. The moment. The child in front of you. Come back to a conversation, a jar of ideas, a walk around the block. Come back to a book instead of a screen. Come back to the silence, and then the sound that follows.

Come back.

You are never starting over.

You are always starting again.

And your family is better for it.

## **Printable Tools & Templates**

These are flexible tools—simple, low-pressure ways to bring intention into your family’s tech use. Print them, sketch them, adapt them. They’re here when you need support or a reset.

- Family Tech Plan
- Weekly Screen Check-in
- Boredom Jar Prompts (Cut & Draw)
- “First This, Then Screen” Chart
- 7-Day Reset Challenge

## Family Tech Plan

### Our Family's Agreement on Screen Use:

- When we use screens: → Weekdays:

---

→ Weekends:

---

- Where screens are allowed:

→ Yes:

---

→ No:

---

- Types of content we allow:

→

---

- When we turn off screens:

→ Meals: Yes  No

→ Before bed: Yes  No

→ Mornings: Yes  No

- What we'll do instead:

→

---

- Signed by:

---

## **Weekly Screen Check-In**

Use this once a week—during dinner, in the car, or anytime your family is calm and connected.

- What felt good about screen time this week?
- What felt not-so-great?
- Did anything surprise us?
- What's one change we'd like to try next week?
- What's one fun thing we want to do without screens?

## **Boredom Jar Prompts (Cut & Draw)**

A few ideas to get you started—add your own too!

- Build a cardboard castle
- Make a menu and play restaurant
- Draw a comic strip
- Make up a silly dance and teach it
- Do a blindfolded drawing challenge
- Write a joke and perform it
- Build the tallest thing you can from blocks
- Create a treasure hunt
- Write a letter to Future You
- Make a nature sculpture outside

## “First This, Then Screen” Chart

Use this for younger kids to help them build structure and self-regulation.

### **First I...**

### **Then I can...**

Do my homework

Watch a show

Play outside 30 mins

Use my tablet

Read for 15 mins

Play a game

Help clean up

Have 20 mins screen time

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## **7-Day Reset Challenge**

A simple challenge for families who want a quick refresh.

**Day 1** – No screens after dinner

**Day 2** – Eat one meal with no devices

**Day 3** – Go for a screen-free walk

**Day 4** – Create something (draw, build, craft)

**Day 5** – Family game night

**Day 6** – Listen to music instead of watching something

**Day 7** – Celebrate with a fun screen-free outing

## About The Author

Martha Reck is a mother, educator, and IT professional with a deep interest in how technology shapes family life. She holds degrees in pedagogy and sociology, and brings both academic insight and personal experience to her writing. As a mom to a curious and energetic preschooler, she understands the daily tension between screens and real connection—and the desire to raise children who are both digitally capable and deeply grounded.

Combining her background in child development and her firsthand perspective from the tech world, Marta Rek offers a balanced, guilt-free approach to parenting in the digital age. *The Screen-Free Family* is her invitation to slow down, reconnect, and rediscover the richness of everyday moments—no scrolling required.