

Helping teens unplug and reconnect this summer

Like each new year, summer often begins with the best intentions — more family time, outdoor adventures, new experiences, and a break from the grind of the school year. Yet before we know it, our acquired habits of spending time scrolling social media, watching videos, or texting friends manage to plant themselves firmly into our every hour.

Teens are especially susceptible to this as their time can be mostly unstructured during the summer months. Striving for a “screen-light” summer for ourselves and our teenagers not only supports overall wellbeing but also provides opportunities to reset habits around technology. The remainder of summer offers a valuable window of opportunity to reframe our relationship with our screens.

One of the easiest ways to reduce screen time is to spend more time outside. A bike ride with friends, a pickup soccer game, or simply reading quietly under a shade tree offers the kind of unstructured freedom



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that many young people rarely experience during the school year. For teenagers who have spent much of the summer indoors, getting outside can improve mood, reduce stress, and boost energy levels.

A screen-light summer also makes room for activities that engage the hands and imagination. Drawing, painting, journaling, playing music, cooking, gardening, building, or learning a new skill all help young people develop focus and creativity.

Parents often worry when kids say they are bored, but boredom can be one of the most valuable parts of summer. That may sound counterintuitive, but boredom often sparks imagina-

tion. When teenagers are not constantly entertained by a screen, they are more likely to explore a new hobby, read a book, write, draw, build something, or simply spend time reflecting. Many of life’s most valuable interests and talents emerge during unstructured moments.

Summer is also an ideal time for teenagers to develop practical life skills. Cooking a family meal, learning basic car maintenance, creating a budget, gardening, or taking on a small home improvement project can build independence and self-confidence. These activities help teens feel capable and prepared for adulthood while giving them a sense of accomplishment that scrolling through social media rarely provides.

Parents should remember that successfully reducing screen time often starts with modeling the behavior we hope to see. Consider establishing family screen-free periods during meals, on weekend mornings, or during evening activities. When everyone participates, the focus shifts from restric-

tion to connection.

It’s also important to involve teens in the conversation rather than imposing rules without discussion. Ask them what activities they have always wanted to try or what goals they hope to accomplish before school begins. Giving them ownership in creating a screen-light summer plan increases the likelihood that they will embrace it.

Perhaps most importantly, parents should focus on what teens gain rather than what they give up. Less screen time can mean more laughter with friends, stronger family relationships, improved sleep, greater creativity, and memories that last far longer than the latest viral trend.

Healthy technology habits are not about eliminating screens altogether — they are about creating more room for the real-world experiences that help young people thrive.

The Health Foundation of East Texas has launched its Screen-Light Summer initiative, encouraging families to help young people spend more time connecting with

friends, family, nature, and their communities in real life. The campaign is built on a simple but powerful message: the experiences that most strongly support youth well-being — time outdoors, face-to-face friendships, creativity, movement, and a sense of purpose — are often crowded out by excessive screen use.

To help families translate that message into action, the Foundation partnered with local events guide The Piney List to create the Touch Grass Tour, a curated collection of East Texas destinations, activities, and gathering spaces where young people can explore, create, socialize, and experience the outdoors. The collaboration highlights the abundance of opportunities already available throughout the region — from parks and trails to community events, arts experiences, and recreational activities. Rather than focusing solely on limiting screen time, the partnership encourages families to replace digital distractions with meaningful real-world experiences that foster con-

nection and well-being.

The name “Touch Grass Tour” comes from a phrase many teens use online as a playful reminder to step away from the digital world and reconnect with reality. According to emerging research, spending even 10 minutes outdoors can reduce stress hormones and boost mood, providing a simple but effective strategy for improving mental wellness during the summer months. Through its partnership with The Piney List, the Health Foundation of East Texas is helping families discover local opportunities to do exactly that, making it easier for teens to find healthy, engaging alternatives to endless scrolling.

The Health Foundation of East Texas is supporting a broad, collaborative effort to transform our community into a place where youth can thrive, with digital wellness as a central component of our efforts. Please visit us at healthfoundationet.org to learn more.

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