Five Ways to Ease Screen Time Transitions

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"There is *nothing* to do," my youngest kid wailed again. In case we hadn't heard he increased his volume when he repeated the word *nothing.* Then he scanned our home as if it were a barren wasteland.

I glanced at him and within seconds could pick out any number of enjoyable activities he could try next. Admittedly, it might have been hard for him to generate ideas given that he was lying prone on the floor. Just seconds earlier, both the TV screen and his eyes had been bright as he created a new Minecraft structure. Now both the screen and my kids' desire to do anything *but* Minecraft had gone dark.

To be honest, I didn't have a lot of empathy for my son's plight. Indeed, I stifled the impulse to share any of the unhelpful responses running through my mind. These included, but were not limited to, supplying a long list of things he could possibly do, reminding him of the importance of gratitude, and threatening to confiscate all video games forever and ever.

I knew from experience that these responses weren't actually going to be helpful or appropriate. The good news is that before I even had the chance to open my mouth, my kid jumped up and said, "Oh right – I forgot to do my jumping jacks!"

Saved by an alternative source of dopamine.

Screen time transitions

I have yet to meet a parent who experiences screen time transitions with ease and joy one hundred percent of the time. Turning off the iPad or wrapping up a gaming session can ignite a range of feelings for many kids. How many of us haven't had to deal with the "post screen time blues?"

I don't think that I'm the only one who has been tempted to meet their big feelings with lectures, empty threats, or unhelpful instructions. But understanding what is happening *inside* our kids during these transitions generates more empathy and can lead to more helpful responses. Here are a few dynamics at play during these challenging moments:

- **Attention.** Many platforms are designed to grab and hold our kids' attention for long periods of time. This means that there are fewer natural stopping points amid the constant stream of attention hooks. Endless YouTube feeds or never-ending gaming worlds can make stopping feel jarring and abrupt.
- **Rewards.** Screen activities tend to be high reward spaces. This isn't inherently a bad thing. Certainly some screen activities deliver a steady flow of cheap dopamine shots in the form of mindless games or clips with frequent emotional jolts and rewards. But plenty of games and platforms engage kids through compelling storytelling, engagement with peers, novelty and "just right" levels of challenge. Dropping out of these environments into offline spaces that offer comparatively low dopamine rewards can be a real let down.
- **Development.** Even adults with fully developed brains have a difficult time consistently regulating our emotions in healthy ways. For kids and teens, the skills that help them handle feelings like distress, exhilaration, anger, or frustration are still under construction. Practicing these skills takes time. This means that as feelings come up during a transition it may be more difficult for our kids to handle them.

Understanding these dynamics can generate much-needed compassion for our kids during screen time struggles. It can also help kids themselves think about strategies for easing the transition. For example, when we got our first gaming console we talked through the science of screen time transitions. After learning that the drop in dopamine when screen time ends can leave them irritable and bored, my kids were more open to brainstorming ways to avoid the crash. This, by the way, was the origin of the twenty jumping jacks ritual.

Easing the transition

Not all screen time transition challenges can be solved with jumping jacks and not all kids are eager to brainstorm strategies. Our approach will also need to change and evolve as kids get older. But understanding what is going on *inside* can still help us respond in ways that are more helpful. Here are a few strategies to consider adding to your toolkit:

Stick to routines (most of the time)

Constant negotiation and inconsistent boundaries are a recipe for screen time power struggles and meltdowns. It tends to position parents as constant "on/off regulators." Instead, letting predictable routines guide expectations and behavior takes pressure off of us and

helps kids manage their expectations and feelings. For example, try, "We always watch two shows before dinner," or, "We always charge our phones in the kitchen overnight." Flexing the routine when we need to is easier than having to recreate it everyday.

Create agreements

Creating a family media agreement helps us talk about screen time transitions ahead of time. Advance planning tends to work better than responding in the moment. Everyone can contribute to the agreements, including ways we are going to *enjoy* the new platform or device. Brainstorm ideas together about reasonable logical consequences for out of bounds behavior. For example, "Remember, we agreed that if you choose to scream at me and throw the controller then you are choosing no gaming tomorrow."

Forecasting and skill building

Kids are more likely to follow through on agreements when they have the skills and capacity to do so. Capacity can be impacted by many factors including sleep, stress, or hunger. Even at full capacity, however, skills like emotional regulation are still works in progress for kids and teens. Forecasting predictable emotional storms gives us a chance to practice skills for handling them. For example, "We both know that anger and frustration can show up at the end of a gaming session. That makes sense! It's hard to stop playing this game sometimes. What will you do if anger boils over? Let's practice that now."

Create a bridge

Shouting from the kitchen, "You have five minutes left!" might feel like ample warning to us. But for most kids, this kind of communication isn't likely to get their full attention (even if they absentmindedly respond). This leads to surprise and indignation when we wrench the device out of their hands five minutes later. To be fair, if someone walked into the room while I was watching my favorite show and demanded that I end it immediately mid-plotline I would be pretty angry too. Instead, try creating a human bridge between activities. Get close, engage them in questions about what they are doing, establish connected conversation, and then remind them that they need to find a good stopping point in the next five minutes.

Mind the drop

Too often, we expect kids to transition from a very high reward activity online to a *very* low reward activity offline. For example, going from a highly immersive gaming space to washing hands for dinner can feel like falling off a dopamine cliff. Instead, consider transitioning to another higher reward activity after screen time. To be clear, this doesn't mean giving our kids candy or stickers every time they log off. Instead, consider moving from screens to other dopamine producing activities like movement, outdoor play, or a short activity with you. For teens this could be a different activity of their choice. The buffer doesn't have to be long to do its job.

Celebrate progress, not perfection

We can encourage our kids to do jumping jacks and create structure and mind the drop and *still* struggle with screen time transitions. Let's not wait to celebrate progress until some unrealistic dream of perfection is realized. For example, if we wait until our kids hand us the video game controller with a huge smile, a hug, and an articulate thank you, we may never get to revel in our own growth. Instead, let's mirror back effort and note progress. "I noticed that anger showed up today. That makes sense because it's hard to stop playing games. I noticed that you screamed at me once, which didn't feel good. Then I noticed that you stopped and took two deep breaths. How did that feel? Nice!"