Family screen rules you can print and fill in

Good family screen rules name places without screens, such as bedrooms and the dinner table, times without screens, such as the hour before bed, where devices charge overnight, what content is fine, and what comes first, like homework and sleep. Write them together, include the adults, and review them each school term.

Key points

- The AAP recommends a family media plan made with your children, covering every family member, adults included.
- Screen-free places and times, such as meals, homework and the hour before bed, are the backbone of most plans.
- Turning off autoplay and notifications removes features designed to keep children watching longer.
- The rules change as children grow; revisit them at the start of each school year and before long holidays.
- A short list everyone can remember works better than a long one nobody reads.

A family screen rules template: fill in your own answers

Rule	Under 5	5–12	13–17	Our family's rule
Screen-free places	Bedrooms, the table, the car for short trips	Bedrooms and the table	The table; phones out of bedrooms overnight	Write yours here
Screen-free times	The hour before bed; meals	Meals, homework, the hour before bed	Meals and the hour before bed	Write yours here
Where devices sleep	Not applicable, or the kitchen	A family charging spot	A family charging spot, including parents' phones	Write yours here
How much and when	WHO: no more than 1 hour a day for 2–4 year olds; none under 1	An agreed amount on school days and weekends	Agreed together; reviewed if sleep or school slips	Write yours here
What we watch and play	Chosen by an adult and watched together	Checked for age and advertising	Talked about openly, including privacy and contact with strangers	Write yours here
Settings	Autoplay off	Autoplay and notifications off; parental controls on	Privacy settings checked together	Write yours here
Adults too	Phones down at meals and bedtime	Phones down at meals and bedtime	Phones down at meals and bedtime	Write yours here

Most families have screen rules. Fewer have written them down, and fewer still have made them together. Writing them down turns a nightly argument into a shared agreement you can point to, and the printed version of this page gives you a template to fill in at the kitchen table.

Why a written plan

In 2016, the American Academy of Pediatrics said that the evidence on children's media use does not support a one-size-fits-all approach, and recommended that families build a family media plan that fits their children's ages, with consistent rules. Its 2026 guidance takes the same line and goes further, encouraging families to look beyond simple time limits to the quality of what children use, the context, and the conversations around it.

The AAP's guidance on making a plan has three steps: create rules that work for your family, make a plan for every member of the family, including yourself, and revisit and revise it often, for example at the start of a school year or before a long holiday.

What to put in it

The template in the table covers the areas that come up in almost every plan. You do not need all of them. Pick the ones that cause most friction in your home and start there.

Screen-free places. Bedrooms and the dinner table are the most common. A review by Carter and colleagues found that children and teenagers who used, or even just had access to, a phone or tablet in the bedroom at night were more likely to sleep too little and sleep poorly.

Screen-free times. The AAP suggests screen-free zones and times such as the dinner table, homework and before bed, to support connection, learning and sleep. Its sleep guidance advises turning off all screens at least an hour before bedtime.

Where devices sleep. A charging spot outside bedrooms, in the kitchen or hallway, used by the whole family, takes the bedtime rule out of daily negotiation. The AAP also advises keeping devices out of children's bedrooms, especially at night.

How much, and when. For the youngest children there are numbers: the WHO advises no screen time for babies under one, none of the sedentary kind for one-year-olds, and no more than an hour a day for two- to four-year-olds, with less being better. For older children, agree an amount that leaves room for sleep, movement, homework, play and time together, and change it if any of those start to slip.

What we watch and play. The AAP suggests choosing shows and apps that teach, inspire creativity or encourage connection, and avoiding content with heavy advertising, violence or material that is not right for your child's age. With teenagers, this becomes a conversation about privacy, advertising, influencers and contact with strangers.

Settings. The AAP advises turning off autoplay and notifications, which are designed to keep children engaged for longer, using one screen at a time, and using parental controls to set limits on time, downloads, contacts and purchases.

Adults too. Children notice when the rules only apply to them. The AAP's 2026 guidance suggests parents put their own phones down during meals and bedtime.

How to make it together

Sit down at a calm moment, not straight after an argument about screens. Ask your children what they think good rules would be, and write their ideas down alongside yours. Write down only what everyone can remember, ideally five or six lines. Agree what happens when a rule is broken, and keep that consequence small and predictable, such as losing the device for the rest of the evening.

Then stick the printed sheet where everyone can see it, and agree a date to look at it again.

Changing it as children grow

For toddlers and preschoolers, the plan is really a plan for the adults: what is on, when, and who is watching with them. For school-age children, it becomes a set of agreements children can help write. For teenagers, it is mostly a conversation, with a few non-negotiables, such as phones out of bedrooms overnight. The AAP advises thinking carefully before handing a child their first phone, and that moment is a good time to write the first version of the rules together.

If you live in two homes

If your child lives in two homes, rules do not have to match exactly, but a few shared basics help: where devices sleep, the hour before bed, and what is not allowed at any age. Share the printed list with the other household if you can. If you cannot agree, explain the difference simply to your child, without criticising the other home: "In this house, phones charge in the kitchen."

Sources

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