What to say when the screen goes off and your toddler melts down

"The TV went off and my three-year-old is wailing. I just banned all screens, with my phone in my hand. What do I say?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"New policy: ZERO screens. Effective immediately."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"I understand you want to use screens like I do. Let's find something fun to do together instead."

"New policy: ZERO screens. Effective immediately." Announced with a glowing phone in your hand, it is the all-hands nobody believes. A three-year-old points at the phone. Fair.

Why the setting matters as much as the minutes

A 2024 review of a hundred studies of children under six looked past the minutes at the setting. A parent's own screen use during routines like meals and bedtime was linked to more behavior and emotional struggles in the child. Watching together was linked to better thinking and language skills. Television on in the background was linked to poorer thinking skills. The links are small and mostly correlational: they describe groups, not your living room, and they do not say that screens cause anything. Limits are still real guidance: UK guidance (ages 2 to 5) and the WHO (ages 2 to 4) say no more than an hour a day, less if possible; the review adds what's on, who is with them, and whose screen is open.

On the switch-off itself, a two-week diary study of 28 families followed children aged fourteen months to five and a half years at home. Children were less upset when the technology ended screen time, the episode finishing or the battery dying, than when a parent switched it off. It is a small study. It does suggest the ending is worth planning.

What the words do

Take 2 does two things. "I understand you want to use screens like I do" is honest about the phone, and it ends the argument about fairness before it starts. "Let's find something fun to do together instead" replaces the screen with you. Then offer a real choice between two things, a book or a game, and put your own phone face down where your child can see it.

Next time, agree the ending before you press play, in something your child can see: when this episode ends, when the song comes on. Switch autoplay off, as American pediatricians' family media plan advises, so the ending really ends.

If your child loses words or skills they had, or you are worried about hearing or social connection, talk to your pediatrician, GP or health visitor.

If you live in two homes

The two homes will not have the same screen rules, and a three-year-old may not keep track of which rule is whose. What travels is the ending and the offer: say what comes after the screen before it goes off, and offer one thing together when it does. If you tell the other adult anything, tell them that, not a minutes number. Your phone-down evenings count on their own.

In the UK

UK guidance for under-fives is on Best Start in Life, and your health visitor can talk through it. In England and Wales, a child arrangements order may set out who a child lives with and when they spend time with each parent (older orders say "residence" and "contact"). Cafcass in England (Cafcass Cymru in Wales) advises the family court about what is safe for children; for everyday parenting questions, Coram Family Lives (England and Wales, 0808 800 2222) is free and confidential. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

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This is general information drawn from published research and pediatric guidance. It is not medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about your child, talk to your doctor.