What to say when the screen goes off and your five-year-old melts down

"I said "two more minutes," the tablet went off, and my five-year-old is sobbing like the world ended. What do I say?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Two more minutes, sweetheart, then it goes off."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"You're sad it finished. It was a good one. It's still off. I'm right here."

"Two more minutes" sounds like a kindness. To many five-year-olds it is a word, not yet an amount, and the switch-off arrives as a surprise chosen by someone else, in the middle of a story.

Why the ending matters more than the warning

Most five-year-olds know an hour is longer than a minute. Many don't yet know how long either one is. That usually comes at around six or seven. By about seven, many children understand minutes, so a time can help too, but the ending has to be something they can see or hear: the end song, the credits, the last page.

In one small diary study of young children at home, children were less upset when the show or the battery ended screen time than when a parent switched it off. In a follow-up home experiment with three- to five-year-olds, autoplay made stopping harder. No study we know of has tested a parent agreeing the ending on its own; the advice is built on these small studies and on American pediatricians' media-plan guidance to turn autoplay off. The studies stopped before age six. For a seven-year-old, the words here are everyday practice.

One more link, not proof: in one study of three- to five-year-olds, children who were often calmed with a device became a little more easily upset a few months later; the link showed in boys and in very active children. Doing it often is what was measured.

What the words do

Take 2 is for when it ends in tears anyway. "You're sad it finished" names the feeling. "It was a good one" agrees with your child. "It's still off" keeps the ending real. "I'm right here" is the staying close. Then stay, and do not hand it back.

Next time, say the ending before you press play, switch autoplay off, and let your child press off themselves.

Worried your child is "hooked"? Gaming disorder, which the WHO includes in its classification of diseases, is about games, affects only a small share of people who play them, and is a pattern usually over at least a year, not one bad morning.

Getting upset when something good ends is common in young children. Talk to your pediatrician, GP, health visitor or school nurse if meltdowns happen most days, over lots of things, not just screens, if they are long or someone gets hurt, or if screens are crowding out sleep, play or friends.

If you live in two homes

Two homes will have two sets of screen rules, and that is survivable. What helps a child this age travel between them is the ending being visible in both: "when the song comes on" makes sense in any kitchen. If you tell the other adult anything, tell them the ending, not the minutes. Agree, if you can, that neither home hands the screen back to stop the tears.

In the UK

The UK's 2026 guidance for ages 2 to 5 on Best Start in Life suggests up to an hour a day, less if possible; it stops at five, and your health visitor or school nurse can talk it through. 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.