What to say when the game has to go off and your nine-year-old argues

"Every time I say "off now" my nine-year-old says "five more minutes, I'm mid-game" and it turns into a fight. What do I say?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Five more minutes."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"Get to the next save point, then off. Show me when you've saved."

"Five more minutes" is the line a nine-year-old uses on you and the line you use on them. Neither version ends anything, because a game has no minutes in it; it has rounds, levels and save points.

What is known, and at what age

The studies on screen endings behind this page were done with children aged one to five. In a small diary study, young children were less upset when the show or the battery ended screen time than when a parent switched it off; in a home experiment with three- to five-year-olds, autoplay made stopping harder. No study we know of has tested the same thing with nine-year-olds. The words on this page are everyday practice, built on those findings and on pediatricians' guidance.

That guidance is the American Academy of Pediatrics' family media plan. It says to "create a plan for every member of your family, including yourself," and of the rules, "Discuss them with your kids." It also says to turn off autoplay and notifications, which it says are "designed to keep kids engaged longer." Applied to a game, the everyday-practice version here is: agree the ending before the game starts, in the game's own units, with a check-in you keep.

What the words do

Take 2 does three things. "Get to the next save point" puts the ending in a unit your child can see on the screen, so it is not an ambush mid-level. "Then off" says what happens next. "Show me when you've saved" gives them a job and gives you the check-in, which is where the rule lives.

Before play, agree the number of rounds, then do the check-in you promised. The rule stands tonight; the fairness debate is for tomorrow, not the moment.

If the upset at losing a device is sudden, extreme or secretive, ask what is going on online before the device goes anywhere. Child-safety guidance warns that children may hide online problems if they fear losing their devices, so telling you should never cost your child the phone. If you think your child is being threatened or exploited online, or anyone is in danger, contact emergency services (911 in the US, 999 in the UK). In the US you can report to NCMEC's CyberTipline (report.cybertip.org, 1-800-843-5678); in the UK, to CEOP (ceop.police.uk).

If you live in two homes

A nine-year-old will tell you the other home lets them play longer, and it may be true. The rule you can keep is the one about endings: agreed before play, in the game's own units, with a check-in you actually do. If you tell the other adult anything, tell them that shape and leave the minutes to them. Never make the game the thing your child loses for telling you something.

In the UK

Your GP or school nurse can talk through anything that worries you. 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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10. Coram Family Lives (n.d.). Confidential helpline. Retrieved November 4, 2026.

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.