

Tech/Life Balance: Helping Families Thrive in a Digital World



**SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL HEALTH
FAMILY GUIDE**



Who is This Guide For?

Improve your family dynamics and help the kids in your life better navigate the challenges of growing up in a digital world. If you're reading this, you're concerned about the healthy social-emotional development of young people today.

This guide is for you, **the caring adult.**

We understand your concerns. There is a lot of lived experience and expert insight available to support you, and we've distilled that into an adaptable framework with actionable steps you can take today.

Explore our Additional Resources section or consult a licensed professional, such as a child psychologist, school counselor, or behavioral health coach from California's free mental health platforms, [BrightLife Kids](#) and [Soluna](#), for more specialized support.

This Family Guide offers the following resources:

TOOL 1 Questions to pinpoint the issue

TOOL 2 Conversation starters and practices to try with your child

TOOL 3 Self-reflection prompts for modeling digital well-being

TOOL 1**Pinpoint
the Issue**

As parents, our primary job is to prepare our kids for life, guiding them through age-old challenges like drugs, sex, and alcohol, and now, those specific to the digital era. Before discussing or intervening in our children's screen media use, we must clarify our concerns to develop a straightforward, focused approach. Through open dialogue and concrete strategies, our kids can move seamlessly through the virtual and real worlds confidently and responsibly.

**What am I concerned about?****1****Cyberbullying**

- Does your child share their online experiences with you?
- Is your child's mood and behavior consistent?

2**Family Conflict**

- How do you and your child communicate about their device usage?
- Is your child able to keep up with responsibilities?

3**Exposure To Harmful Content**

- Have you observed any changes in your child's behavior or language recently?
- Has your child's sleep quality changed?

4**Exclusion or Loss of In-Person Connection**

- Have you noticed a decrease in social interactions or invitations with peers?
- Has there been a significant increase in screen time or a shift toward online interactions only?

5**Resilience/Coping With Stress**

- How does your child approach solving challenges on their own?
- What does it look like when your child needs to practice patience versus feeling the instant gratification from technology?

TOOL 2

Connect With Your Child

Now that we understand the issue, let's take action!

We have two goals:

1. Maintain a strong adult-child bond.
2. Show our kids the real world is worth living in.

Talk openly and intentionally with your kids about these tricky topics, regardless of age. There are also powerful practices we can engage in to maximize these conversations even more.



“We have a lot of open conversations at our house about the uses, both negative and positive, when it comes to technology.”

-MOTHER

Before we initiate these conversations, there are a few basics to keep in mind:

1

Tailor your talk.

Every child is unique! Adjust your approach based on your child's needs (e.g., neurodivergent kids might have different device needs).

2

Connect through experiences.

Use movies, shows, or real-life stories as discussion starters. This opens two-way conversations and lets you address issues naturally.

3

Listen without an agenda.

No judgment! Be open and willing to learn. Repeat what you hear and ask if you got it right. Kids are the experts in their own lives, and humility can lead to deeper insights and more meaningful connections.

4

Focus on one issue.

Talk about [one concern](#) at a time. In the same way that opening too many tabs on a computer can crash a browser, trying to cram all your worries into one conversation can be overwhelming for your child.



“Get to know your kid and be curious. Get to know your child's world a little more before you come down and start imposing all these rules because you might be surprised. Stay curious and connected.”

MERCEDES OROMENDIA

child and family therapist and Chief Clinical Officer at [Manatee](#)

Conversation Starters



For Younger Kids

Cyberbullying

- Have you ever felt left out or upset about something that happened online?
- Have you ever seen someone being mean to another person online? How did that make you feel? What would you do?

Harmful Content

- Sometimes, there might be things on the internet that aren't right for us to see. Have you ever seen something that made you feel icky?
- What are some things you can do if you ever see something online that scares you or upsets you?

Family Conflict

- How does it make you feel when we have rules about screen time?
- Do you ever want to spend more time on your [insert media or device] than with your family? Why do you think that is?

Loss of In-Person Connection/Exclusion

- What games or activities do you wish you could do more with friends?
- Have you ever noticed a difference between playing online and playing with a friend in person? What are some things you can feel, hear, or smell when you're with a friend that you can't experience online?

Social-Emotional Resilience

- Screens can be fun, and sometimes, it can be hard to stop playing. How does it feel when you don't have [insert media or device] to play with?
- Sometimes, you might feel bored when you can't be on our [insert device]. What fun things can you do to keep yourself entertained when this happens?

For Older Kids

Cyberbullying

- I've noticed you are less interested in doing [insert favorite activity]. Why do you think that is?
- Have you ever written something online that you later regretted, even if you didn't intend to be mean? What would you do if you were on the receiving end of a mean message or comment?

Harmful Content

- Have you ever felt uncomfortable or pressured by something you saw or experienced online? How did you handle it?
- We all see strange things online sometimes. How do you tell if the information you find online seems reliable or safe?

Family Conflict

- I've noticed things seem a bit tense at home lately. How do you think digital devices contribute to that?
- How do you think screen time is affecting our family time together?

Loss of In-Person Connection/Exclusion

- I'm curious, what are some of the things you enjoy most about spending time online?
- I've noticed you're not spending much time with friends. What does a healthy balance between technology use and other activities look like for you?

Social-Emotional Resilience

- How do you feel before you get online? How does that change when you're online? How do you feel after?
- What happens when you feel bored or uncomfortable? What do you usually do?

Actionable Strategies

Enrich your child's offline life

Excitement and stimulation aren't only found online. Prepare rewarding alternatives (e.g., a playdate, independent outing, driving practice for older kids) to replace screen time and prevent emotional meltdowns.

Nurture healthy friendships

Proactively host friends, connect with other parents, and join school activities. This will help your kids learn to communicate, empathize, and navigate social situations naturally.

Boost self-esteem

Assign age-appropriate responsibilities and let them know they [contribute meaningfully](#) to the family. Feeling needed builds confidence and [resilience](#) and promotes emotional well-being.

Stay involved

Know their friends, monitor online activity, connect with teachers, and be approachable. Tuning into your kids lets you catch issues early and deepen your connection.

Build coping skills

Screens zap inner strength. Let kids experience discomfort and work through challenges — it's a chance to grow. Offer creative materials like puzzles, games, and art supplies, not instant fixes. Be patient even if they push back, and watch them blossom.

Seek outside help

If your child shows signs of significant distress, consider contacting a professional who can offer personalized strategies.

“

“Help your kids understand that the screen is not the only engaging activity.”

DR. DEVIKA BHUSHAN
pediatrician and
former California
Chief Health Officer

TOOL 3**Reflect on Your Habits**

Want to raise emotionally mature, tech-balanced kids? Then, we must start with ourselves. Research shows that parents have the biggest influence on their kids' tech habits. Setting a good example is key, even for parents of young ones.

We're all learning to live with advanced tech. Let's ditch "technoference" (those moments when our devices interrupt us from connecting with our kids). To do this, consider your relationship with devices and model the healthy habits you want for your children. Just like using questions to solve problems, use "mindful moments" to pause and be present with your kids.



"Kids appreciate honesty; acknowledging our feelings, even when overwhelmed, builds trust. Pretending everything is okay can feel like a betrayal. By modeling self-care during tough times, we teach kids it's safe to express and discuss their struggles."

DR. JUDY CHU

Stanford University lecturer and author of *When Boys Become Boys: Development, Relationships, and Masculinity*

Mindful Questions

- 1 What message am I sending my children about technology use?
- 2 Do my actions match my words?
- 3 How does my digital device use affect my mood or stress levels?
- 4 How do I respond to notifications or digital interruptions?
- 5 How can I validate my child's experience by sharing that I struggle sometimes, too?

"It's not just the kids; sometimes parents are more on social media. It affects them emotionally. There are fewer conversations between parents and children now; they aren't communicating."

– GRANDPARENT

"I think even grown-ups – sometimes we put on a movie, and then we just go straight to our phones. We're modeling that behavior with our little ones."

– PARENT

Understanding the Foundation

A close relationship with your child is their [armor](#) in the digital world. It helps them navigate challenges and build perseverance. As caregivers, adapting to our kids' evolving needs requires flexibility and honest conversations.

[Research](#) confirms that clear and consistent communication with a parent or caregiver is a cornerstone of a child's happiness.

Effective parenting promotes closeness and involves:

- **Kindness and support:**
Creates a nurturing environment.
- **Clear rules and high expectations:**
Provides a framework for healthy development.

This approach, often called [authoritative](#) or [balanced parenting](#), builds trust and creates a safe space for your child to confide in you. It's never too late to nurture a deeper connection with your child, [no matter their age](#), and positively influence their development and decision-making.

Read our companion report CalPartnersProject.org/TechLifeBalance to learn more about digital media and technology's impact on emotional regulation and the development of healthy relationships.

To discover ten tech tips for your family to embrace best practices, visit calpartnersproject.org/techtipsforfamily.



“It’s about learning boundaries. We first need to connect with our children to set rules. Saying, ‘You have to stop right now, and if you don’t...’ or ‘I’m your dad, and I command you’ doesn’t work. When we make a connection with our children peacefully, they will grasp the boundaries we set.”

— FATHER

Additional Resources

For Immediate Help

[988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#)

Free, 24/7, confidential support to people in distress

[Crisis Text Line](#)

Text HOME to 741741 to connect with a volunteer crisis counselor

[24/7 Suicide Hotline for LGBTQ Youth](#)

1-866-488-7386 or text START to 678-678

[California Parent & Youth Helpline](#)

855-427-2736

[California Youth Crisis Line](#)

800-843-5200

[Teen Line](#)

Peer-to-peer support from highly trained teens supervised by adult mental health professionals

California Resources

[CalHOPE](#)

Digital mental health support for youth, young adults, and families

[BrightLife Kids](#)

Free behavioral health coaching for parents, caregivers, and kids 0–12.

[Soluna](#)

Free confidential support for 13- to 25-year-olds in California

[California Surgeon General's Playbook for Stress for Caregivers and Kids](#)

Books

[*Childhood Unplugged*](#) by Katherine Martinko

[*Congrats–You're Having a Teen!*](#) by

Ken Ginsburg

[*Good Inside*](#) by Dr. Becky Kennedy

[*How to Break up with Your Phone*](#) by

Catherine Price

[*iGen*](#) by Jean M. Twenge

[*Media Moms and Digital Dads*](#) by Yalda T. Uhls

[*Permission to Feel*](#) by Marc Brackett

[*The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and*](#)

[*Family Relationships in the Digital Age*](#) by

Catherine Steiner-Adair and Teresa H. Barker

[*The Mediatrician's Guide*](#) by Michael Rich

[*The New Childhood: Raising Kids to Thrive in a*](#)

[*Connected World*](#) by Jordan Shapiro

[*Where to Start*](#) by Mental Health America

Websites

American Academy of Pediatrics

[Social Media and Youth Mental Health](#)

[Resources for Parents/Caregivers](#)

Child Mind Institute

[Positive Parenting, Thriving Kids](#)

Children and Screens

[Learn and Explore Resources](#)

Common Sense Media

[Parenting, Media, and Everything in Between](#)

Fairplay

[Screen Aware Early Childhood Action Kit](#)

Family Online Safety Institute

[How To Be A Good Digital Parent Toolkit](#)

Harvard Graduate School of Education

[Center for Digital Thriving](#)

Kids Mental Health Foundation

[Social Media and Kids Mental Health](#)

The Mental Health Coalition

[Resource Library](#)