

Anti Screen? No...

Pro Human Relationship? Yes.

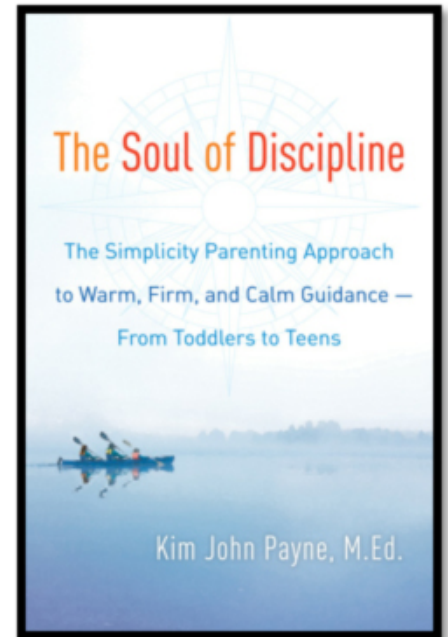
By Kim John Payne.

An extract from *The Soul of Discipline: The Simplicity Parenting Approach to Warm, Firm and Calm Guidance. From Toddlers to Teens* (Ballantine Books/Penguin Random House. 2015.)

How a parent handles the influence of screens (television, computers, phones and other devices) used to be a part of a general discussion about filtering the adult world from our kids' lives. In recent years, however, it has become a major stand-alone concern, as alarm has spiked among parents and educators about how children of all ages cope with the tsunami of information and distraction digital devices offer. It's a sensitive issue for some, who feel that technology has significantly improved education and entertainment, as well as for those who believe screen exposure is the *new normal* and do not want to question the status quo. It is clear to me, as a parenting advisor, that we have to approach this issue with consciousness and courage, and accept the fact that—as in many other areas of our kids' lives (like when they are fighting or arguing over a favorite toy)—there will be times when we have to step in firmly and take careful control of our children's screen consumption.

Deep Family Connection.

To be clear, I am not anti-screen, but I am passionately pro human relationships and family connections. I am just as committed to the reality that childhood develops in phases and each stage needs the right environment in order to flourish. Frankly, I would be relieved if the evidence supported screen use for kids as being okay.



It would make Katharine and my life as parents a whole lot easier to just go with the popular tide and get our kids smart phones and tablets and open the door to social networking.

“The evidence is mounting that this twenty year unregulated mass social experiment is not going so well, especially for kids and families.”

However, both the balance of research and my plain old gut instinct tells me that something is seriously wrong with the way in which perhaps the most powerful tool humankind has ever known is being placed literally in the hands of children. The evidence is

mounting that this twenty year unregulated mass social experiment is not going so well, especially for kids and families.

Strong family bonds take time to build and nurture. The increasing demands of work life, with its invisible digital arm reaching right into our home life, means our time with our kids has become more precious and limited than ever before. Therefore, it makes sense that we live every moment with our kids to it's fullest and not allow ourselves to be displaced by the allure of digital distractions.

A Story From the Heart.

During a morning break in a workshop in British Columbia, a couple with three children, ages four to fifteen, spoke about their experiences with screen media. But it was their bold decision to dial back their kids' screen use dramatically that caught my attention. The mother was nuanced and insightful about the positive changes cutting back had brought about in their family life. But the dad put it bluntly: “The screens used to be in charge. Now Barbara and I are. It's that simple.” They'd noticed that their kids got along better now. But the biggest change involved discipline. “To be honest I only went along with this because Barbara was so determined that we try to limit computer, phone and TV use, and I was so tired of everything becoming a fight with my kids,” the dad continued. “They talked to me like characters from movies in which kids took control. When we cut down on screens they stopped challenging us at every turn. It's weird that we've all bought into the media so much, when it makes it so much harder to be a good parent.”

When the Screen is Supreme.

The family *medium* needs to be more important than the social *media* in a child's life. Otherwise the danger is that it is the children who are bringing up children and the teaching of family values is displaced by the passing fads of what is cool on social media. Every parent wants to inculcate in his or her child good moral values: we want our children to be strong, kind, and considerate of others. These fundamental values are strengthened whenever we affirm the little kindnesses our children show, and every time we correct their disrespectful behavior. These values need careful parental nurturing because they develop slowly and cannot compete with the fast paced, relentless, manipulative marketing forces unleashed through screens. It is important that we parents understand that kids who are bombarded with screen values don't reject a parent's discipline and guidance but rather, simply deem it boring and irrelevant to their situation. How bitterly ironic that, in this brave new world in which the screen is supreme, the very digital devices that we gift to our children, serve to bankrupt our parental authority.
