

Do We Need More Screen-Free Zones?

It's Friday afternoon, and I'm standing near the polar bear enclosure at the local zoo. A few feet away from me, a thousand-pound animal is playing with an exercise ball. It's amusing. He looks like a massively oversized toddler trying to palm a basketball. The zoo is quiet today, so I've got the observation window all to myself.

When the ball bounces into the splash pool, the bear gets ready to follow. This moment is too good to miss, so I call out to my kids: "Hey guys! The bear's putting on a real show here. Come and watch!"

Perhaps I neglected to mention that I'm here with my five little boys. So why aren't they watching already? An animal native to the Arctic is having a spontaneous romp just 10 paces away from them, but their heads are all turned in the opposite direction. What does it take to amuse kids these days?

We all know the answer: pixels. A performing bear is giving us a private show, but the kids aren't watching because their eyes are glued to a screen. As it happens, they're watching a short video about melting ice caps and conservation. I don't particularly object to the content, but we've seen this clip at least a dozen times. They're not learning anything. They're watching because it's what they do. The screen summons them, and they gravitate towards it like moths to a flame.

For a mom, this is soul-destroying. Before we entered the Pixeled Presence, my youngsters had been romping around joyfully, jostling each other and laughing. Like the bear, they were in high spirits on this unseasonably warm January afternoon. Then, coming into the presence of The Screen, they

morphed into zombies. I note with irritation that they aren't even watching a state-of-the-art television. We have a better one at home. For kids, it seems, even the lowest-quality media experience takes precedence over flesh-and-blood animals from faraway lands. And I've seen this same reaction in children from all sorts of homes: screen-free homes, screen-packed homes, middle-ground homes (like mine) where screen use is restricted.

Every time I see this, I come back to the same question. Isn't it time to implement some public *screen-free zones*? Why is this not already a major trend?

I'm not asking public establishments to do my parenting for me. Not living under a rock, I am aware that appropriate screen use is a major parenting issue these days, and my husband and I take steps to protect our kids. They don't own personal devices. Their at-home technology use is restricted, with the emphasis on making screen time (when we allow it) *communal* and not a substitute for live interaction with other corporeal beings. (Needless to say, it's easier to adopt that approach when you have *five* boys, and not just one lonely child perpetually yearning for company.) Screens in our house can be found in general-use areas, but not in children's bedrooms or in the living room. I don't want a massive television to be the whole focal point of our family life.

Obviously, we live in a media-rich world, so children need to learn about appropriate technology use. It's a process though. Young kids haven't yet steeled themselves against the allure of the moving-talking thing. One way parents can help is by ensuring that screen use is balanced by a variety of meaningful *low-tech* experiences. It's essential to develop some conversational skills and some non-pixeled interests. Don't let your kids reach 18 without realizing they can actually have a lot of fun, both alone and with other humans, *without* the help of a device.

In my experience, parents nowadays are already quite anxious to secure these kinds of low-tech experiences for their kids. “Family-friendly” establishments seem to be the last to get the message though. There are certain public restaurants that disallow cell phones, and many people have designated “screen-free” areas in their houses. Nevertheless, at zoos, aquariums, and kid-friendly museums, blaring televisions and touch-screen exhibits are still plentiful. It’s especially silly because quite often the technology itself is already thoroughly antiquated, apparently dating back to the period when gratuitous screens actually *pleased* many or most parents (“we’re tech-savvy!”). Now, I can download better products on my iPad at literally any hour of the day. Why should I load up the car and pay an admission price just to watch my kids play with inferior technology?

If these establishments want to retain their appeal for families, they should rip out the screens and stamp their doors and literature with a glossy guarantee: SCREEN FREE ZONE. Lure kids with exciting hands-on exhibits, and attract their parents with the promise of a few relaxing hours of *not* chasing their kids away from screens.

Not every place needs to be a screen-free zone. My kids and I have been to some museums with genuinely interesting screen-oriented exhibits. Our local science museum has one exhibit that enables the kids to record themselves doing a sports “move” (shooting a basketball or pitching a baseball), and then watch themselves in slow motion next to a professional athlete who’s doing the same thing. That’s pretty cool. Sometimes it’s worth turning to screens if that enables children to have a genuinely educational experience that can’t be captured any other way.

On the other hand, if you’ve already built a really amazing live exhibit (say, an aviary housing many different types of exotic birds), don’t ruin it by throwing up a TV to play some dopey video on endless repeat. Find some other way to convey

the information, through signs or zookeeper talks, or even a library corner where kids can read actual books. It's possible that turning off the videos will mean losing a chance to broadcast a particular message. Does that really matter so much though? In our media-drenched world, there are a thousand ways to blast people with "messages." If you actually *want* to learn, it's easy to find resources. What's hard is finding *unmediated* experiences, which are frankly far likelier to leave a lasting impression on impressionable audiences particularly. These are the sorts of experiences that might eventually persuade kids to, say, pursue a career in STEM, or support the arts, or make sacrifices for the sake of the environment. Instead of preaching at us every moment, let beauty and natural wonder do the talking.

Screen-free zones will inevitably provoke some fights about personal devices and where they can be used. That's fine. I fully appreciate that some parents may really need their smartphones and tablets. It would be near-impossible for me to manage my writing career without the help of a smartphone. Even parents need some balance though. It's not that big of a deal if you occasionally need to step into a stairwell to check for an important email.

The important thing is for adults to become more creative about orienting our children towards non-screened experiences. We want them to learn that there are times and places for using technology; that doesn't mean "every minute" and "every interesting or fun place you can remember." Embrace the screen-free zone. If we can tear our eyes away from the devices, we might notice that there's a whole world out here.

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