Smartphone Free Childhood

Connecting, empowering and uniting parents, educators and regulators to delay smartphones and social media, establish phone-free schools, and safeguard the use of technology in education.

A Parent's Guide: Explaining screen limits to grandparents & caregivers

Setting consistent screen time boundaries with other caregivers, such as grandparents, au pairs, or family members, is vital because consistency is what helps young children understand and accept rules.

**This requires approaching the conversation with teamwork, clarity, and empathy.**

Here is a step-by-step approach and useful scripts for setting these boundaries:
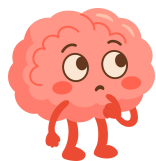
Establish Your Family Media Plan

Before speaking with anyone else, you and your co-parent/partner need to be aligned on the non-negotiables. Here is an example:

Boundary Element	Your Rule for the Under -5 Child
Time Limit	X minutes total per day (e.g., "30 minutes total").
Timing/Zones	Screen-Free times (e.g., "No screens during meals," "No screens one hour before nap/bedtime").
Content Quality	Only high-quality, parent-approved educational shows (e.g., "Only Kids-approved shows, no YouTube/movies").
Co-Viewing	Parent/caregiver should watch with the child to encourage conversation and critical thought.
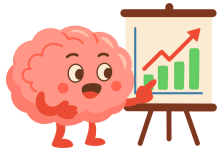
Approach the Conversation with Empathy and Teamwork

When talking to caregivers, it's helpful to frame it as a partnership, in which we are all learning as we go, rather than a list of demands.

The "Grandparent/Family" Script:

"We are so grateful that you spend time with [Child's Name], you create such wonderful memories with them!

Because of how fast their brain is growing, their pediatrician has given us a few simple rules we're trying to stick to, so we can keep things consistent."

Grandparents often want to spoil the child, which can mean relaxing rules, and spoiling them with devices. Acknowledge this love first.

Focus on the Rule:

"Our main rule is that [Child's Name] gets 30 minutes of screen time total per day, and we like to save it for a calm-down moment before dinner. If they use a device while they are here, we ask that you limit it to 15-20 minutes so they still have some time left for later."

Offer Alternatives:

"To make it easier, I put together a Screen-Free Activity Bin with blocks, cars, dolls, lego, play-dough, and a stack of books for them to choose from. Could you please encourage them to use that first?"

The "Au Pair/Nanny" Script

Thank you for supporting our rules while you are caring for [Child's Name].

When it comes to screen time, we have a very clear policy we need you to follow for consistency.

For paid childcare, the rules are clearer as it is a professional relationship, but still be empathetic and supportive in your discussion.

Focus on the Rule:

"The rule is [State your Time Limit and Timing Rule clearly]. We also ask that they only watch [State Content Type]. If they ask for a device, please use the phrase, 'Let's find a screen-free activity, I know! Let's go build a fort!'"

Address Transitions:

"We know ending screen time can be hard. If you do watch a short show, please give them a 5-minute warning before you turn it off and transition right into a fun, exciting physical activity like playing outside or a bubble bath with toys."

Use Practical Tools to Reinforce the Boundary

When talking to caregivers, it's helpful to give suggestions on practical alternatives to screens.

Create an "Activity Menu":

For their home (grandparents) or your home (sitter), provide a simple visual list or bin of engaging alternatives (as suggested in the previous answer) to instantly divert attention from the screen

A "Screen Time Jar":

If your child gets a daily allowance (e.g., 30 minutes), give the caregiver a stack of tickets or a jar of buttons representing that time. Once the tickets/ buttons are used for the day, there is no more screen time.

Use Visual Timers:

Give the caregiver a simple, non-digital hourglass or kitchen timer to use. When the sand runs out or the bell dings, the screen goes off. This shifts the blame from the caregiver to the timer.

Join the Movement!

- **Sign the Parent Pact**
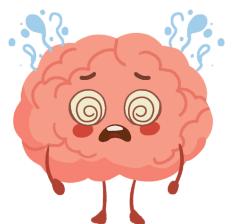- **Sign up as a Phone-Free School**
- **Join the Whatsapp community**

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Provide assistance for managing screentime

Ending screen time often causes the most friction and meltdowns. The key is using predictable language and offering a positive transition to a new activity. Here are specific phrases and techniques to suggest to caregivers, to help a young child prepare for the screen to turn off:

The Phased Warning System:

Use three simple, consistent steps to transition the child from the screen to the next activity. The language should be the same every time, which gives the child a sense of control and predictability.

Timing	Script/Wording	Action
1. The First Warning (5 Minutes)	"Five more minutes until screen time is over. When it is over, we will go [Name the Next Activity]."	Gently touch their shoulder or make eye contact if possible.
2. The Last Chance Warning (2 Minutes)	"Two more minutes! That means this will be the last song/game/scene. When it is done, we are going to [Name the Next Activity]."	Reiterate the transition. If they are watching a show, point out the next likely stopping point.
3. The Shutdown (Time is Up)	"Time is up! The screen is sleepy now and needs a rest. Let's say, 'Bye-bye screen!' Now, let's go [Start the New Activity]!"	Turn the screen off immediately (or physically remove the device). Do not negotiate or wait for the child's permission.
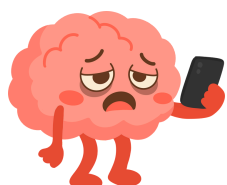
Key Techniques for Smooth Transitions

Externalize the "Blame"

Make the device or the timer the "bad guy" instead of the caregiver. This is especially helpful when dealing with strong emotions.

- *"Oh look, the timer says our time is all used up for the day! The timer is the boss today!"*
- *"The TV is getting very tired and needs to sleep now. We can wake it up again tomorrow."*
- *"The battery is all gone! Time for it to charge while we go play."*

Connect the "Off" to a "Fun On"

Never end screen time without immediately starting the next activity. Have the transition activity planned and ready to go.

- *Bad: "Screen time is over now."*
- *Good: "Screen time is over! Now it's time to build the tall tower we planned! Let's go!"*
- *Good: "Screen time is done for the day! Let's go to the kitchen and make play-dough now!"*

Use the Power of Choice

Giving the child a small choice about the transition can make them feel respected and cooperative.

- *"The screen is done! Would you like to walk to the toy bin, or would you like to hop to the toy bin?"*
- *"Do you want to turn the TV off, or should I? Ready? 3... 2... 1... Off!" (Let them push the button if they choose it).*

Remember: If they have a meltdown, remain calm and empathetic.
Acknowledge the feeling - *"I know you are sad the show is over, that's okay to feel sad"*, but hold the boundary - *"The screen is off now, and we are not turning it back on today"*.

Consistency is a sign of respect for your child's developing brain. By working together, you can ensure your child benefits from the best of both worlds: loving care and healthy boundaries.