Unplug Protocol
Screen Withdrawal Plan for Families

What do you mean by screens?

Screens are defined as any screen-based technology e.g. TV, video games, internet, cell phones, tablets, and all hand held devices used for entertainment purposes e.g. not music, or screens used for therapy, school or work.

How do I know if my family or child(ren) has a problem?

Screen usage patterns are set by parents, and therefore if a child or youth is overusing or is addicted to screen-based technology, generally their parents have similar issues. Therefore, it is important for all family members to participate in a family technology *Unplug Protocol* to get their family back on a healthy track. Symptoms associated with technology overuse or addiction are: developmental delay, obesity/overweight, sleep deprivation/fatigue, depression, anxiety, agitation, anger, aggression, violence, social phobias, attention deficit, or learning difficulties.

The following *Unplug Protocol* is designed to enable families to better understand their usage of screen-based technology and guide them toward a plan that results in more balanced usage of technology and healthy activity. The *Unplug Protocol* is a four-step plan to *wean*, or in some cases *lean,* your family off technology. Designed by pediatric occupational therapist Cris Rowan, the *Unplug Protocol* consists of the four R's – *Rate, Reset, Reorder* and *Rules.* The *Unplug Protocol* enables families to explore the changes technology has caused to their family structure and envision a new and healthy future.

Unplug Protocol

Procedure	Moderate Use	Heavy Use	Very Heavy Use	Severe Use
Rate	3-4 hours/day	5-6 hours/day	7-8 hours/day	greater 8 hours/day
Reset	3-4 week unplug	7-8 week unplug	3-month unplug	6-month unplug
Reorder	Pursue 3-4 activities	Pursue 5-6 activities	Pursue 7-8 activities	Pursue 10 activities
Rules	Lock up all tech in box, locked cupboard, or filing cabinet; leave cell phone at work.	Store all tech out of home at friends/family; leave cell phone at work; acquire non-texting phone for emergencies.	Sell all handheld devices e.g. cell phones, tablets, and video gaming platforms; switch to non-internet phone.	Destroy all handheld devices e.g. cell phones, tablets, and video gaming platforms; revert to land lines for phone.

1) **Rate:** identify technology usage amount.

Many families have no idea how much screen-based technology they actually use on a daily basis, and consequently often overuse technology without conscious thought. While one can easily see the effects of overeating, overusing technology is more ubiquitous. Child technology usage often follows that of the highest using parent, as this parent inadvertently encourages high technology usage in all family members to normalize or condone their own high usage rates.

2) **Reset:** determine time period required to "unplug" from all technology.

Mindless entertainment screen time repatterns your body and brain to be in a constant state of stimulation. Adrenalin is released in the body and dopamine in the brain with screen time, causing hyperarousal and high blood pressure. Both body and brain require time to relax and reset to a slower pace, duration needed is relevant to level of screen usage.

3) **Reorder:** replace time spent using technology with alternate activities.

Technology kills a lot of time which could be filled with healthy and family inter-connected activities. Many families have no other activity pursuits than technology and need to spend time to schedule in alternative activities. Suggest development of family theme nights, such as baking cookies or playing board games to get started with scheduled activity replacement.

4) **Rules:** agree upon rules that will support the family unplug.

Each family should discuss what type of structure and rules they need to establish to support and complete the *Tech Diet*. Suggestion is that each family acquire a *Tech Box* with lock, and that all technology upon entering the home is locked up. Key or combination for lock should be given to the lowest technology user, generally this would be the youngest child in the family. Penalties for cheating should be agreed upon, as well as technology usage rules when members are outside the family home.

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