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STRATEGY #1:

Amusement Is Not the Highest Priority

It is not good to eat much honey; so to seek one's own glory is not glory. Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls.

Proverbs 25:27–28 (NKJV)

Great!" I thought. "It's time for my show!" Driving home from the mall in my minivan, I turned the radio to *Focus on the Family*. I was a mother of a toddler and a preschooler at the time, and I needed all the help I could get.

It wasn't two seconds before four-year-old Ethan bellowed, "I want music!" I calmly explained he would have to wait until my radio program was over. You can guess what happened next. He started crying and screaming, "No! I want music! You *can't* listen to talking, Mommy!" The more I drove, the more he screamed.

"Ethan," I said loudly over his crying. "I am not even listening to talking because you are screaming. I am the one who picks what we

listen to in the car. If you keep crying, we will listen to talking again tomorrow.”

He thought for a moment and then screamed even harder. What would you have done in that moment?

Whether it's demanding music in the car or a video game at home, children are growing increasingly accustomed to being amused. Boredom is the kryptonite of today's screen-driven child. Think about it. Television offers hundreds of channels and exciting choices. Smartphones and tablets have games, games, and more games. Even churches are setting up kid spaces that rival the local amusement park.

The majority of parents have capitulated to their children's cries for constant me-centered amusement. Frankly, we've given in because the alternative takes more effort. But this convenience comes at a very high cost and can negatively impact your child's character for life. It may sound as if I'm exaggerating the problem, but I've become convinced!

YOUR CHILD'S BRAIN ON A ROLLER COASTER

When my daughter Noelle was in fourth grade, we drove to an amusement park two hours away. It was a special mom/daughter date since, at that time, Noelle and I were the only roller-coaster fanatics in the family. To us, the higher and faster the ride, the better! The first coaster twisted this way and that. The next coaster was much bigger. We watched other riders spiral, corkscrew, and turn upside down for two minutes and ten seconds. But when it was our turn, Noelle and I were on this monstrous ride for thirty minutes!

We got stuck. After the ride was over, the restraints wouldn't open. With our stomachs already tumbling from the previous two minutes of massive spin, we sat waiting with our legs dangling and

our hearts pounding. Twenty minutes later, the ride operator announced we had to ride *again* to reset the restraints.

Several riders cheered, but Noelle and I looked at each other anxiously. We didn't want to ride again; we wanted off! But ride again we did. This time instead of enjoying the thrill, we simply endeavored not to get sick. When we finally got off, Noelle immediately went to lie down on a bench. The day was over before lunchtime. She felt so sick that I stood in line to ask for a voucher to return another day. Defeated but relieved, we headed back down the freeway to our calm, peaceful, non-moving house.

Kids aren't meant to ride roller coasters all day long without stopping. Their brains don't require or desire constant stimulation. As Gary and I wrote in our book, *Growing Up Social: Raising Relational Kids in a Screen-Driven World*, "Compare the difference between taking a family vacation to Disneyland to living at the theme park for a year. Pleasure *can* be overdone."¹ Today's child doesn't just look forward to a summer trip to Disneyland as yesterday's child did. The modern child yearns for, dare I say expects, a party *every day*.

Unfortunately, too many well-meaning parents stand ready to accommodate the child's fairly insatiable demands for entertainment. From jumping in trampoline parks to giving phones to elementary school students, we've spoiled and treated our little ones on a daily basis. Screen time isn't reserved for special occasions like Friday night movie night with the family. The average American child is looking at screens seven hours per day, and that's not including homework.²

Today's child is surrounded by tablets, flat-screen TVs, mobile phones, and computers. When a child watches TV, shops for toys online, or plays a video game, the neurotransmitter dopamine carries a signal of pleasure to the brain. Your daughter feels good while she's watching television. But as children are amused more and more each

day, the payoff diminishes. The video game that was awesome last month is now passé. Dr. Archibald Hart and Dr. Sylvia Hart Frejd write in their book, *The Digital Invasion*,

Many of our Internet behaviors, such as gambling or gaming on the Internet, or even Facebooking, can do as much damage to the pleasure center as any powerful drug. The pleasure center can become so flooded that only the “big” stimulants can get a message to the pleasure center. Little, ordinary pleasures are ignored because they do not have the power to overcome the flooding. . . . What this all means is that the thrills of our digital world, if abused, can be as addicting as any drug and rob you of the simple joys of life.³

You would never dream of handing your child drugs or alcohol. Yet most parents hand over a tablet or phone to a child without much thought. Because we depend on them and use them so heavily ourselves, we often fail to understand the addictive nature of screens. In a national study of American youths, psychologists found nearly one in ten of the gamers (8.5 percent) to be addicted, meaning that playing video games was causing damage in their lives.⁴ Young people today are flunking out of college because instead of going to class, they are playing video games in their dorm rooms. Adam Alter writes in his book *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked*, once a cucumber has become pickled, it can never go back to being a cucumber. In other words, if your child’s brain gets hooked on video games, he or she will always battle those addictions.⁵

When Steve Jobs unveiled the iPad in January 2010, he touted it as an extraordinary way to browse the web, listen to music, look at photos, play games, and navigate thousands of apps. He encouraged everyone to get an iPad, but get this: he didn’t let his own kids use the

device! When interviewed by the *New York Times* later that year, he said his children had never used the iPad.⁶ I believe he limited technology use in his own home because he understood firsthand the addictive danger of having an iPad readily and constantly available. The pickled brain can't go back to being a cucumber.

What kind of society will the screen-driven children of today create tomorrow? I'm afraid what Neil Postman predicted in *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* has already come to pass. In the 1980s, he wrote, "Americans no longer talk to each other, they entertain each other. They do not exchange ideas, they exchange images. They do not argue with propositions; they argue with good looks, celebrities, and commercials."⁷

Doesn't *that* sound familiar? You see the negative effects on our culture when we exalt entertainment over reason and character. So why do we as parents tolerate—and sometimes fuel—our children's love affair with technology and entertainment? Let's be honest. We fall into the amusement trap because it keeps our children quiet and out of the way. It gives us time to make dinner, to have an uninterrupted conversation with our spouse, to catch up on email, or to watch our favorite show. You see screens popping up in restaurants now, not just being held by the customers, but bolted to the tables. I've heard many parents voice their approval because as their kids play with the screen provided on the table, it gives them time to talk.

Cue the roller coaster. But wait. Is it healthy for kids to be entertained all the time? Kids ride from one wave of excitement to the next. Classrooms are providing iPads to improve learning. Minivans are movie theaters. Restaurants are "eat and play" spaces. Most homes in America have five to ten screens to choose from.⁸ Remember the principle from Proverbs? Too much honey is not good for any of us. Constant mental candy will stunt our children's growth.

And screen time can mean exposure to content that you would

never have chosen to bring into your family. It's hard to know what exactly a child is watching on her phone or tablet. Content is often violent, inappropriate, and completely at odds with our values. Our children aren't likely to commit a crime after hours of playing violent video games, but do we really want them spending time pretending to punch, shoot, stab, or club opponents?

Parents, we must rise!

In this increasingly screen-driven world, your child's brain is being rewired by the internet. The instant gratification of text messaging, Google searches, and Amazon products arriving the next day is training your child to expect quick answers to life's questions. But that's not how real life works. Dr. Kathy Koch, author of *Screens and Teens*, encourages us to hold down the off button.

There is abundant research that reveals when we are quiet and really thinking about nothing, important thoughts often rise to the surface. If kids are always trying to fill every waking moment with something, they may never get comfortable with their own thoughts. They might not be able to handle loneliness and being alone, which are not the same. They may have a hard time hearing the inner prompting of the Holy Spirit if they are constantly being entertained.⁹

Your child's brain doesn't function best with a constant drip of dopamine. Get your kids off the roller coaster. Providing amusement for your child should not be a main part of your job description. Make a radical commitment instead: *I will not allow my child to be addicted to any device while they are living under my roof.*

FUN SCREEN-FREE ACTIVITIES FOR KIDS

NERF GUN ARCADE GAMES: Buy a few helium balloons from the dollar store. Arrange them in varying heights and begin target practice. It's fun for boys, girls, and parents too. Don't like nerf guns? Set up plastic cups on the floor or on a table, and shoot rubber bands at them to knock them down.

PING-PONG AND OTHER GAMES: My parents bought a ping-pong table for their backyard, and it really has added a fun element. My kids love playing ping-pong with their grandparents (and occasionally beating them). We bought an inexpensive set that converts your dining room table into a ping-pong table just by placing the net across. Have items like footballs, Frisbees, hula hoops, basketballs, and soccer balls easily accessible so your kids will go outside and play more often.

READ ALOUD AS A FAMILY: As your kids get old enough, it's fun to switch the roles and have the kids read to the parents. You can also use books such as *The Chronicles of Narnia* and take turns reading aloud, adding drama with your voice for more laughs and excitement.

KID THEATER: Have your children choose a story from the Bible and give them permission to find props throughout the house. For younger kids, you can provide a simple script, but allow older kids to make up their own. After they practice, they can present their masterpiece to the adults after dinner. This is something fun to do when you have other kids over to play. The more the merrier in

terms of roles cast, and it's a great way to share the Bible with friends.

GOOD OLD-FASHIONED FREE TIME: When your kids aren't directed to a particular activity, they will come up with the most creative and unexpected things to do themselves. I've watched my daughters make up dance routines using swing music and umbrellas, teach their imaginary students math, and set up elaborate weddings with all their stuffed animals attending.

THE GOOD STUFF IS NOT NECESSARILY AMUSING

Have you seen any dancing broccoli on television lately? Vegetables don't have the same curb appeal as a bag of crunchy chips or a mouth-watering chocolate bar. As Erma Bombeck said, "In general my children refuse to eat anything that hasn't danced on television."¹⁰ Broccoli may not be amusing in any way, but that's not an excuse to dismiss its importance. Your kids need to be introduced to broccoli (or another green relative). What's the good stuff your child is missing when amusement is pursued as the highest priority? Although this list could be quite extensive, let's focus on two big ones: language development and self-control.

How to Foster a Love for Reading

Parents, educators, and researchers agree language development is fundamental for all areas of learning in your child's life. Your child's reading level will predict future school success. The larger your child's vocabulary, the more he or she will be able to consider big ideas, understand the Bible, and enjoy a successful career.

So how can you help your child excel in language development?

Thank goodness it's not rocket science; it can be as simple as talking and listening to your children over dinner. Researchers found that dinnertime conversation boosts vocabulary for young children even more than reading aloud to them.¹¹ Think of the word power of combining daily mealtime conversations with reading books. Make trips to the library a part of your family's routine. Create a desire for learning by modeling reading yourself (you might even let your child catch you reading this book today).

When it comes to free time, think books first, TV second. One study found when readers are transported into the emotional lives of books' characters, they grow more empathetic in real life.¹² Reading requires intellectual and imaginative involvement and ability. Television requires only passive involvement.

In order to read a book, your child has to focus and develop competency to understand the words on the page. To watch TV, all your child has to do is look at the screen and take a seat.

Yet with all the proven advantages reading produces, children are spending far more time being entertained by a screen than by a book. Four out of ten families with infants and young children have a television on at least six hours each day.¹³ There is a correlation between increased screen time and a reported decline of reading books aloud to young children. Between the years 1993 and 2007, the percentage of preschoolers who were read to every day by a family member changed very little (53 percent in 1993 and 55 percent in 2007). But in 2012 (post iPad), the percentage dropped significantly to 44 percent. That means that 66 percent of children ages three to five were not listening to a grown-up read at least seven times per week.¹⁴ Between 2005 and 2012, the number of children with speech difficulties leapt 70

Helping your child excel in language development can be as simple as talking and listening to your children over dinner.

percent in the United Kingdom. The study blamed the growing use of screen-based gadgets as convenient “babysitters” and a trend for hardworking parents to spend less time with their children.¹⁵

As you may guess, research shows young children whose parents read to them regularly experience multiple benefits such as a boost in literacy, social emotional growth, and a likelihood of later overall school success.¹⁶ I speak to several MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers) groups, and the following scene has been repeated again and again. A well-meaning mom will come up to me with a preschooler, a toddler, and a confession. “I used to read at bedtime to my preschooler, but one night I was busy, and my preschooler just read the tablet then went to sleep. A few days later, it happened again. Slowly I got out of the habit of reading at nighttime because it was so much easier to have the tablet do it.”

So what if your child reads to himself on an electronic tablet? Will he still enjoy the multiple benefits of reading? Although reading on a Kindle is better for language development than playing a video game, it may not equal the benefits of reading on paper. A 2014 study found that readers who used Kindles were less competent in recalling the plot and events in the book than those who used paperbacks.¹⁷ Psychologist Erik Wastlund at Sweden’s Karlstad University found students learned better when reading on paper. Wastlund followed up that study by presenting students a choice of on-screen document formats. He discovered the most influential factor was whether they could see pages in their entirety. When they had to scroll, it distracted their attention away from the story and “took a lot of mental resources that could have been spent comprehending the text instead,” reported Wastlund.¹⁸

Paper also provides the advantage of holding a physical book you can see, touch, write in, and even smell. That’s a richer sensory experience. You can tell how many pages you have left in the book,

which gives you a sense of orientation and achievement. You can recall where in the book you saw a particular story or quote you liked. For shorter texts, reading from a book or an e-reader is more similar according to researchers.¹⁹ But if you want your child to be able to read long texts requiring sustained concentration, paper still reigns.

My thirteen-year-old son, Ethan, has devoured books like *New York Times* bestseller *Boys in the Boat* by Daniel James Brown and David McCullough's *1776*. He hasn't asked me to read to him in years, but when he was younger, I read aloud to him every night. I don't regret one minute I spent reading with my son. When you read with your young child, you strengthen your emotional bond and the love of reading in both of you.

Maybe you're thinking, "My child is too old for bedtime stories or too accustomed to TV and video games to pick up a book. Is it too late?" If you will commit to make reading a priority in your home, you will find a way. You might imitate the program D.E.A.R., which stands for "Drop Everything and Read!" It's a national month-long celebration of reading that libraries, schools, and bookstores share. You can create your own D.E.A.R. program at home complete with rewards at the end of the month for reading. What subjects do your kids like? Whether they like history, how to build stuff, friendships, humor, or animals, you'll be able to find something interesting with the help of a librarian or an online review site.

When you read with your child, you strengthen your emotional bond and the love of reading in both of you.

In order for your child to succeed as a reader, he or she needs:

Competency

Positive expectations and experiences

An environment conducive to reading

Your child's education isn't the primary responsibility of a teacher or school. It's yours as a parent. No one will care about your child's progress more than you do. If you see your child lagging in reading and writing, take immediate action. Sit right next to your child and read together over the weekend. In my household, Satur-

No one will care about your child's progress more than you do.

day mornings aren't reserved for cartoons as they were in my childhood. Saturdays are synonymous with one hour of family academy. Each child has a book to read and a set of index cards. When they get to a word they do not know, they look up the definition and write it on the index card. We pipe in classical music and for one hour each week, our home is magically transformed into a place of higher education. Afterward, we all turn silly again.

Even though we laugh a lot, our family's priority is not amusement. We don't make parenting decisions based on the fun factor. On the contrary, we welcome boredom (writing out definitions of words on index cards is, well, boring). If children must be entertained in order to be educated, they will enter the workforce at a disadvantage. Kids must first learn to put in the hard work, *then* the amusement can begin. This leads us to the next big thing your child needs in addition to reading well.

The Building Block of Self-Control

It's our job as parents not to amuse, but sometimes to do just the opposite so our children can learn self-control. For example, when your child throws a tantrum in the store, that's not the time to give in and buy the candy to stop the crying. It's time to leave the store and serve vegetables for the rest of the day. Self-control doesn't come naturally to kids (or adults). It must be taught and practiced over and over.

Believe me, I realize it takes a lot of parental self-control not to

give in when you're tired. In that moment, it feels so much easier just to stop the whining or crying! If the thought of standing firm seems very difficult to you right now, take heart. As you practice this discipline yourself, you strengthen your parenting "muscle," and it will get easier with practice.

We don't make parenting decisions based on the fun factor.

Your child needs to develop a similar muscle of self-control that says, "I'm going to do the right thing even if I don't feel like it. If I don't do the right thing, something will happen I don't like." Don't get hung up because you feel bad when you reprimand your children. The truth is that life will punish the foolish child who lacks self-control, which is far more exacting than loving discipline in your home. Proverbs 25:28 says a person who lacks self-control is like a city breached, unprotected, without walls. There's no protection from danger and enslavement to sin for your child when self-control is missing.

It takes self-control for your child to finish homework before playing. It takes self-control to get along with others at school, learn an instrument, eat properly at the table, or memorize times tables. Self-control, which is the ability to control one's emotions and behavior, is a crucial building block to your child's success.

DIGITALLY SPEAKING

Perhaps you've uttered these words in frustration, "It's time to stop playing that game!" or "You are losing your iPad for the rest of the day!" Technology and self-control can certainly be at odds. I used to think technology was neutral and the problem lay only in how we used it. But the more I read, the more I conclude the technology we use is not neutral. Brilliant and business-minded tech giants are striving to design irresistible technologies. Popular websites, social

media sites, and video games translate into serious dollars. In 2013, *Grand Theft Auto 5* made \$800 million in its first day.²⁰ The entire video game industry that same year earned \$66 billion—yes, *billion!*²¹ *World of Warcraft* has grossed more than ten billion dollars, and more than a quarter of a million people have taken the free online World of Warcraft Addiction Test.²²

What makes video games so highly addictive? First, playing these games brings a strong sense of achievement and mission. Winning is unpredictable, so you keep playing to move up to the next level. Designed with motivational elements such as badges and leaderboards, the games let the player earn points and receive special recognition. Visually, players are taken into another world, being totally immersed in the game. There's a strong social component of playing with others in MMO (Massively Multiplayer Online) games. It has been estimated the average young person will spend 10,000 hours gaming by the time they reach age twenty-one. That statistic should take your breath away. Let's say your child plays video games from age six to age twenty-one: that would equal about thirteen hours of video gaming per week. You can see how that 10,000 hours could rack up. To give you a comparison for that 10,000 hours of gaming, 10,080 hours is the amount of time an American child with perfect attendance spends in school from fifth to twelfth grade.²³

Girls are also at risk for video game addiction, but as they get older, social media takes over. When your child posts a photo, an instantaneous "like" reinforces the action and invites her to check throughout the day for new likes. Various rewards like messages, likes, and new friend requests don't appear on a schedule, so our kids check in compulsively for that dopamine prize.

In 2012, Netflix introduced "post-play," which meant once one episode ended, the next episode in the series automatically loaded and began playing five seconds later. You can imagine how irresist-

ible it became for our kids to watch “just one more episode,” especially if a cliffhanger was involved.²⁴

Former Google employee and Stanford graduate Tristan Harris is calling for a revival of conscience in Silicon Valley, asking designers to stop exploiting people’s vulnerabilities. About having self-control, he said, “You could say that it’s my responsibility . . . but that’s not acknowledging that there’s a thousand people on the other side of the screen whose job is to break down whatever responsibility I can maintain.”²⁵ Let that sink in. When your child is playing a video game or scrolling through social media, imagine a thousand people on the other side of that screen who have worked long hours to engineer that experience to be as addicting as possible. That, my friend, is not a fair fight. That’s why children need parents to step in and intervene with screen-related boundaries, such as collecting all devices at night.

SPIRITUALLY SPEAKING

When the apostle Paul shared about faith in Christ to the governor Felix and his wife, Drusilla, the Bible says Paul talked about “righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come” (Acts 24:25). Self-control is evidently very important. We know it is part of the fruit of the Spirit.

Neil Postman wrote, “I believe I am not mistaken in saying that Christianity is a demanding and serious religion. When it is delivered as easy and amusing, it is another kind of religion altogether.”²⁶ Of course there’s room for funny skits for kids and catchy worship songs. But faith in Christ should not be presented as entertainment all the time. A shallow faith in God will disappear when life gets tough.

The ways of God are not always entertaining or amusing, but they bring everlasting life and true joy. A steady stream of cute videos, cartoons, and video games may amuse and occupy your

child, but they don't cultivate character or yield lasting fruit. You can be easy on your children now by entertaining them, but later life will be hard on them. Or you can be tough on your children by providing for their needs but not catering to their wants, and then their lives as adults will be much easier.

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I began this chapter by telling you about Ethan ranting and raving about wanting music in the car instead of listening to my radio program. Did I give in to his screaming? Let's just say we listened to a lot of talk radio that week. I learned a lot—and so did he.



Parents Rising Question

Can your children amuse themselves for long periods of time without a screen? How might you help them practice this important skill?

Parents Rising Prayer

Lord, show me what to do with the devices in our home. I dedicate our phones, computers, tablets, and screens for Your use. Help my family not to waste time with unhealthy amusement. Empower me to lead my children to do what is right and to possess self-control. In Jesus' name, amen.

Parents Rising Action Step

Make it your family policy to collect all phones, iPads, and devices at night, out of your children's bedrooms. Do this for your teenagers also (you might want to charge your phone outside of your bedroom too).