PARENT ARTICLE

# Filling the void: helping children rediscover real-world skills and passions

A practical read for parents navigating the awkward space that opens when screens go quiet.



**THE IDEA TO REMEMBER**

**The question is not only how to remove the screen. The better question is what need the screen was meeting, and what real-world thing could meet it instead.**

When parents finally reduce the screens, they often run straight into a wall they did not expect. The hours open up, and instead of rushing to fill them with painting and bike rides and the wholesome pursuits of their own childhood, the child simply deflates. They mope. They follow you around announcing how bored they are. Before long, exhausted by the misery of it, many parents quietly hand the screen back, concluding that the alternative was somehow worse and that this is somehow never going to work. You tried, but think that it is simply not realistic...

I want to help you past that wall, because the problem is almost never the child, and it is almost never that the real world has nothing to offer. The problem is a misunderstanding of what the screen was actually doing.

Here is the idea that changes everything. A screen is never just a screen. It is meeting a real need, and the moment you remove the device without meeting that need another way, you do not solve anything. You simply leave a hole. The child is not pining for the device itself. They are pining for whatever the device was quietly giving them, what it substituted, what void it filled and that thing has not gone anywhere. It is still needed. It is just suddenly unmet. There is a whole subject around dopamine release in the brain through interacting with the content on screens and how a child begins to become independent on it. This is worth understanding from the book to know what you a dealing with from a chemical and scientific perspective.

So the question is not "how do I get my child off the screen?" The better question, the one that actually works, is "what need was the screen meeting, and what in the real world could meet it instead?"

In my experience, almost all screen time is feeding one of four needs. The first is stimulation, the cure for boredom and the buzz of something happening. The second is connection and the pull towards friends and belonging, towards being recognised and staying in the know so you are not left behind. The third is escape, offering a way to switch off and self-soothe after something stressful or hard. The fourth is mastery and making, the deeply satisfying sense of getting better at something and of creating something of your own, whether that is levelling up in a game, learning a skill, building a world or making a video, the quiet pride of watching your progress and seeing what you make take shape. Most of what looks like a simple screen habit is really one of these four needs, dressed in digital clothes.

Once you can see the need underneath, the way forward stops being guesswork. The solution can be challenging for many, but the point is that there is in fact a solution. Often times, we become that solution. Our time, our attention and understanding. Offering a real-world swap that feeds the same need, because a swap that matches, sticks, and a swap that does not, gets refused no matter how worthy it is. This is why so many well-meant parenting efforts fail. A child using the screen for connection with friends will not be consoled by a solo jigsaw, however lovely the jigsaw. A child using it for mastery will not be soothed by something with no challenge and no sense of progress. A child desperate for company and support will not find it in being told to go play their guitar. The activity is not wrong. It is simply feeding the wrong hunger.

But match the need correctly, and something clicks. The bored child who needs stimulation comes alive with something physical and absorbing to build or do. The lonely child who needs connection lights up at the suggestion of a coffee date or playing with them, doing an activity with other children attached to it, a team or a club. The stressed child who needs escape finds a gentler refuge in something calming and absorbing, a present parent willing to engage, listen and just be available. It could be a therapeutic craft or instrument, or time outdoors to reflect. And the child who needs mastery and making, perhaps the most important to feed, will pour themselves into anything that offers real challenge, visible progress or the chance to create, a skill, a sport, a craft, a project that is genuinely theirs, where they can watch themselves slowly get good and see what they have built. That last need is gold, because a genuine passion fed properly competes with the phone on something close to equal terms.

This is also, quietly, where you are released from a job you were never meant to hold. You do not have to become your child's entertainment officer, manufacturing fun from morning to night. You only have to understand the need and gently point towards a few real-world options that might meet it, then step back and let your child do the choosing. The aim is not to fill the void for them unless you are that void. It is to reopen a door they have half forgotten how to walk through. Pointing them in the right direction is where it begins.

So here is the small thing to try. Pick the one screen habit that worries you most, and instead of asking how to remove it, ask what need it is feeding. Stimulation, connection, escape or mastery. Once you can assess and name the need, you can offer something real that meets it, and the void stops being a problem to dread and becomes a space waiting to be filled with something far better.

*Naming the need beneath the screen is the key that makes everything else work, and it deserves more room than a single article allows. In the book I show you how to match a specific activity to the exact need your child's screen was meeting, and how to help a one-off attempt grow into a genuine passion.*

**NEXT STEP**

Pick one screen habit that worries you most this week. Name the need it is feeding, then offer something real that meets that same need.