PARENT ARTICLE

How to open the conversation about screens without starting a war

A parent-to-parent article about beginning the screen conversation without turning it into a battle.



THE IDEA TO REMEMBER

Win trust first. The rules will hold far better when they rest on understanding.

This is something important worth knowing. You probably didn't do much wrong. The conversation went badly because of what both of you walked into the room expecting.

To you, the screen is a problem to be managed. To your child, the screen is not a gadget at all. It is where their friends are, where they feel capable and good at something, and where they go to switch off after a hard day, in exactly the way an adult reaches for a glass of wine or even their own mobile. When you stride in to discuss "the screen problem," your child does not hear a concerned parent. They hear a threat to their friendships, their competence and their comfort, all at once. They end up defending it the way any of us defend something we love and feel is about to be taken from us. The war starts before either of you has really said anything, because you each came in braced for it.

This is why the single most useful change you can make is not in your words but in your aim. One should not open this conversation trying to win, make changes and set rules. A first conversation engaged in to win is a first conversation built to fail, in that the moment your child senses they are being managed towards a conclusion, they stop listening and start defending. The goal of the first talk is not victory, but understanding. You are not there to take anything away tonight. It is important to learn what your child actually gets from the screen, and to have them leave the room still willing to talk to you tomorrow.

That shift, from controlling to understanding, changes everything downstream, as every later conversation depends on this one not poisoning the well.

It changes how you open, for a start. An accusation, however gently worded, invites a defence. Curiosity invites a child to stay in the room. There is a world of difference between "we need to talk about how much you are on that thing" and "show me the game you love most right now. I genuinely want to understand what makes it so good." The first is the opening move of a battle. The second is the opening move of a relationship. The one puts your child on trial and the other puts you on their side of the table.

It changes your timing as well. A child mid-game or a teenager halfway through a video will hear any approach as an ambush, because you are interrupting the very thing you want to discuss. The conversation goes far better in a neutral, unhurried moment with no screen in the balance. A walk or a quiet sit down after a meal. If you are still angry about last night, that anger will leak into every sentence no matter how carefully you choose your words, so the honest move is to wait until you are genuinely calm and honestly curious, not performing calm over a simmering frustration.

It even changes what you leave out. Statistics deployed as a weapon will come across as a lecture. The word "addicted" will be interpreted as an insult. An ultimatum will be seen as a declaration of war. None of these belong in a first conversation whose only real job is to keep your child talking to you. The limits and the firm rules will have their place, but this is not the initial focus. They will have their place once your child trusts that you can listen without immediately clamping down.

Here is something to consider: Before your next attempt, decide in advance that you are not going to fix anything in that conversation. Pick a calm moment, lead with one honest, curious question, and then do the hardest part, which is to listen to the whole answer without correcting it or jumping to conclusions. Let it be the first conversation, not the only one.

Win trust first as your primary focus. When able to implement rules, they will be far more effective and able to be embraced on top of this foundation.

My own experience was only effective once I had first done my homework. Previous conversations were met with resistance and arguments. I spent time understanding how the brain is wired, and how gaming and social media act on a developing adolescent mind. Then I sat down with my children, not to accuse them, but to share what I had learned and to talk honestly about how it might be affecting them and I stopped accusing them. That open conversation did something I had not expected. It helped them see their own situation clearly, and that recognition opened a door rather than closing one. They wanted to know more, and even though they were not proactively asking questions about it, their responsiveness and engagement was a clear signal that they were open to discussing this in more detail. They were eventually the ones asking me to help set sensible rules, on their terms as much as mine. The effort was well worth putting in, and it began with a single honest conversation.

FROM THE BOOK

Getting safely into that first conversation is only the beginning. In the book I give you the fuller approach for what comes next, including how to move from one good talk to an agreement that is effective, and what to say if your child shuts down completely.

NEXT STEP

Choose a calm moment, ask one genuinely curious question, and listen without correcting the first answer.