PARENT ARTICLE

Why does my child want to be there more than here with me?

The psychology of escape, and why this is not a verdict on you as a parent.



THE IDEA TO REMEMBER

Your child is not choosing the screen over you. They are choosing the frictionless over the effortful, and your task is to make real life worth the friction.

I don't know how to be here right now...

There is a particular pain that comes when you realise your child would rather be on a screen than with you. You call them for dinner and feel the reluctance. You suggest a walk and see irritation cross their face. Somewhere underneath, a quiet and painful question forms. Have I been replaced by a device? Is something wrong with us?

That question deserves a better answer than the usual reassurances. The honest answer is gentler than the fear behind it.

What the screen actually offers

Your child does not love the screen more than they love you. What the screen offers them is something the real world, by its nature, cannot. It offers a world with the friction taken out.

Consider what the digital world is actually like from the inside. It is instant, and so there is no waiting. It is tailored, so it rarely bores. It is designed to reward, and as a result effort is met with a steady drip of small successes. It never has a headache, never says "not now," and never asks them to wait their turn or tidy their room first. Every rough edge that real life carries has been deliberately sanded away, because rough edges are where people put devices down, and putting the device down is the one thing these products are built to prevent.

Real life set beside it

Now set your living room beside that virtual world. Here, things take time. Here, people are tired and distracted and sometimes short-tempered. Here, your child has to manage the disappointment of a board game they are losing, the boredom of a slow afternoon and the small social risk and "waste of time" of starting a conversation that might go nowhere. Real life is full of friction, and friction is precisely the thing the screen has removed. So when a child chooses the screen, they are rarely choosing it over you as a person. They are choosing the frictionless over the effortful, which is a very human thing to do, and which adults do every time they pick up their own phone in a dull moment.

What this means for the longer term

This reframing should bring some relief, yet it also points to something we should sit with honestly. A childhood spent mostly in a frictionless world is very poor preparation for an adult life that is full of friction. The waiting, the boredom, the awkward first move and the disappointment that has to be felt and survived are the training ground for a good life rather than the obstacles to one. A child who never has to tolerate the slowness of the real world never builds the muscles that the real world will later demand of them.

What the task actually is

So the task is not to make your home as gripping as the screen, which is a task you cannot succeed in and should not try to enter. That world is engineered by teams of specialists with budgets you cannot match. If your aim is to compete with them, you will lose, and you will exhaust yourself in the losing. The task is something quieter and more within reach. It is to make the real world worth the friction.

That happens less through spectacle and more through presence. A child returns to the things where they feel seen, even when those things are slow. Ten unhurried minutes where you are genuinely there, not half-watching while you scroll your own feed, compete with the screen far better than any elaborate outing. Connection has a pull that the algorithm cannot fake, because the algorithm only ever simulates being interested in your child. You can actually be interested.

A small thing to try this week

Pick one ordinary, frictionless moment, the drive home or the wait before dinner, and instead of letting the screen fill it for both of you, fill it yourself. Do this not with an activity but simply with attention. Ask a real question and stay present and engaged for the real answer.

Your child is not choosing the screen over you. They are choosing the easy over what requires effort, as we all do. Your quiet, steady work is to keep showing them that making an effort here with you is where the things worth having actually live.

FROM THE BOOK

This pull towards the frictionless sits at the heart of why screens gain such a grip. It shapes a lot of what comes later in the book. In the chapters ahead you will see more closely what your child is really escaping when they retreat to a screen, and how to make the real world a place they genuinely want to return to.