



your kids

Unplugged

Daily media use among kids is on the rise. But is "plugging in" all bad? Maybe not. Experts say the digital craze is an opportunity to teach your children the benefits of an active lifestyle. [Read more.](#)

by ANGIE MIZZELL



Four creative ways to get your kids outside ...and loving it!

scavenger hunt

Pick a theme like "blue," "circle," or "the letter 'A'." Send your kids out with cameras or sketchbooks to photograph or draw everything they find that relates in some way to the theme.

fort fun

Build a fairy house or an elf hideaway out of sticks, rocks, leaves, etc. The only "rule" is that all materials must be gathered from nature.

rock out

Have a rock flip day. Go out and flip rocks to see what you find. Be sure to put the rock gently back again after observing. Remember, you might be looking at somebody's home! Your children can photograph or draw what they find.

certifiable

Certify your backyard as a "Backyard Wildlife Habitat" with the National Wildlife Federation. Have your children help you analyze the resources available in your yard (food, water, cover, places to raise young, sustainable gardening). Make any changes or additions necessary and get certified! More information is available on the NWF website at nwf.org.

—*Courtesy of Sarah Davies, aka "Mom Unplugged."* For more great ideas, check out her blog at UnplugYourKids.com

I stood in the kitchen, acting out a scene for my four-year-old. "So Jack went up, up, up the beanstalk," I said, pulling at the air, like I was climbing. His eyes opened wider. "And when he gets to the top, guess what he finds?"

"A giant!"

"That's right! A giant." Then I realized I had never told him this story before. "How do you know that?"

"Mickey Mouse Clubhouse," he giggled. This is not the first time my son has wowed me with a nugget of knowledge and then told me he learned it on television. Recently, I caught myself telling him a "back in my day" story, about how when I was a kid, my television had three channels, and I had to wait until Saturday to watch cartoons. That's a tough sell when the remote control manages to make any show he wants to watch magically appear. And each day, he sees me sitting at the dining room table, working at my laptop. He waits, then hovers and then crawls into my lap. "Mommy, are you done, yet?" He's trying to boot me off so he can play his favorite Scooby Doo game. My son is growing up in a new generation where 24-hour access to technology is the norm. Daily media use among children has increased dramatically in the past five years, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, a private, non-profit organization focusing on major health care issues in the United States. Today, 8-18 year-olds spend an average of seven and a half hours a day using entertainment

media. The foundation says easier access to mobile media, like cell phones and iPods, is the likely factor.

online versus outdoors

"Video games certainly have their place in terms of cognitive challenge, problem solving and decision making," says Dr. Risa Mason-Cohen, a licensed clinical psychologist in Charleston, SC. But only to an extent, she says, since video games are designed primarily to entertain, teaching a child to take a passive, rather than active role. And while technology seems to be developing at warp speed, the benefits of outdoor play still trump its online competitor. "Playing outdoors facilitates imagination and creativity and exposes children to the many benefits of fresh air, sunshine, exercise and social interaction," says Mason-Cohen. Studies show that some of those added benefits include increased immunity, lower stress and a reduced risk of chronic diseases. "We have to show a generation of children how to start to be active," says Louis Yuhasz, Founder of Louie's Kids (louieskids.org), a national non-profit organization to fight childhood obesity. In America today, 25 million kids are obese or overweight, a number that has tripled in the past 30 years. That's why Yuhasz has recently launched Run Buddies (RunBuddies.org), a program that pairs a child with an adult who's excited to share his or her enthusiasm for fitness. "When your run buddy comes to pick you

up, you know you're going to be active."

everything in moderation

My son loves playing outdoors, and he has an active imagination. The difference between my son and me is I can recognize when I'm on technology overload, and it's time to unplug. I get regular exercise, and I still haven't purchased a phone that allows access to the Internet, because I know once I start downloading apps, there's no turning back. I've had to teach myself how to create healthy limits around technology, and now that my son is getting older (and more opinionated) this concept of balance is something I'll need to teach him, too.

"You know, it's not hard," says Yuhasz. "Be an example."

Mason-Cohen agrees. We can teach our children to embrace a healthy, active lifestyle by simply showing them that it's fun. "The best way to encourage unplugging is to help children develop positive associations around imaginary and interactive play. Plan a game night. Pictionary, charades or even a board game can teach children the joy of human interaction." •

Angie Mizzell is a freelance writer and mom to two young boys. She writes a monthly column for Lowcountry Parent magazine and is a regular contributor to HybridMom.com. More at AngieMizzell.com.

Recommended Reads

Unplugged Play

By Bobbi Conner

Offers 710 activities and games for kids, from toddlers to 10-year-olds. Includes suggestions for parent and child, solo play ("busy body games"), and birthday parties! \$16.95 • AMAZON.COM

Last Child in the Woods

By Richard Louv

Louv links the lack of nature in the lives of today's youth to the disturbing rises in obesity, attention deficit disorder and depression among children. He offers practical solutions and calls to action in this influential, provocative work that every mom (and dad!) should read. \$14.95 • BN.COM

Pulling the Plug

E-sources for encouraging more green time and less screen time (yes, we get the irony):

Children and Nature Network

CHILDRENANDNATURE.ORG

Nature Rocks

NATUREROCKS.ORG

Unplug Your Kids

UNPLUGYOURKIDS.COM

Five tips for successful unplugging

1 Pick a goal, or just aim to gradually reduce family screen-time until it feels "right" for your family.

2 Go slowly. Start with maybe one night a week and be positive! Instead of calling it "Screen-Free Night," call it something fun like "Family Game Night," "Kids Cook Night," or "Puzzle Night."

3 Resist the urge to be your children's activity director. If they say they're bored, let them be bored. Out of boredom comes creativity!

4 Get them (and yourself) outside as much as possible. Exercise and fresh air does wonders for everyone's mood.

5 If you really want to get serious about unplugging, then move the TVs and computers out of the main living spaces of your house. Put them all in an office or basement.

—Courtesy of Sarah Davies, UnplugYourKids.com



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LET'S GET OUTSIDE