

An Interesting Mistake

By Chip DeLorenzo, MEd

In our home, we limit screen time to weekends; our children are allowed to watch one movie per weekend day. My oldest child (age 11) will go to any lengths to get just a few minutes in front of a screen, even if it means breaking the house ground rules. To deal with this, we use a logical consequence: “If you abuse it, you lose it.” If a child sneaks screen time, he will lose screen time on a future weekend day. We joke that my oldest son has forfeited more screen time than he has actually experienced because of his proclivity to smuggle electronic devices into his room for his personal, unauthorized viewing pleasure.

Recently, my wife found her Kindle in my son’s room, under his covers. (How did she know to look there? In our home, his room is the second place we look for an electronic device, after first looking in the place we thought we’d left it.) Accordingly, he lost a day of screen time for the upcoming weekend. Not too long afterward, just as I did when I was his age, he tested the limits and smuggled screen time again.

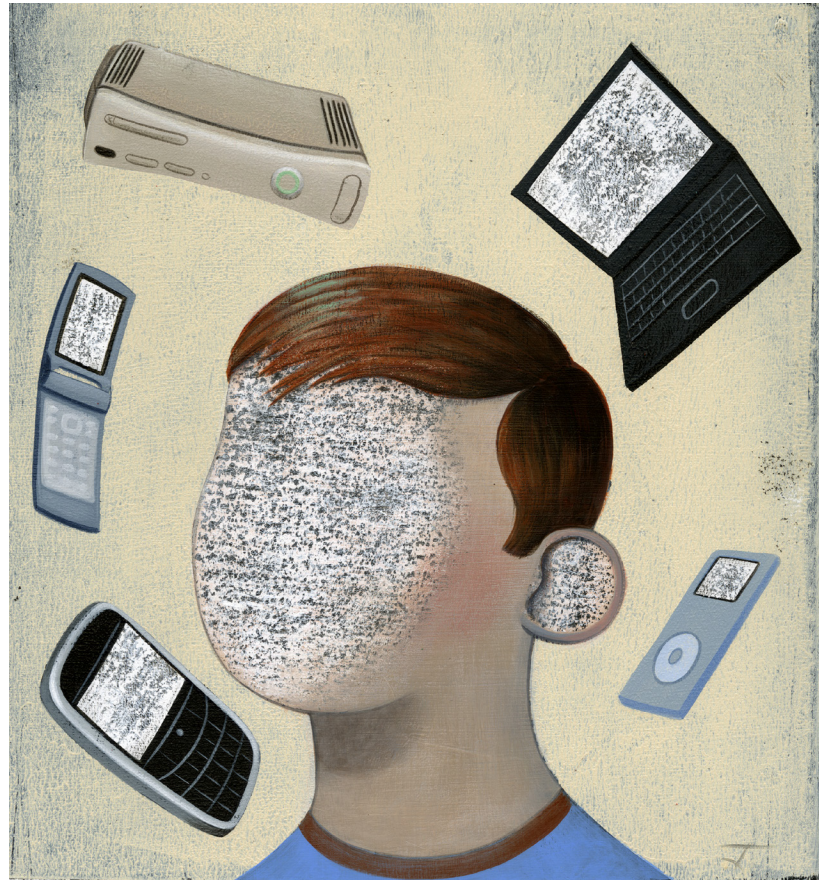
Fast forward to 3 weeks later: as a result of his continued sneaking, my son hadn’t watched a movie since the initial Kindle incident. Then his birthday arrived, and I was feeling sorry for him because he couldn’t watch a movie with his brothers. I knew I should hold to the limits firmly, even if it was his birthday. But instead, I caved and let him watch the movie as a “birthday treat.”

Almost immediately, I began to regret my decision. My son responded to my act of mercy by pushing the screen time limits even more, trying to watch things that he wasn’t allowed to, taking control of the programming from his brothers, and so on. I wanted to be angry, but I knew what was happening. My son, like all children, wants to know that the adults in his life will be consistent and do what we say we are going to do—much more than they want to watch television. My son was saying, in his own way, that he preferred the limits. And I know that limits are meant to be tested. Otherwise, how would we know where the limits really are?

Shortly after his birthday, my son asked me if he could have his screen time back, even though he still had 3 more weekend days of screen time to forgo. My response to him was, “What would I be teaching you by eliminating the consequence for your choices?” He thought for a moment and said, “Good point.” Inside I laughed knowingly. Children are our best teachers.

I recently saw one of my favorite comics, Louis C. K., talk about parenting. Sardonicly yet prophetically, he mused that his job was not to make his children happy. He said, “I’m not raising children. I’m raising the grown-ups they’re going to be.”

Reflecting on this point, I thought about my decision to remove the “no screen time consequences” for my son’s birthday. I made a mistake.



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I learned from it, but it was a mistake nonetheless. I asked myself the same question that I asked my son: What was I teaching him by removing that consequence? In attempting to make him happy by rescuing him, I was actually setting him up for disappointment and perpetuating his dependence on me for his happiness. I want my son to learn that he can be happy despite his circumstances and that he can accept responsibility for his actions and learn to make better decisions by himself.

As I continue on the road to becoming a better parent, I am grateful for my children and for the many lessons they teach me.