



## The Reset

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**I'M NOT A SCIENTIST.** (I don't even play one on TV.) But sometimes you remember things you learned in a science class because they make so much sense.

Take, for example, the second law of thermodynamics. Essentially, this rule recognizes that things tend toward chaos, decay, and disorder unless outside energy is invested to restore order. Without that energy being injected into the system from the outside, *entropy*—total chaos in which all the existing energy within a system has been expended—will rule.

I often ponder the second law of thermodynamics—at least, the way I remember it from eighth-grade physics. Because, let's face it, *order never happens accidentally*. Order is

the by-product of intentionality and energy being expended to take something that's out of whack and set it right again. It implies, by its very definition, *work*.

We see this dynamic in virtually every area of our lives. Leave dirty dishes on the counter before work, and they're still going to be there when you get home if no one has invested outside energy in restoring order. Dishes don't magically clean themselves. (What a miracle that would be, right?) Leave them a couple of days, and bugs start showing up. (Ask me how I know—I was single until I was thirty-four.) More chaos. I suspect you could leave your dishes for a thousand years, and they'd still be dirty (though probably worth more at that point, now that they're archaeological relics).

I think something like the second law of thermodynamics is at play in our character and moral core too. We move naturally from order toward disorder, a consequence of the Fall. Left to our own devices, without God's redemptive input in our lives, we drift toward self-gratification pretty naturally. That's true of our interaction with screens and technology too.

Even if we've set good boundaries (as we talked about earlier) and worked hard to protect them, our screen-based interactions can easily follow the same pattern: from discipline to undiscipline, order to chaos. Like the movie *Groundhog Day*, in which Bill Murray relives the same day over and over, it's easy to end up in a spot where we realize, *I've been here before*.

In my family, we do try to keep some semblance of entertainment and tech order. One of our rules is not to engage with two screens at once. If you're focusing on multiple

screens, after all, you're probably not focusing on any of them. And you might be missing something important. That's especially true if you're engaging with a screen with other people—during a family movie night, for instance.

Recently we were having a family movie night. I honestly don't remember what we were watching, but I do remember that my middle daughter soon busted me. Without my even being aware, my hand had drifted to my phone, and I was somewhat mindlessly scrolling when she yelled at me, "Dad! No dual-screening! Put your phone down!"

Point taken. She was reminding me of one of our family screen guidelines that I was, in fact, breaking. I had drifted outside the boundaries we've tried to establish as a family.

Now, that was just one choice. One moment. But it was a telling one, a sign that my own relationship with technology had drifted noticeably. And I realized it was probably time for a family screen reset—even if I was the one who needed it most right at that moment.

## **HOUSTON, WE HAVE A PROBLEM**

We all know that setting boundaries on screen-time use is hugely important for the sake of our kids' mental, emotional, and spiritual health. (And ours, too!)

But if we're being honest as parents, sometimes our grip slips. We implement new habits, we make changes, we see progress with regard to how we're spending time—or not spending time—with screens. And then—*bam!*—Christmas break happens. Someone gets sick. Or something else disrupts our schedule, and our kids begin to stumble back into

old habits. It could be something as maddeningly mundane as a really stressful week or two. And suddenly, our family's screen-time usage is out of control again.

In those moments, it can be tempting to throw in the towel, to feel like the hard work of setting limits and making healthy changes is just unrealistic. Or, worse, impossible. *What's the point?* we might wonder dejectedly. *We're just going to end up in the same place again. Why fight it?* Indeed, the impulse to throw in the towel here can be disturbingly strong. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em, right? The pull of passivity—a pull that almost always leads to disorder—is like that.

But the fact is, setting limits is hard in any area of our lives. Anyone who's ever tried to redirect old habits and establish healthy, new ones knows it's anything but easy. And I'd suggest that the same is true when it comes to making changes to our family's screen-time usage.

When things slip out of control, it's time for a screen-time reset. So how do we do that? And how do we move toward making changes stick?

### ***Mission Drift***

Even though we know better, it's easy to drift off course. (Remember: entropy!) For many of us, our smartphones are also our alarm clocks—the first thing we reach for in the morning and the last thing we interact with before we go to sleep. It's no wonder we can find ourselves using them perhaps more than we intend.

Toss in the fact that social media developers spend a lot of time making sure we're never out of the loop, and we have a

situation in which this truly spectacular technology threatens at times to take over every waking minute of our—and our children’s—lives, if we let it.

In the 2020 documentary *The Social Dilemma*, former Google designer Tristan Harris, who now sounds the alarm about the product he used to create, said, “Every time you see [your phone] there on the counter and just look at it. And you know if you reach over, it just might have something for you. So you play that slot machine to see what you got. That’s not by accident. That’s a design technique.”

Former Pinterest president Tim Kendall added, “[The business model of] companies like [Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram] is to keep people engaged on the screen. Let’s figure out how to get as much of this person’s attention as we possibly can. How much time can we get you to spend? How much of your life can we get you to give to us?”<sup>1</sup>

Wow. It’s a lot to consider. As if steering clear of bad tech habits wasn’t hard enough. We’re not just talking about resisting and saying no to something that’s benign and neutral here. Instead, we’re talking about setting limits on a system that’s actively trying to get us—and our children—to cede as much of our waking attention as they can get. It’s a sobering thought, and it helps explain why trying to break these habits when they *do* cycle out of control can seem so difficult.

Difficult, but not impossible. So what do we do in those moments where there’s more chaos than order, more caving in than carving out space without our beloved screens.

In those moments, it’s time for a reset. Let’s talk about what that is and what it might entail for your family.

*Reset Reloaded*

A reset is a renewed commitment to look at our technology boundaries and adjust them to bring more order and health into our relationships with screens. There's no "right" way to do it (though I'll offer a bunch of concrete suggestions later in this chapter). But it does involve acknowledging that your family's habits are out of whack in this area and working together to reset what your relationships with screens, technology, and entertainment should look like.

However, before we even begin to implement some of those changes, we've got to be honest and realistic about what we're dealing with.

As we discovered earlier in this book, changing habits in entertainment isn't an overnight process. Making healthy changes stick involves more than just ramping up our willpower, as important as that is. We've got to realize that our screen habits condition our brains in a very real way to want the stimulation that all those flickering pixels promise. We need to understand that our brains crave the dopamine hit looking at our screens gives us: It's an appetite and an addiction.

That's why making changes can feel painful at first. In fact, I'd suggest that resetting our screen habits is akin to two other practices most of us have done at some point: dieting and budgeting. Neither is particularly easy or pleasant. But the outcomes—better health and more financial security—are worth the effort.

There's an inescapable element of discipline here, but the outcome is a fruitful one, as the author of Hebrews reminds

us: “For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 12:11, ESV). Discipline is rarely easy or natural. Saying no to ourselves costs us something in the moment—namely, that brief, immediate gratification. But in the end, consistently applying it helps us move in the direction we ultimately want to go.

### ***Parents, You Go First***

If you’ve ever flown on a commercial flight, you’ve heard safety procedures that might at first blush seem counter-intuitive: Parents are supposed to put their oxygen masks on first in the event of an emergency and then help their children do the same.

There’s a parallel principle in play when it comes to dealing with screen time in the family. Parents, we need to get our proverbial houses in order first. It’s easy and perhaps natural to make our kids’ screen usage our top priority. But the reality is this: Our kids are likely just doing what we’re doing as parents. They don’t have to try to emulate us; they just do it.

So first, Mom and Dad, we need to take a look in the mirror. How much are you on your phone? What changes do *you* need to begin making before you ask your kids to change their own habits? It may seem like their issues are more pressing, but I guarantee you that they’ll be watching you. And “Do as I say, not as I do” will not work here.

One change I’ve been *trying* to make (see how I hedged there? This isn’t easy!) is to turn off my phone for two hours every evening. That enables me to come home from work

and be fully present with my kids and wife instead of being sucked into the ever-present vortex of “content” via my smartphone.

That’s been a good starting place for me when it comes to leading a successful reset. And that brings me to my next point.

### ***Rejecting All-or-Nothing Thinking and Perfectionism***

How do you tend to go about making changes in your life? Do you typically make one small adjustment and then another until the desired course correction has been achieved? Or do you go at it full force, determined to make massive changes in one fell swoop?

I confess, I tend to be in the latter category. Like some gigantic Paul Bunyan swinging an ax the size of a pickup truck, I take aim with all my might at a given problem, hoping to fell it with one decisive blow.

If you’re wondering how that works—well, generally speaking, it doesn’t. Oh, there can be a lot of noise and pyrotechnics, figuratively speaking. But we don’t make lasting changes or solve complex problems with a single grand gesture. Instead, change is built on small adjustments that we integrate over time. In military terms, we might think of it as reclaiming lost territory, one battle at a time. The war isn’t won overnight. But if we persist, we’ll look back and realize we’ve retaken a lot of lost ground.

A recent study by researchers at Ruhr-Universität Bochum in Germany backs up this approach to making changes stick when it comes to tech’s place in our lives. Scientists



divided 619 study participants into three groups. The first group was asked to abstain completely from their phones for a full week—the cold-turkey approach. The other group was tasked with reducing their phone usage by one hour a day but otherwise interacting with their devices the way they normally would. The third group made no adjustments at all in limiting their smartphone use. Researchers then checked in with participants a month into the study, and then four months later.

Who do you think used their phones less after this study? Obviously, I've telegraphed the findings already: The group that cut usage by an hour a day over a week were still using their phones, on average, thirty-eight fewer minutes per day four months later. In contrast, those who went cold turkey drifted back into more usage more quickly.<sup>2</sup>

Lead researcher Dr. Julia Brailovskaia summarized the study's findings: "We found that both completely giving up the smartphone and reducing its daily use by one hour had positive effects on the lifestyle and well-being of the participants. . . . In the group who reduced use, these effects even lasted longer and were thus more stable than in the abstinence group."<sup>3</sup>

I love that study. Instead of all-or-nothing perfectionism, I think it shows us that the opposite is the best strategy for the long haul. The goal isn't absolute perfection or instantaneous change. The goal is movement toward what is healthy and good for us. Sometimes we blow it—just like with a diet, or a budget. But we don't quit. Instead, we reset, regroup, and try again.

**Replacement Theory**

Now, we need to talk about another important consideration: what we're filling that vacated digital space with. Here's what I mean.

When I'm trying to make changes, I often get very intense about what I intend to *give up*, to cut out. But my wise wife always asks the corollary question: *What are you going to fill that empty space with?* That's a great question. Because the truth is, it's hard to eliminate anything we like without a concrete plan for replacing it with something that offers a different kind of satisfaction.

For us as parents, resetting our kids' screen-time limits demands something more than just a parental edict that we're not going to do *X* anymore. When we remove something from our children's lives that they enjoy and are used to doing, it's going to create a vacuum we have a responsibility to help them fill. That requires planning and intentionality. (There's the word *intentionality* again!)

For our family, we've tried to find things we like to do together. There are several games all of us enjoy (or, well, most of us, most of the time), as well as certain shared activities. So if I say, "It's time to get off your phone," that instruction is much easier for my kids to take if I have a replacement activity in mind. With my son, for instance, I might suggest "So let's go play guitar together" or "Show me a guitar lick you've learned this week." He and I enjoy making music together, whereas my wife and daughters are more likely to enjoy doing puzzles and various crafty things together. Or,

during volleyball season, heading out to the backyard to practice their bumps, sets, and spikes.

We also sometimes have fun contests, especially on breaks. *Who can read the most pages (and/or books) over a break?* Or we have a drawing contest where each family member comes up with a category of objects to sketch out: The best tree, for instance, or the best animal, or the best Millennium Falcon (I wish).

Your family's replacement strategies may look very different from mine. In fact, they probably will, because they should be built on whatever you and your kids enjoy doing or have an aptitude for. But the point is this: We're not just dropping screen-time regulations on our kids from on high and expecting them to naturally know what to do with the empty space we've just created. Instead, we're actively and intentionally engaged as parents in brainstorming and modeling non-screen-related activities. And the more we help our children choose those activities, the more likely they are to make those wise choices without our close guidance and encouragement to do so.

### **PUSHING THE RESET BUTTON: LOOK FOR A NATURAL RESET POINT**

So how do we get started when it comes to actually initiating the kind of reset I've been talking about?

It's not impossible to make changes right in the middle of your normal schedule. Like, say, starting on a random Wednesday morning. But in my family's experience, it's a bit easier to do that when there's a natural reset point.

It can be as simple as the next weekend or the next break from school (fall break, Christmas break, spring break, or the beginning of summer). These sorts of breaks offer natural transition points where reintegrating renewed boundaries feels less jarring.

So if things are starting to feel a bit frazzled, you can get out your calendar right now and ask, “What’s the next best spot for our family to reset our media habits?”

***Baby Steps: Small, Measurable, Achievable Changes***

At the risk of sounding like I’m a Bill Murray fanboy (which I’m really not), I want to mention another famous role of his. In the 1991 movie *What about Bob?*,<sup>4</sup> Murray plays a man named Bob Wiley who struggles with crippling phobias that can make even basic, everyday-life stuff difficult for him. His therapist, Dr. Leo Marvin (played by Richard Dreyfuss), suggests that meaningful change begins with “baby steps.”

“Baby steps?” Bob asks.

“It means setting small, reasonable goals for yourself one day at a time. One tiny step at a time. Baby steps,” Dr. Marvin replies.

For a mainstream comedy, there’s a lot of practical wisdom wrapped up in Dr. Marvin’s counsel. Taking “baby steps,” one after another, can change our family’s trajectory, one little step at a time.

So what might that look like? Let me offer a few concrete ideas that echo or build upon others we’ve seen so far throughout this book. Consider these suggestions:

**Buy an alarm clock.** Yes, we’ll say this again. Just go do

it. Now. And while you're at it, get one for each of your kids, too. This means that instead of your phone being the first and last thing you have contact with each day, you can do something truly old-fashioned that only people in the movies do now: turn off your annoying, buzzing alarm clock.

**No phone before breakfast.** It's so easy to pick up our phones the second we wake up, as I mentioned above. But there's a growing body of research that suggests we should abstain from them for at least the first hour after waking because they instantly kick our brains into a state of alertness (which sounds good) that can create anxiety and stress (there's the rub). So consider embracing a boundary that puts your phone out of reach for that critical first hour of consciousness. Many who've reported doing so say, anecdotally, that they have less stress and are more productive in their lives as a result.

**No phones at dinner.** We've already mentioned this in chapter 9, but it's worth repeating, in part because it might be the easiest place to start. When your family eats together, put the phones away. Admittedly, many families may not eat together more than once or twice a week. But doing so has enormous benefits, because it's a place where kids usually begin to talk about how their lives are going. So if you're eating, get a phone basket and put 'em away.

**The two-hour challenge.** Scientists suggest a two-hour screen-time limit for children and adolescents. But we know that most teens (and most adults) are clocking somewhere between six and eight hours of screen time daily. Getting down to two hours is sort of like taking up running and

deciding to sign up for marathon a week later. So we've got to reduce our usage in chunks.

May I suggest what I call the two-hour challenge? As I noted earlier, I'm doing my best to turn off my phone for two hours every evening (usually between 6:00 and 8:00 p.m.). It's amazing how just two hours has an impact on my mental clarity. Maybe that's because I'd otherwise be reaching for my phone to check the news, Facebook, my favorite sports teams, and other sites about once every four minutes. That's right: According to a survey of US adults in 2023, most were checking their phones about once every four minutes.<sup>5</sup> Looked at from that perspective, putting your phone away for two hours at a time is no small thing.

**The two-hour challenge, part 2.** A positive part of putting your phone down for two hours is that, well, you've got two hours back in your life. What might you do with that time? What hobby might you pursue? What relationship might you invest in? What exercise program might you start? The sky's the limit. And if we think about trimming phone use as an opportunity for personal development and growth, this is a great way to start.

**Turn off your phone in the car.** Should be easy, right? You're *driving*. Still, 27 percent of Americans report looking at their phones while driving.<sup>6</sup> And I suspect a good portion of the other 73 percent aren't telling the truth. If we turn off our phones in the car, we can ask our kids to do the same. Instead of everyone riding to school with AirPods in their ears listening to their own music (ask me how I know), just think: We could have a real conversation with our kids.

**Whoever reads the most wins.** One summer (and, truthfully, we only did this once), we had a reading competition in our family (with a generous cash reward for the winner). Now, is offering a monetary prize the best way to encourage your kids to read? I don't know. But I do know we all read a *lot* that summer. So even something as seemingly crass as bribing your kids to put their phones down may be worth considering.

**Phones off an hour before bed.** Speaking of better sleep, ideally we should all be stowing our little pixelated “preciouses” at least sixty minutes before bed. That’s because it takes that long for your brain to unwind to a good rest state. The so-called “blue light” emitted intensely by phones, as well as other screens, essentially awakens the brain to a ready state and makes deep and healthy sleep more difficult.

**No phones overnight in bedrooms.** What good can come of kids having their phones in their bedrooms overnight? None. There are the obvious issues for parents, such as not knowing how late our kids may be up or what they may be looking at. And then there are the less obvious things, like friends pinging them on social media at 3:34 in the morning and wrecking their sleep. This is another change where the pushback may initially be strong, but ultimately it will help your kids sleep better.

**Tech-Free Tuesday.** I have to give credit here to my friend Jonathan McKee, author of *Parenting Generation Screen*. He and his family identified one evening a week to turn off the tech devices and do something fun together as a family. Jonathan reports that initially there was big pushback from

his kids. But as they got into this tech-free groove, they actually began to look forward to it, even commenting about how much better life was when they put down their phones for an evening.<sup>7</sup> Though the writer in me loves the alliteration in “Tech-Free Tuesday,” there’s obviously nothing magical about that particular day. Maybe your family can have a “Family-Focused Friday” or even a “Sabbath Saturday” (though you see that I’m still having a hard time letting go of my love affair with alliteration).

Now, remember how I said earlier that the all-or-nothing approach is likely a setup for failure? If you’re gung-ho to make changes, you might be tempted to say yes to all these suggestions. But I’d encourage you to pick one change and integrate it into your life for sixty to ninety days; then perhaps choose another one. That kind of slow change will help it stick, as opposed to giving you one really good, amazingly disciplined week before it all falls apart because too much change at once was unsustainable.

### **WINNING ONE FOR THE HOME TEAM**

Change is hard. Making lasting changes to unhealthy or destructive screen habits is no small thing. While one spouse in a marriage may be able to influence the kind of family-culture changes I’m talking about, it’s going to be harder if Mom or Dad is going it alone. If possible, getting on the same page with your spouse will vastly increase the likelihood of success in this area. It also creates an opportunity for marital bonding as you both work toward a common goal in this area.



One final word on resets. The world of screens that permeates our lives today isn't going away (well, not short of one of those apocalyptic events we see in dystopian sci-fi movies, that is). It's a reality that anyone raising kids today has to grapple with for the foreseeable future. And that means we're not always going to get it exactly right. Sometimes our habits slip out of control. That's just a part of life.

But our goal doesn't have to be perfection when it comes to media and technology. Rather, our goal is to be engaged and aware of our habits, and to periodically reset them when discipline wanes (because we're tired or sick or had a bad day . . . or week), as it naturally tends to do.

It can feel like a losing battle sometimes—a battle that gets even tougher as kids move into their teen years. That said, I believe that if we stay engaged relationally, continue to set healthy limits, and keep hitting the reset button when we drift outside those boundaries, it will give our kids a model for relating to others and interfacing with technology.

As long as we don't quit trying altogether, I believe our children will reap the benefits of our determination—frayed though it may feel at times—to not give up the media fight but to get back in there again and give it another try.

There's *always* an opportunity for a reset, a chance to start over and keep working on developing healthy boundaries and limits over the long haul.