

Shining with ADHD by The Childhood Collective

Episode #168: When Screens Become a Daily Battle for ADHD Families

Mallory: And if the answer is no, I'm not going to hold the limit. I'm going to give in. My child is going to get more time. You might need to consider eliminating them from your home because when we give in, when we acquiesce, that grows the problem bigger.

Katie: Hi there. We are The Childhood Collective, and we have helped thousands of overwhelmed parents find joy and confidence in raising their child with ADHD. I'm Katie, a speech language pathologist.

Lori: And I'm Lori.

Mallory: And I'm Mallory. And we're both child psychologists.

Lori: As busy mamas ourselves, we are on a mission to support ADHD parents on this beautiful and chaotic parenting journey.

Mallory: If you are looking for honest ADHD parenting stories, a dose of empathy with a side of humor and practical tools, you are in the right place.

Katie: Let's help your family shine with ADHD.

Lori: Today I'm here with Katie and Mallory to talk about a highly requested topic, again. Managing screen time challenges. Actually, it wasn't really requested at all, but we think it's an important one.

Mallory: It was requested, Lori, you requested it.

Lori: Oh, yeah, I guess I did, didn't I? But truly the reason why I requested it is because so many of my patients' families are struggling with challenging and sometimes really aggressive behaviors around screens. And it really just causes a lot of chaos and distress in their homes.

Katie: So today we are going to be doing a deep dive into the topic of screens. But before we jump in here, if you haven't yet listened to podcast episode 108, we really recommend you

check that one out first. In that podcast, we shared a lot of tips about how to set boundaries around screens, making transitions off of screens a little bit easier. And for many families, those tools will actually be really helpful. It's kind of a balanced approach where you can still have screens, but you have a screen time agreement. I don't want to give away all the secrets of episode 108, but for a lot of you that might work really well and screens may not be causing a huge, significant daily disruption.

Mallory: Yeah, but the truth is that for some kids with ADHD, screens truly are causing significant challenges in the home. In the day-to-day life. Those challenges might be bleeding over into the school when they're not using screens. And even when parents have the best intentions and they set boundaries, they're continuing to face significant pushback at best, and really aggressive behaviors at worst.

Katie: Yeah, it's really heartbreaking. And there definitely comes a point with some families where we need to talk about getting rid of screens from the home altogether. And I'm nervous just saying that because we know this is so much easier said than done.

Lori: Yes, and today we're going to be talking a little bit more about the signs that it might be time to consider removing screens or certain screens and what you can do instead. But before we get into this, Katie, can you talk a little bit about why screens are so challenging for kids with ADHD?

Katie: Yeah, believe it or not, there is a reason this is happening, it's not just your imagination. Because kids with ADHD, their brains work differently and screens are extra motivating because they light up the reward center in your child's brain. So they're getting dopamine, they're getting this constant stimulation, and it feels really good to them in the moment. And another piece that we hear from parents a lot is, hey, it kind of almost seems like the screens help them to regulate while they're sitting there. And it might seem that way because again, they're getting that dopamine. But what we often see is that when it's time to turn off the screens, or maybe after they've been on screens for a long time, we're actually gonna see a lot of dysregulation. And kids might actually be angrier, have kind of like a shorter fuse. And so this is something that you really need to understand about your own kid. And if you have more than one child, they might all respond differently. So being really aware and kind of being curious about, okay, how do screens affect my child personally?

Lori: Yes. And so we know that screens are very, very rewarding for kids with ADHD. The question is, when does it start to feel like it's a problem in your family that the degree is so significant that screens need to be removed? And as a side note, again, each family is going to be really different in this. So your child might be totally fine with the television and you might not see issues transitioning off of that, they can have boundaries around that. But when it comes to video games, or maybe even a certain video game. Or the iPad, where they maybe can kind of flip through things every two minutes and it's, again, extra, extra reinforcing because it helps with their limited attention span. You might see that certain types of screens are more problematic for your child than others. So again, think about what is going on with your family. And some, some of the signs that we look for are kind of really significant emotional meltdowns that are following screens and they extend for a long period of time. Again, these are like kids who, half hour, hour, more than an hour, are having meltdowns because of this. That is so challenging as a parent to deal with every single day. I remember when, you know, one family in a situation where, like, they were so aggressive afterwards, the parents and the siblings were having to hide in other rooms and lock themselves behind doors because they were so aggressive in those situations, it's really, again, so heartbreaking. If there are constant requests throughout the day that are just, again, you've really set those boundaries. You know, go back to episode 108.

Katie: And you listened to 108, when you did the things...

Lori: Listened to 108, did the things and you made a family screen time agreement, your child knew what the expectations are, you've gone over these things, and despite having these, like, very clear expectations and boundaries, helping them with the transition, doing all the things, you're still getting constant requests throughout the day for it. That it's just always on their mind, always what they're thinking about. Another question I ask families is, you know, can you, let's say you've come up with your family screen time agreement, you've said, you know what, during the week, for an example, we're going to do 1 hour of screens. And that can be video games or tv or whatever. And when it comes time to stopping that, setting a limit, setting a boundary and holding that boundary when your child is really emotional, can you hold that boundary? And some families have really, truly said no, like, we really can't.

Mallory: I think this is one of the most important questions that parents need to ask themselves when they are deciding whether they need to eliminate screens from their home

is, can I hold a boundary knowing that my child might have an emotional reaction to that? And if the answer is no, I'm not going to hold the limit. I'm going to give in. My child is going to get more time. You might need to consider eliminating them from your home, because when we give in, when we acquiesce, that grows the problem bigger. The child just learns, your child learns, oh, if I put up big enough of a fight, like mom will let me have more time, dad will let me have more time. So I think this is one of the most important questions that we want you listeners to ask yourself is, can you be holding this limit around screens? And again, it's not a flaw. It's not a personal flaw if your answer to that is no, I just, I can't hold the limit. I know, I know my own limits. I'm not going to be able to hold this screen time boundary.

Katie: And I think that too, you know, we're talking about it's hard to hold boundaries on a day-to-day basis, so what you should do is take away the screen, and now you have to hold this boundary for eternity, and that sounds terrible, right? But what's really, what's actually sort of interesting about it is that you're actually taking away the decision because you, every single day, every single time your child asks, you have to make a decision. This is why I don't take my kids to Costco, because they see everything, even things we've never used and don't really need whatsoever. And they ask me, can I have that? Can we get this? Can we buy this? And I struggle with decision fatigue. By the end of Costco, I'm the most irritated version of myself. If you see me at Costco, you didn't see me at Costco. Don't say hi, I'm not friendly. But it's because I don't want to make this decision over and over and over. And so I'll try to save myself the decision to be like, we're not buying anything. That's really not effective, to be honest.

Lori: I literally just made a target order this morning, and my husband was like, why are you ordering and picking it up? Which I should do all the time, by the way. It's so much more efficient.

Katie: You save thousands of dollars.

Lori: And I was like, the main reason is because I don't want to go into target and have 500 requests for 500 different items that I have to say no to.

Katie: Right. But I think bringing that back to the screens, I mean, that is what you're doing. You're essentially giving yourself the gift of, the decision has been made. And over time,

we'll get to this. But over time, that is going to reduce the asking, it's going to reduce the dysregulation. But it feels impossible when you're standing there going, I can't even get my kid off the screen after 45 minutes. How do you expect me to take it away forever or, you know, for a very long, undetermined amount of time? But I think what's really critical here is that we are actually exhausting ourselves by having to make the decision and hold the boundary over and over and over. And it starts to make us question ourselves. I start to wonder, do I actually need 160 packs of fruit snacks at Costco? And I maybe I give in. And now I have infinite fruit snacks. And if they're the healthy kind, my kids are like, I don't even like those. So, and then I'm giving them to friends. You can come over for a play date, guys I'll send home some healthy fruit snacks. But the thing is, this is really, really scary. Okay, so I get if you're, like, immediately, no, that would never work. I understand where you're coming from.

Mallory: Yeah. Let's. Let's talk through some other signs that maybe it's time to eliminate screens or specific types of screens within your home. One, definitely, that I know a lot of the families we talk to see is their child is having sleep challenges as a result of the screen use. Whether the screen use is too close to bed or they're arguing about going to bed because they don't want to stop the screen use.

Lori: Yeah. Yeah. And again, we just know from kind of the research on sleep that if kids aren't getting an adequate amount of time outside in the sunlight or they're not getting physical activity, again, if you're not able to hold that boundary, maybe your child's, like, coming home from school and it's 5 hours that they're on a screen. We know that that's, I think every parent would say, I know that it's not healthy for their brains and bodies. Of course it's going to affect their sleep. And you're starting to see that, that's definitely a sign.

Mallory: Another sign might be if your child is avoiding things that previously they found fun or, you know they really like, like spending time with friends, spending time with family. If screens is getting in the way of doing those things, those other things, right. Those other things that we know they really enjoy, but they're consistently opting for the screens, that might be a sign we need to limit.

Lori: And many families will say, you know, they don't want to do this, they avoid it. You know, when we bring up going to do a fun activity as a family, they don't want to do it

initially. But almost every time, if you ask the family, once they do it, they, they really have fun and they enjoy that time.

Mallory: It's like getting, your kid in the shower, right? Once they're in there, they don't want to get out. But it took an hour to get in.

Lori: Yeah, but our kids with ADHD it's thinking in the future about this activity that's, like, far in advance in their mind that they can't see what that's going to be like. All they can see is what's immediately happening now. They just can't make a good decision around that.

Mallory: Yeah. And I feel like we can't overstate this enough, but I'll say it again, just for prosperity, it's not a, it's not a personal flaw of yours or your child's at all. It's how their brain is working. And we get it. We're parents, too. We understand how challenging these things are. Another sign might be if they're not doing their homework or if their grades are suffering or something I even see is if their kids are trying to not go to school because they want to stay home and do screens, or it's getting really hard to get them to school, because in their mind it's like, hmm, I could go to school, that doesn't sound that great. Or a day at home with screens like the weekends, all day sounds super reinforcing. So, it's getting hard to even get your child to school.

Lori: Yeah. And sometimes mood changes. So, if you're seeing kind of more anger, more, again, aggressive behaviors, depression, is your child withdrawn? Do they come home from school and immediately go to their room and isolate themselves and they're not wanting to even not even go out, but spend time with the family. Or higher levels of anxiety or stressors or things like that. Those are all kind of signs as well, that you want to look out for.

Mallory: So these are all signs that it's time to consider removing screens for the sake of the dynamics in your family and your household and your child's well-being. And so how do you do this, right? Like we said, easier said than done. Like, we get why a lot of families end up in a situation that they feel like, how did we get here with screens? Because taking them away is not easy. But once you've made that decision and maybe you've made that decision with a partner, remove those devices from your home or lock them away. And some kids might try to get those out. They might try to figure out the combination or find a way to get them. Especially at first, when kind of the shock of going from using them to not using them, is still, like, really strong. Obviously, you want to talk to your kids about it, why you're making

this decision, and this, we get it, this is a really hard conversation to have. You can probably expect that there's going to be a lot of big feelings around that. You might see some challenging behaviors around that, because you're making a really hard call as a parent that your kid is not going to like. But in the moment, tell yourself, this is for my child's health, this is for their well-being. They're upset now, but I. This will not last forever. I can do hard things. Our family can do hard things. Just reminding yourself of why you're doing this, how it kind of relates back to your values and what's important to you as a family.

Lori: I know. I think in those moments when our kids are so emotional and so upset, it is very easy, even for me, knowing what is happening as a child psychologist, to feel like, oh, my gosh, I've done something wrong. I must have done something wrong as a parent. But sometimes holding those boundaries does result in those big emotions. It's not because you did anything wrong. You should expect that. You should expect a big reaction.

Katie: Yeah. And just to get a little bit clinical for a second, you might see what we call an extinction burst. So you're saying you can't do this thing that you've always let them do and then they're going to have this big reaction and when you don't give in, you're actually most likely going to see the reaction get even bigger. So if you're thinking like, oh, I'm just going to ride this wave, we've done it before. Just expect before you even go into it, that it's probably going to get worse for a little bit because your child is like, oh, shoot this key that I always use to unlock this door isn't working, maybe I have to kick it really, really hard. Okay, hopefully we're not actually kicking a door, but metaphorically, they're thinking like, this entry point always opened and it's not anymore, what do I need to do next? And so recognizing too, that you need to be prepared, you know, if you, if you have a partner or a family member that can be, you know, there to talk through it with your kids and really not getting into a huge discussion when they're very escalated, either. Just recognizing like, this will pass, the emotions will subside eventually, but it is really challenging. We don't want to underestimate how frustrated a kid is going to be when you say, hey, we're changing the game. This is going to look different now. But over time, whether that's a couple days, a couple weeks, you know, and we're going to talk about another strategy that you might use to help make this transition a little bit easier. But over time, we should see that the requests go down, the big explosive behaviors and emotions start to subside because your child is going to develop different coping skills and different activities in place of the time that they were using screens.

Mallory: And Katie, I just want to circle back to a point that you made because I think it bears repeating. We're having these conversations at a calm time. Like, you're not making the call to remove screens from your home while your kid is actually like, on the screen and you're upset because you've already asked them ten times. And so you, like, you're ripping it out of the wall. You're upset.

Katie: You're like, I'm actually removing this screen right now!

Mallory: That's it! Exactly. So that is nothing our advisable approach to doing this, you know, you want to be thoughtful about it. You might want to actually get all of the devices gathered and locked away or at a family or friend's house before you sit down to have that conversation. Like they're already gone. And so let's talk about that. But at a time when people are calm and so anyways, you know, beef, I know you will, but the reminder to be thoughtful about how you're having this conversation, expecting that there is going to be pushback.

Katie: Yeah, absolutely. So another really important piece that we want you to consider is when you're taking screens away, that can be really stressful for everyone involved. So really be prepared with what can we put in place of the screens? What can my child do instead of screens? And for kids who have been playing video games or using screens for hours and hours every day, they might have a very short or almost invisible list of hobbies, right. Like, if this is your main thing that you do in your free time, it's not you're probably not saying, oh, yeah, and I also love to bake, and I also love to go to karate, and I like to do all these different things. So we have to understand and take the perspective to understand that our kids are going to probably need some support with this to figure out what else do they like? What are they good at? We do have a couple other episodes that we wanted to reference. So there's one episode 113 that's all about helping your child build confidence and in that episode, we talk about helping your child find sort of their passion and the thing that they're good at or that they really enjoy. We also interviewed a neuropsychologist, Doctor Ellen Broughton, that's episode 140. And she talks about if you have a middle schooler or older child, even up through high school, she talks a lot about unlocking your child's motivation. So as a neuroscientist, she studied this topic, and it's really interesting for kids who play a lot of video games or are on screens a lot, they have a hard time often finding that motivation to do other things. And so she has some really great tangible strategies in that episode if you want

to check that out. But really thinking about what else could my child do? Giving them a lot of outside time, finding opportunities for them to be physical. And honestly, with my kids, especially my ten-year-old, I will actually sit down with her and think about what are the things that you like to do? And we'll even look in our game closet and be like, oh, we have these little pearler beads, let's write that down. Because for her, in the moment, she's faced with, what do I want to do right now? And she cannot think of anything. And so having that as like a quick reference point, you know, she can quickly go through. And of course, she always wants to do like the messiest situation, like make slime or with DIY glitter in the bathtub, whatever it is. So those I try to not put on the list, they go at the very bottom. But thinking through that is really helpful. And there's like a variety of options, you know, things that are more physical, things that are more quiet time, things she can do by herself, some things that she needs a grown up to help with, but really helping her be prepared for when she needs to think of something that she can be doing in that moment. And it's hard, it's hard to be like, figure it out, like, let's go do this. But that's going to be really helpful to help your child develop more skills and other interests outside of screens.

Lori: Yeah. And if you have a child that's, again, very active and they love to climb, they love to run, they need that movement, especially after a long school day of having to sit still and listen and all those things they really, as far as regulation, it's really good for them to get that movement and activity in after school. And if you need ideas, we have a whole climbing blog that we'll put in the show notes with lots of ideas that we've gotten from our wonderful, amazing ADHD families of things that they do with their kids to give you some ideas as well. So, one key takeaway is, if your child is showing significant behaviors or physical aggression around screens, even when you have clear expectations and boundaries, it might be necessary to remove screens altogether or specific screens for the emotional health of your family. And remember, this is not your fault. It's not your child's fault. But you can do hard things, and we are here to support.

Katie: Thanks for listening to Shining with ADHD by your hosts, Lori, Katie, and Mallory of The Childhood Collective.

Mallory: If you enjoyed this episode, please leave us a review and hit subscribe so you can be the first to know when a new episode airs.

Lori: If you are looking for links and resources mentioned in this episode, you can always find those in the show notes. See you next time!