

Christa McAuliffe Elementary  
Charter School



31

**Alternatives to  
TV and Video Games  
For Your Elementary School Child**

One of a series of Parent Guides from



# Christa McAuliffe Elementary Charter School

## **Parent Guide**

### **31 Alternatives to TV and Video Games** For Your Elementary School Child

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## Introduction

**W**ith TV, videos, DVDs, computer games and the Internet, kids today are overwhelmed with screen media. In 2004, the Kaiser Family Foundation reported that children spend an average of five and a half hours each day using these media—virtually the same amount of time they spend in school. Even the very youngest children spend more hours with screen media than they do playing outside.

And let's face it—sometimes we as parents contribute to the problem. We park our kids in front of the set when we are preparing dinner. We switch on a video so we can pay bills or catch a few quiet minutes at the end of a hard day. We plug in a video game rather than take our children to the park.

Research increasingly shows why it's important to limit the amount of time our children spend in front of the TV set or the computer screen. Everything from their reading ability to their physical health is affected by all those hours in front of the tube.

Watching TV may limit a child's attention span. It is also associated with obesity and aggressiveness and may possibly contribute to the development of attention deficit disorders.

Should you limit screen media time at your house? How can you do it? This publication offers sound, research-based facts about how screen media affects children and what parents can do about it. It also gives you 31 alternative activities for your child—activities that will help you tame the media monster.



### Facts About Kids and TV

- **Kids spend more time**, on average, watching TV and playing video games than they spend in any other activity besides sleeping.
- **The average U.S. home** has the TV on more than 51 hours per week.
- **Eighty-one percent** of children ages two to seven watch TV alone and unsupervised.
- **An average person** will have watched seven to 10 years worth of television by age 70.
- **An average U.S. child** will see 360,000 TV commercials before graduating from high school. Statistics are not far behind for children from Canada and Europe.
- **Saturday morning kids' shows** feature 20 to 25 violent acts *each hour*.
- **The average child** will see about 8,000 murders depicted on TV before finishing grade school.
- **The American Academy of Pediatrics** recommends *no television at all* for children younger than two years of age and no more than one to two hours per day of quality screen time for older children.

*\*Each child is unique, so this publication alternates using masculine and feminine pronouns.*

### Facts on Screen Media and School Performance

The American Academy of Pediatrics reviewed dozens of studies on media and brain development. They found that higher levels of television viewing are linked to lower academic performance—especially reading scores. Why? First, television time is time not spent reading. In addition, the strongly visual nature of television images actually blocks language development in a child's brain. Young brains that have been overexposed to visual images are less able to listen carefully to spoken language.



### Facts on Screen Media and Childhood Obesity

Researchers have found a strong link between screen media use and obesity. The Rand Corporation now says that obesity may be a bigger health problem than cigarette smoking. Today's children are increasingly at risk of the health problems caused by obesity. Nearly 15 percent of children ages six to 19 are overweight, and the same number considered at serious risk of obesity.

Those risks are real. Obese children are more likely to suffer from diabetes, respiratory ailments, sleep problems, and depression. And most of these children will be obese as adults.

Consider these facts:

- **The time children spend using screen media** replaces time they could spend in physical activity. Children ages four to six who spent two hours or more watching TV spent an average of a half-hour less playing outside that day than did other children their age.
- **Food ads on television** often encourage children to make unhealthy food choices. Fast food companies alone spend more than \$3 billion in advertising directed at children. Clearly, advertisers believe that food advertising pays off.
- **Children are more likely to snack**, and more likely to snack on unhealthy foods, when they eat in front of the computer or the TV.
- **Watching TV lowers children's metabolic rates** (the amount of energy or calories their bodies burn) below what they would be if they were asleep.

## Making the Switch

So you've decided to limit TV and computer time in your house. But how can you go about it? Here are a few simple ideas:

- **Take the TV** and the computer out of your child's bedroom. Children who do not have TVs and computers in their rooms spend nearly 40 minutes fewer each day watching TV or playing video games.
- **Eat dinner as a family** and keep the TV off during the meal. Children who regularly have dinner with their families spend a half hour less watching TV and playing video games each day.
- **Preview TV shows** and video games before allowing your child to watch and play unsupervised.
- **Move the television set(s)** to less prominent locations. TV is far less tempting when it is not easily accessible.
- **Start small.** Turn off the TV for 30 minutes each evening.
- **Set limits.** Fewer than half of all children say their parents set *any* limits on the amount of time they can spend watching TV and playing video games. You may decide that your children can watch no TV on school nights. Or you might give your children tickets, each good for 30 minutes of TV viewing or video games. Once the tickets are gone, the set is turned off.
- **Post a schedule.** Each week sit down with your child. Help him make a chart of his TV and computer time for the coming week.
- **Make it a challenge.** Record how many minutes your family spends watching TV this week. Then try to reduce that amount next week.
- **Expect your child** to complete homework before watching TV, surfing the net or playing video games.
- **Make sure your video rental store** requires parental approval before a child can rent a violently rated video game.
- **Hide the remote control.** If your kids can't find the clicker, they may read, play games, or get some exercise. (They're also more likely to plan their viewing than just mindlessly channel-surfing.)
- **Think about times when you rely on TV.** In some families, TV keeps kids busy while dinner is cooking. If you sometimes use TV as a babysitter, try doing some advance meal preparation instead. Or get your kids in the kitchen to help you cook.
- **Be patient.** If you can live through 20 minutes of whining, your children WILL find something else to do.

## What to Do Instead

It does take time and a little planning to fill the time that your children are used to spending in front of the TV or the computer screen. But here are some fun activities you can try:

### Inside Fun

**1** Play board games or card games together. (Go Fish®, Uno®, Checkers®, Scrabble®, Chess). Teach your child how to play solitaire (*not* on the computer). A card game of War can occupy children for an eternity.

**2** Keep some play dough on hand. You can make your own with the recipe on this page. Store in the refrigerator in an airtight container and bring it out on a rainy day or at a time when your child wants to play alone.

**3** Create an Idea Box. Help your child decorate a small tissue box. Brainstorm about ideas your child can do when she's bored. These should be things she can do by herself, with no help from you. Write them on small slips of colored paper and put them in the box. Then when your child is bored, or when you need a few minutes to finish a task, you can get out the Idea Box and have your child draw a slip. Here are some ideas to get you started: read a book, work on a puzzle, start writing a story, invent a secret code, write a sentence backwards (without looking in a mirror).

**4** Give your child a magnet. Let her see where it will—and won't—stick. She'll learn that only iron and steel are attracted to magnets. But a magnetic force will pass through a piece of paper, glass, cloth, or pottery. See if your child can figure out how to make her own magnet by rubbing a piece of metal against the end of a permanent magnet twenty times, and always in the same direction.

#### NO-COOK PLAY DOUGH

2 cups self rising flour  
2 tablespoons alum  
2 tablespoons salt  
2 tablespoons cooking oil  
1 cup, plus 2 tablespoons  
boiling water  
Mix and knead.

**5** Help your child create an indoor garden. Save small plastic containers. Let your child fill them with potting soil and plant herb seeds in them to make a window herb garden.

**6** Phone Bag Fun. There comes a time when every parent has to take a phone call. That is usually the same moment that your child insists on talking to you (or starting a fight with his brother). One way to amuse your child while you're on the phone is to assemble a small box with activities your child can do alone. Here's a list to get you started:

- Crayons and a coloring book.
- A deck of cards.
- A yo-yo.
- Easy puzzles your child can do alone.
- Activities you have cut out from newspapers or downloaded from the Internet—word search, mazes, connect the dots.

**7** Give your child a magnifying glass and let him see the world close up.

**8** Design a new board game together. Draw a path of squares from "Start" to "Finish" on a poster board. Fill in some spaces with fun things to do—"draw a picture," "sing a song." Add some other silly things in other spaces—"make a funny face," "hop on one foot," or "wiggle your nose." Have your child create rules for the game. Roll the dice and have fun.

**9** See who can fill in the most words in a crossword puzzle—or in the least amount of time.

**10** Take turns hiding different items and challenging the other person to find them. Give the "finder" clues to let her know what to look for and where to start looking.

**11** Have your child decorate and fill a "time capsule" box using pictures and objects that represent his life and interests this year. He might include a family picture, a drawing of a pet, or the name of a favorite book. Ask him how he wants to remember this year. Have him write a short essay about what is happening in the world. Now put the capsule away for safe-keeping. In several years, it will be fun to look at it to remember the significance of the objects your child included.

## Outside Fun

**12** Take a walk together. Ask your child to bring paper and a pencil to write down street names and landmarks. After you return, have your child make a map of your neighborhood.

**13** Cut a long piece of rope and teach your child jump-rope rhymes. Here's one old standby:

**A**—my name is ALICE,  
my husband's name is AL,  
we live in ALABAMA  
and we bring back APPLES.

**B**—my name is BETTY,  
my husband's name is BEN,  
we live in BERMUDA  
and we bring back BUGS.

**C**—my name is ...

**14** Go to the park and let your child climb, swing, slide, teeter-totter or just run.

**15** Challenge your child. Who can keep a hula hoop spinning the longest?



**19** Make your own musical instruments. Here's how to make maracas: Put a handful or two of dried beans, rice, or popcorn kernels on a paper plate. Staple another paper plate securely on top of it. (Or use a single paper plate, folding it in half, adding the beans, then stapling the sides of the paper plate together.) Decorate the maracas with crayons, markers, or paint. You may want to staple long crepe paper streamers to the maracas. Instructions for making other musical instruments are at Enchanted Learning ([www.enchantedlearning.com/crafts/music/](http://www.enchantedlearning.com/crafts/music/)).

**20** Make pasta pictures. Toss a handful of pasta spaghetti (for each child) into boiling water. Add a tablespoon of cooking oil to keep it from sticking together. Cook the pasta until it is soft, but not mushy, then drain and cool. Now give your child colored paper and the spaghetti. Let him shape the spaghetti into shapes, faces, flowers, or other designs. To keep a favorite picture, cover it with waxed paper and top with a heavy book so that it will dry flat. The pasta will stick even after it hardens.

**21** Instead of watching cartoons, have your child make her own. To learn how to draw cartoon characters, visit Cooltoons ([www.cooltoons.com/shows/artlessons/main.html](http://www.cooltoons.com/shows/artlessons/main.html)). To learn how to make a flip book, visit For Kids & Grownups Alike ([www.shmonster.com/Flip\\_Book.html](http://www.shmonster.com/Flip_Book.html)).

**22** Make your own papier-mâché. Tear several sheets of newspaper. Put them in a bowl and moisten them with water. In a plastic cup, dilute two parts of white glue with one part water. Layer strips of paper on a mold (try a plastic bowl, an inflated balloon, a paper towel roll, or a plastic egg), applying a small amount of the glue mixture with a paint brush. Let it dry and then decorate it with markers or paint. (Note: This can be messy.)

## The Arts

**16** Design a family emblem or logo. Draw or paste together pictures of things your family likes to do.

**17** Have a family sing-along time. Use instruments, or sing to a tape of old favorites. Or turn on your favorite music and dance together.

**18** Make a puppet theater. Use an old appliance box to create your stage. Brown paper lunch bags or old socks make great puppets. Let children add faces, button eyes and yarn hair, along with any other decorations they like. (For more puppet ideas, visit the site Family Fun at [http://familyfun.go.com/crafts/buildmodel/specialfeature/puppets\\_crafts\\_sf](http://familyfun.go.com/crafts/buildmodel/specialfeature/puppets_crafts_sf))

## Family Meal Times

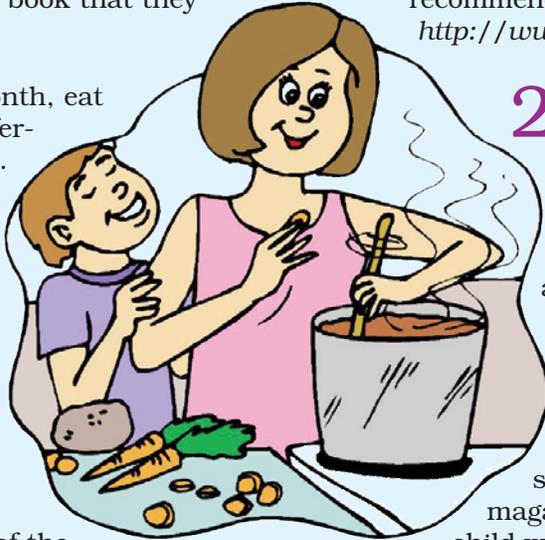
**23** Involve everyone in making a family meal. Have your child look through cookbooks and select the menu based on the photos they see in the book that they like.

**24** One night a month, eat food from a different country or culture. Locate the country on a map, and have your child read something about it. If you can find maps of the country, turn them into place mats by covering them with clear contact paper.

**25** Pick one letter of the alphabet to focus on for dinner. Discuss foods that start with that letter with your child. Together plan a menu of foods that begin with that letter. For example, for the letter C, serve carrots and chicken for the main dish and chocolate cookies for dessert.

**26** Once a week, bring a clipping of a news article to the dinner table. Discuss the event, its impact and what each family member thinks about it.

**27** Pick a favorite book and make a dinner or snack based on the book such as an *Alice in Wonderland* tea party, a French dinner with *Madeline*, honey and bread with *Winnie the Pooh* and his friends, or a British meal with *Harry Potter*. Let your child help plan out the meal, and take turns reading from the book after eating!



## Reading

**28** Set aside some time each day to read aloud with your child. The Family Literacy Foundation has resources, including recommended books to read aloud, at <http://www.read2kids.org/readaloud.htm>.

**29** Have your child choose a word out of the dictionary without telling anyone else what the word means. Ask everyone else in the family to write down what they think the mystery word means. Then share answers. Who comes closest to guessing the definition of the word?

**30** Make and enforce the rule that all snacks have to be eaten in the kitchen. Then make sure you keep books, comics, and magazines handy in the kitchen. Your child will get a lot of reading done while he is snacking.

**31** Have a household scavenger hunt. Include simple household items like a can of vegetables that start with the letter "B," something from the bathroom that has a "T" in its name and items from the kitchen with initials that spell "CAT." Set a time limit and see how many items on the list your child can find.

**T**hese ideas should get you started thinking about fun ways for your kids to spend time away from screen media. Talk with your children to think of other ideas. If you have concerns about specific effects of screen media on your child, check with your pediatrician.

## For More Information

### “Children, Adolescents, and Television”

American Academy of Pediatrics  
[http://aappolicy.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/pediatrics;107/2/423?fulltext=Children+%2C+Adolescents+%2C+Television&searchid=QID\\_NOT\\_SET](http://aappolicy.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/pediatrics;107/2/423?fulltext=Children+%2C+Adolescents+%2C+Television&searchid=QID_NOT_SET)

### “Childhood Overweight: An Epidemic on the Rise”

Carol A. Rice, Ph.D., and Janet M. Pollard, M.P.H., editors,  
[http://fcs.tamu.edu/health/Health\\_Education\\_Rural\\_Outreach/Health\\_Hints/2003/sept-oct/childhood\\_overweight.htm#section1](http://fcs.tamu.edu/health/Health_Education_Rural_Outreach/Health_Hints/2003/sept-oct/childhood_overweight.htm#section1)

### “Early Television Exposure and Subsequent Attentional Problems in Children”

by Dimitri A. Christakis, M.D., M.P.H., Frederick J. Zimmerman, Ph.D., David L. DiGiusseppe, M.Sc. and Carolyn A. McCarty, Ph.D.  
*Pediatrics*  
 April 2004

### Fairfax County (VA) Public Schools

[www.co.fairfax.va.us/library/reading/elem/1-5.htm](http://www.co.fairfax.va.us/library/reading/elem/1-5.htm)

### *Great Books for Boys*

by Kathleen Odean  
 Ballantine Books, Random House  
 1-800-733-3000

### *Great Books for Girls: More than 600 Books to Inspire Today's Girls and Tomorrow's Women*

by Kathleen Odean  
 Ballantine Books, Random House  
 1-800-733-3000

### National Institute on Media and the Family

[www.mediafamily.org/](http://www.mediafamily.org/)

### “Nutrition and Fitness: The Importance of a Healthy Balance”

American Council for Fitness and Nutrition  
[www.acfn.org/balance/factsheet.html](http://www.acfn.org/balance/factsheet.html)

### “Television—How it Affects Children”

American Academy of Pediatrics  
[www.medem.com/medlb/article\\_detailb\\_for\\_printer.cfm?article\\_ID=ZZZGF8VOQ7C&sub\\_cat=17](http://www.medem.com/medlb/article_detailb_for_printer.cfm?article_ID=ZZZGF8VOQ7C&sub_cat=17)

### The Boulder (CO) Public Library

[www.boulder.lib.co.us/youth/booklists/index.html](http://www.boulder.lib.co.us/youth/booklists/index.html)

### “The Role of the Media in Childhood Obesity”

The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation  
[www.kff.org/](http://www.kff.org/), Publication #7030

### “TV Free Activities: Things Kids Like to Do that Don't Involve TV”

[www.limitv.org/alternat.htm](http://www.limitv.org/alternat.htm)

### *TV Turnoff Network's Guide to Year-Round Screen-Free Activities*

TV Turnoff Network  
[www.tvturnoff.org/images/action/OnlineActivityBook.pdf](http://www.tvturnoff.org/images/action/OnlineActivityBook.pdf)

### “Understanding TV's Effects on the Developing Brain”

by Jane M. Healy  
 American Academy for Pediatrics, AAP News  
[www.aap.org/advocacy/chm98nws.htm](http://www.aap.org/advocacy/chm98nws.htm)

### “Your Child: Development & Behavior Resources, A Guide to Information & Support for Parents”

University of Michigan Health System  
[www.med.umich.edu/1libr/yourchild/tv.htm](http://www.med.umich.edu/1libr/yourchild/tv.htm)

# Other Parent Guides Available From The Parent Institute®

## **Family & Home Set**

*10 Great Ways to Teach Children Responsibility*

*25 Ways You Can Put the Power of Routines to Work for You and Your Child*

*52 Great Ways Families Can Spend Time Together*

## **School Readiness—Set 1**

*Developmental Milestones for Preschool Children—Is My Child on Track?*

*Preparing Your Child for Reading Success—Birth to Age Five*

*How to Choose the Best Preschool or Day Care for Your Child*

## **School Readiness—Set 2**

*Common Discipline Problems of Preschoolers and How to Deal With Them*

*37 Experiences Every Child Should Have Before Starting School*

*Getting Your Child Ready for Kindergarten*

## **School Success—Set 1**

*The Road to Reading Success—Elementary School Years*

*Common Discipline Problems of Elementary School Children and How to Solve Them*

*31 Alternatives to TV and Video Games for Your Elementary School Child*

## **School Success—Set 2**

*Give Your Child the Edge: Teachers' Top 10 Learning Secrets Parents Can Use*

*How to Help Children Do Their Best on Tests*

*Helping Children Get Organized for Homework and Schoolwork*

## **School Success—Set 3**

*Help Your Child Develop Good Learning Styles*

*How to Instill the Character Traits of Success in Your Child*

*Seven Proven Ways to Motivate Children to Do Better in School*

## **When There is a Problem—Set 1**

*Help Your Child Deal With Bullies and Bullying*

*Help Your Child Deal With Peer Pressure*

*How to Help Your Struggling Student*

## **Other Important Titles**

*Common Discipline Problems of Teenagers and How to Solve Them*

*What to Do If Your Child Has ADD/ADHD*

*Common Discipline Problems of Middle School Children and How to Solve Them*

*Making a Smooth Transition to Middle School*

*For more information about these and other materials for  
parents to encourage learning in their children:*

**1-800-756-5525**  
**www.parent-institute.com**

