A COMPANION TO THE SECOND LOOK CLUB

The Screen Trap

Why cutting screen time fails — and what to replace it with instead

For the parent who has
already tried the timer.

WHAT IS IN THIS BOOK

Before you start

Three things this book will not do

Part 0 — The Trap

Four minutes that change what you do tonight

Part 1 — The Diagnostic

Three days of watching. Change nothing

Chapter 1 — Replacing boredom relief

The shelf, the nine words, and days four to ten

Chapter 2 — Replacing transition easing

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Twenty minutes, named and scheduled

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Part 4 — Thirty Days

Watch, build, reduce, hold

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Because it will, and it is scheduled

BEFORE YOU START

This book is not sold anywhere. It only comes with *The Second Look Club*, and it is written for exactly one reader: a parent of an 8–12 year old who has already tried to cut screen time and watched it fail.

Three things it will not do.

It will not tell you that screens are rewiring your child's brain. You have read that somewhere. It is not what this book is about, and frightening you is not a strategy.

It will not give you fifty activities. You do not have an ideas problem. If someone handed you a list of fifty things right now, you would still be standing in your kitchen at seven in the evening with a bored child and no energy.

It will not tell you that you have been doing it wrong because you were not consistent enough. That sentence has done more damage to more parents than any screen ever has.

What it will do is show you the one thing that is almost always missing, give you the exact words to say at the eight moments where it usually breaks down, and walk you through thirty days in which nothing you do takes more than a few minutes.

Read Part 0 first. It takes four minutes and it will change what you do tonight.

PART 0 — THE TRAP

Read this slowly

Here is a real situation. Read it once, decide your answer, then keep reading.

> Aarav is ten. He was on a screen roughly four hours a day — a phone after school, a tablet after dinner, YouTube on weekends until someone stopped him.
>
> His mother decided this had to end. She sat him down, explained it kindly, and set a rule: **one hour a day, and the timer decides, not us.** She bought a small kitchen timer so it would not be her voice saying no.
>
> **Week one went beautifully.** Aarav was proud of himself. He found his old cricket cards. He read half a book. She told two friends about the timer.
>
> **Week two, it wobbled.** Some negotiation. Some sulking. She held firm.
>
> **Week three was worse than before she started.** He took the phone into the bathroom. He said he needed the tablet for a school project and did not. He got angry in a way he had not been angry before. She found herself shouting on a Tuesday about a device.
>
> She stopped the rule. She felt like a failure.

So — what went wrong?

Take a moment. Most parents answer within four seconds.

What almost everyone says

You said she was not consistent enough.

Or a version of it: she gave in too early, the rule needed to be firmer, she should have taken the phone away completely, she needed her husband to back her up, she should have had consequences.

Almost every parent lands somewhere in that family of answers. It is the answer the whole internet gives. And notice what all of those answers have in common — **they are all about her.** Her firmness. Her willpower. Her failure.

That is why this problem is so heavy to carry. Every explanation on offer points back at the parent.

Now look at the story again.

What actually happened

Nowhere in that story does it say **what Aarav did instead.**

Read it once more if you like. It is not there. It is not there because in most homes it does not exist.

At 6:30 in the evening Aarav was bored, slightly lonely, tired from school, and not yet due at the dinner table. That is a real feeling and it arrives every single day at roughly the same time. The screen was not a treat he was indulging in. **It was the only thing in that flat that answered that feeling.**

His mother did something completely reasonable. She removed the answer.

She did not remove the feeling.

Week one worked because novelty carried it — the timer was new, the cricket cards were rediscovered, his mother was pleased with him, and being pleasing is its own reward for a while. Novelty always lasts about a week. By week three the novelty was gone and the feeling was still arriving at 6:30 every evening with nothing to meet it. So he went and got the thing that used to meet it, secretly, because it had been made forbidden.

Consistency was never the variable. She could have been made of iron and week three would still have come. She was not weak. She was solving the wrong problem, with enormous discipline.

The sentence this book is built on

> **A screen is never the problem. A screen is a job that is being done. Remove it without replacing the job, and the job comes back to collect.**

Read that again, because everything else in this book is just the working-out of it.

Nobody's child wants "screen time." That phrase is a parent's phrase. A child wants to not be bored. A child wants the twenty minutes between homework and dinner to stop feeling long. A child wants to still be in the conversation the boys are having. A child wants their mother to stop being irritated with them for ten minutes.

The screen does all four of those jobs, instantly, for free, with no negotiation. Which is why it is winning, and why no timer will beat it.

Which makes this the actual question

Not *"how much screen time should my child have?"*

But:

> **"What job is the screen doing in my house — and what could do that job instead?"**

Different job, different answer. A child who reaches for the tablet because she is bored needs something completely different from a child who reaches for the phone because his three friends are in a group chat without him. Give the second child a craft kit and you have understood nothing about his life.

Part 1 shows you how to find out which one you have. It takes three days and you change nothing while you do it.

One more thing, before we go on

You have probably been told that you got here by being permissive. You gave the phone too early, you used it as a babysitter, you did not hold the line.

Set that down. It is not useful and mostly it is not true. The screen was the only tool in the house that reliably worked, you were tired, and you used it. That is not a character flaw, that is a person managing a household.

What comes next does not require you to become a different person. It requires you to put something in the gap before you take something out of it.

You have now had the experience your child is about to have with case one of The Second Look Club: you committed to an obvious answer, and the obvious answer was planted. That is the whole design. It works on adults too.

PART 1 — THE DIAGNOSTIC

Three days. Change nothing.

This is the part most parents skip, and skipping it is why the plan fails in week three.

For the next three days you are not going to reduce anything, ban anything, or announce anything. You are going to watch. If you announce a change now, your child's behaviour changes and you will be diagnosing a version of them that will not exist next month.

Say nothing. Change nothing. Just write down four things every time a screen is asked for or picked up.

The log

#	WHAT TO WRITE	EXAMPLE
1	**Time**	6:40 pm
2	**What happened in the ten minutes before**	Came back from tuition, nobody home except me, I was cooking
3	**How it was asked for**	Didn't ask. Just picked it up
4	**What happened when you said no or delayed it**	Whined for two minutes, then wandered around, then asked again

Column 2 is the one that matters. Everything else is supporting evidence.

Copy this out on a piece of paper and keep it in the kitchen. Not on your phone — you will be on your phone and you will get pulled somewhere else. Paper. Three days. Every instance.

The rule that makes this work

> **The job is revealed by the moment of the request — never by what is on the screen.**

Parents spend enormous energy on *what* the child is watching. Is it educational, is it rubbish, is it age-appropriate. Fair questions, different book.

For this diagnosis, what is on the screen tells you almost nothing. **When they reach tells you everything.** The same YouTube video is doing a completely different job at 4pm on an empty afternoon than it is at 9pm when a child cannot settle.

The four jobs

After three days, look at your paper. Nearly every entry will fall into one of these.

JOB 1 — BOREDOM RELIEF

The signature: an empty stretch of time with nothing scheduled in it. Weekend mornings. The hour after school. School holidays. Sunday afternoon. Column 2 says something like *"nothing, just sitting"* or *"finished homework, dinner not ready."*

How it is asked for: often not asked at all. Just picked up. Or the words *"I'm bored"* arrive first and the screen is the obvious next sentence.

JOB 2 — TRANSITION EASING

The signature: it clusters at exactly the same two or three points every single day. School to home. Homework to dinner. Dinner to bed. Column 2 says *"just walked in"* or *"just finished homework."*

How it is asked for: urgently, and out of proportion. A small refusal produces a big reaction, because the child is not asking for entertainment — they are asking for a landing place, and you are refusing to let them land.

JOB 3 — SOCIAL CONNECTION

The signature: it is time-locked to other people. The same evening window every day, because that is when his friends come online. Weekend afternoons. It gets worse after school holidays begin.

How it is asked for: with urgency and a named other person. *"They're all on now." "I'll miss it." "Rohan's waiting."* Refusal produces genuine distress, not sulking — there is a real social cost being paid.

JOB 4 — THE PARENT'S BREAK

The signature: you are the one who initiated it, or you were relieved when it happened. Column 2 says *"I was on a call"* or *"I needed to finish cooking"* or, honestly, *"I could not do one more question."*

How it is asked for: it isn't. You hand it over.

Reading your paper

Count them up.

Most homes have **one dominant job and one secondary job.** That is normal and it is good news, because it means you have one thing to fix well rather than four things to fix badly.

Some patterns worth naming:

Mostly Job 1. The most common in flats with one child, and the most fixable. Part 2, Chapter 1 is your chapter.

Job 2 plus Job 4, clustered at the same hour. Extremely common in households where both parents work. The 6–8pm block is doing double duty — your child needs a landing and you need twenty minutes, and one device is solving both. Chapters 2 and 4 together, and they are designed to be done together.

Job 3 rising with age. If your child is eleven or twelve and the entries are time-locked to friends, read Chapter 3 before you do anything else. **This is the one where a well-meaning ban does lasting damage.**

All four, spread evenly. Then the screen has become the default state of the house rather than a response to anything. Start with Chapter 1 anyway — build the boredom shelf first — but expect this to take longer than thirty days, and that is fine.

Before you turn the page

Write one sentence at the bottom of your paper:

> *In this house, the screen is mostly doing the job of _____.*

That sentence is worth more than every screen-time rule you have ever read, because everything you do for the next month follows from it.

PART 2 — THE FOUR REPLACEMENTS

Chapter 1 — Replacing boredom relief

Start here, whatever your diagnosis said

Even if boredom is not your dominant job, build this first. It is the foundation the other three stand on. Chapter 4 in particular does not work without it.

The uncomfortable truth, said once

Boredom is not a problem to be solved. It is the raw material of every self-directed thing a child ever does — inventing a game, taking something apart, drawing without being asked, reading a book nobody assigned. A child who is never bored never has to generate anything, because something is always being supplied.

That is the case for boredom, and you have heard it before.

Here is what nobody tells you: **it is useless advice on its own.** “Let them be bored” fails in practice, every time, in every house. Not because the principle is wrong but because of what actually happens in the room.

Why “just let them be bored” fails

Boredom is genuinely uncomfortable, and the discomfort is front-loaded. The first stretch is the worst — restless, whiny, following you around, complaining. Then it eases, and something else starts.

The problem is that almost nobody gets past the first stretch. Not the child — the parent. Four minutes of a child orbiting you and complaining

while you are trying to cook is a long four minutes. So you crack, or you snap at them, and either way the lesson the child learns is: *if I complain long enough, something happens.*

You have not taught them to tolerate boredom. You have taught them to escalate.

Unstructured boredom is a fight you will lose. Not through weakness. Through arithmetic — they can complain longer than you can cook.

The replacement: the Boredom Shelf

One physical place. Always the same place. **Five to seven things. Never more.**

The child goes to it without asking you. You do not suggest. You do not supervise. You do not join in unless invited, and then only briefly.

WHY FIVE TO SEVEN

This is the part people get wrong, so it is worth being precise.

A cupboard with thirty things in it produces the same paralysis as a streaming app with thirty thousand. The child stands in front of it, cannot choose, feels the discomfort of boredom get worse rather than better, and comes back to you — which proves to both of you that "it didn't work."

Five things can be surveyed in four seconds. The eye takes them all in and the hand moves. That is the entire design goal: **short enough to choose without deciding.**

Your instinct will be to add more. Adding more is the failure mode.

WHAT EARNS A PLACE

Test every candidate against four questions.

TEST	WHY
Can they start it alone, in under thirty seconds?	Anything needing you to set it up is not a boredom answer, it is a request for you
Does it work in one square metre?	Most Indian homes do not have a garden or a spare room. It has to work on the floor beside the sofa
Can it be done badly?	If there is a right answer, it becomes a performance, and a bored child will not risk performing
Does it survive the fourth time?	Novelty items are shelf-fillers. The shelf is for things that hold up on a Wednesday

WHAT TENDS TO WORK

Not a list to copy — a shape to recognise. Things that hold up over months tend to be **open-ended, physical, and unfinishable.**

- Something to build that has no picture on the box
- Something to draw on that is bigger than a notebook page — the back of old chart paper, a roll of brown paper
- A deck of cards, and one or two games learnt properly
- Something mechanical and safe to take apart, with a screwdriver — an old radio, a broken torch, a dead keyboard
- One craft material in quantity, not a kit — clay, wire, string, tape, cardboard

- A book that is below their reading level, deliberately, because a bored child will not start a hard book
- A physical thing that can be done inside — a ball that doesn't bounce far, a balance board, a skipping rope for the doorway

WHAT ALMOST NEVER WORKS ON THE SHELF

- **Anything with a kit and a picture of the finished result.** It gets built once, correctly, and is then finished forever.
- **Anything that needs a second person.** That is Job 3, not Job 1, and putting it here guarantees the shelf gets blamed.
- **Anything precious enough that you will hover.** If you cannot bear it being ruined, it does not go on the shelf.
- **Educational anything.** The moment it smells like a lesson, it becomes work, and boredom will not be answered by work.

ROTATION

Swap **one item roughly every two weeks.** One. Not the whole shelf.

A single new thing among four familiar ones is inviting. Five new things is a fresh decision problem, which is exactly what you removed.

Retire what has genuinely died. Keep what is being used, even if you are bored of looking at it — you are not the user.

The one response

The words matter here more than anywhere else in this book, because this exchange will happen several hundred times.

Your child says *“I’m bored.”*

You say the same thing, in the same tone, every single time:

> **“Good. The shelf’s there.”**

Then you go back to what you were doing.

Not brightly. Not encouragingly. Not with a suggestion attached. Nine words with no door in them.

Why it works: the sentence is finished. There is no gap for negotiation, no question aimed back at them, no enthusiasm to push against. It ends the exchange without ending the relationship.

The three mistakes:

Suggesting. “Why don’t you do the puzzle?” — now it is your idea, and the child’s job is to reject it. You have just started a negotiation you did not need to have.

Sympathising. “I know, it’s a boring afternoon, na?” — kind, and it opens the conversation instead of closing it. Now you are the entertainment.

Irritation. “You have a whole shelf of things and you’re still bored?” — this is the one to watch. It turns a normal feeling into a moral failing, and it teaches the child that telling you how they feel is dangerous.

Same nine words. Same flat tone. Every time.

What the first two weeks actually look like

Nobody tells parents this, so they assume the failure is theirs.

Days 1–3. The shelf is new, therefore interesting. It gets used. You feel it working.

Days 4–10. This is the hard part. The novelty is gone, the shelf looks boring, and your child will tell you it is boring, possibly with some contempt. They will orbit you and complain. **Nothing has gone wrong.** This is the discomfort of boredom doing exactly what it does, and it is the stretch where almost every parent quietly gives up and concludes the idea does not work.

Hold the nine words. Do not add anything to the shelf to rescue it. Adding is the failure mode.

Days 10–20. Something small and unspectacular happens. They will be doing something on the floor and not have announced it. It will not look like a breakthrough. It is the breakthrough.

Beyond. The shelf becomes furniture. It stops being a thing anyone discusses. That is the destination.

If you do only one thing from this book

Build the shelf. Learn the nine words. Survive days four to ten.

Everything else in this book is easier once that is standing.

Chapter 2 — Replacing transition easing

What a transition actually is

Look at your paper again. If the entries cluster at the same two or three clock times every day, this is your chapter.

A transition is the seam between two parts of the day. School to home. Homework to dinner. Dinner to bed. Weekend morning to whatever the weekend is.

In each of those seams a child has to stop being one thing and start being another, and there is a gap in the middle where they are neither. **The gap is intolerable and it is very short.** Adults have rituals for it — you make tea, you change clothes, you scroll for ten minutes without noticing. Your child has one tool.

Why screens win at seams, specifically

Three properties, and it is worth seeing them separately because your replacement needs the same three.

Instant. No setup. Zero seconds between deciding and being landed.

No decision required. This is the one parents miss. A child coming out of ninety minutes of homework has no decision-making left. Asking them "what do you want to do now?" is asking for effort they do not have. The screen requires none.

Reliably the same. Whatever else was strange about the day, the screen is the same as yesterday.

Any replacement that is slower, or requires a choice, or is different each time, will lose. It will lose even if it is objectively more fun.

The replacement: a 90-second bridge

Not an activity. **A ritual.** Short, fixed, mildly boring, identical every day.

REQUIREMENT	WHY
Ninety seconds to five minutes	Long enough to land, short enough that nobody negotiates
Exactly the same every day	It has to be automatic. Novelty costs energy they don't have
No choosing involved	A choice is work. It is the thing they cannot do at that moment
Physical, not screen and not intellectual	Body first. The mind follows
Ends by itself	A defined finish, so nobody has to police the ending

It should be a little boring. That is a feature. A bridge is not entertainment, it is a way of arriving.

BRIDGES THAT HOLD UP

School to home. Shoes off, uniform off, wash face, one glass of water, sit down and eat something that is already on the table. Nobody asks about the day for ten minutes. *The questions are the mistake here — a child walking in has nothing left for an interview.*

Homework to dinner. Close the books, stack them, put the pencil box away, and one physical thing that is a bit silly — twenty skips, run to the balcony and back twice, help carry things to the table.

Dinner to bed. Plate to the sink, wash hands and face, into night clothes, and then the same twenty minutes of something quiet — reading, being read to, talking in a dark room.

Weekend morning. The hardest one, because an unstructured day stretches ahead and the screen fills it before anyone is awake enough to stop it. Get out of the house within an hour of waking, even for fifteen minutes. A walk to buy milk counts.

How to install one

You do not announce it, because a child who has been told about a system will negotiate with the system.

You just start doing it, at the same time, with a flat instruction.

> “Shoes off, wash your face, food’s on the table.”

Not *“shall we try something new?”* Not a family meeting. Just the sequence, in the same words, at the same moment, until it disappears into the day.

It takes about ten days before it stops being noticed. There will be resistance in the first week — mostly to the change itself, not to the content. Hold the same words.

When the child says “why can’t I just watch something first”

Because *first* is the whole game. Nobody has ever watched something *first* for ten minutes.

The screen at a seam does not end. That is not your child being difficult, it is what the seam is for — the gap is uncomfortable and the screen is the thing that makes it stop, so of course it does not stop.

You do not have to win this argument out loud. You answer it with the sequence, said the same way, at the same time, every day. Rituals do not need to be justified. That is their advantage.

The transition nobody plans for

The one after a screen ends.

Coming off a screen is itself a transition, and usually the worst one of the day, which is why the handover fight is so ugly. You are asking a child to leave an absorbing thing and arrive nowhere.

So build a bridge for the exit, not just the entrance. When screen time ends, something physical and immediate follows, decided in advance, no choosing.

> “Off at 7:30, then plates on the table.”

Never *“off at 7:30”* and nothing. Nothing is where the fight lives.

Chapter 3 — Replacing social connection

Read this before you ban anything

If your log shows entries locked to specific times because that is when other children are online — and especially if your child is eleven or twelve — this chapter comes before everything else.

This is the job where a well-meant restriction does real and lasting damage.

What is actually happening

Somewhere between nine and twelve, a child's social life moves partly onto a screen. Not because the screen is addictive. Because that is where the other children are.

Group chats. A game everyone is playing at the same time in the evening. Voice calls while playing. Clips being sent around that everyone has seen by morning.

When you cut that off, you are not reducing entertainment. **You are removing your child from a room their friends are still in.** By Monday there are references they do not get. By the third week they are outside the group.

They will not explain this to you. They will get angry and you will read it as defiance about a device.

The test that separates this from everything else

One question:

> **Is there another child on the other side who knows your child's name?**

If yes, it is connection. If no, it is consumption.

The same phone, in the same hand, at the same hour, is doing two completely different jobs depending on the answer — and they need opposite treatment. Consumption can be reduced. **Connection cannot be removed, only shaped.**

Watch for these, because they look identical from across the room:

LOOKS LIKE	ACTUALLY IS
Watching a game video alone	Consumption
Playing that game with three named friends	Connection
Scrolling through clips	Consumption
Sending clips back and forth with one friend	Connection — thin, but real
Group video call while doing homework	Connection, and often the most valuable kind

The move: from ambient to scheduled

Do not cut it. **Give it a name and a window.**

The problem with connection time is not that it exists. It is that it is *ambient* — always slightly on, all evening, bleeding into homework and dinner and bed, so it never satisfies and never ends.

Replace it with something better than what they have:

> **"Six to seven is your time with them. It's yours, I won't interrupt it, and I won't ask you to come to the table in the middle of it. And it ends at seven."**

Notice what you just gave them. Protected time. Not an argument every evening. Something to point to when a friend asks.

Notice what you got. An ending that both of you agreed to in advance, rather than one you have to enforce in the middle of a game.

Trade certainty for boundaries. It is a good trade and children take it far more often than parents expect.

Three things that make this work

Pick the window with them, using real information. When are the others actually on? Six to seven is worthless if everyone comes online at eight. Get this wrong and you have given them a window into an empty room, and they will be back to negotiating within a week.

Never confiscate connection time as a punishment for something unrelated. Taking a Wednesday evening away over a maths test does damage entirely out of proportion to the offence, and it teaches your child that their friendships are hostage to their performance. Take away consumption instead. There is plenty of it.

Protect your own side of the deal. If you promised not to interrupt, do not wander in with a question at 6:20. The whole thing runs on you being reliable.

The multiplayer game ending problem

A specific and very common fight.

Most of these games cannot be paused. Walking out mid-match lets down four other children, and your child will be blamed for it by name tomorrow. When you say “off, now” you are asking them to take a social hit.

They will not explain that. They will just refuse, and it will look like defiance.

Learn the unit. Ask how long one round takes. Then set the boundary in rounds, not minutes.

> “Two more matches, then off.”

You will get compliance you have never had, because you are asking for something possible. If someone stretches it, the correction is one line, said calmly, once: *“You said two. That was three. Tomorrow it’s one.”*

The harder version: when the friendships are only online

Sometimes the friends are not from school. They are a group from the game, and there is nobody local your child is close to.

This is worth taking seriously rather than dismissing. The connection is real to them, and if it is the only one they have, cutting it leaves nothing.

Two things, in this order.

Do not remove it while there is no alternative. Removing a child's only social world and offering a boardgame is not a fair exchange, and it will be remembered as such.

Work on the offline side, slowly and practically. One named child, one specific afternoon, one repeated arrangement. Not a lecture about real friends. Real friendship needs proximity and repetition and nothing else — and both of those are things you can arrange and your child cannot.

As the offline side thickens, the online side takes care of itself. It nearly always does.

Chapter 4 — Replacing the parent's break

Said plainly

You need twenty minutes.

Not because you are a worse parent than the ones in the videos. Because you are a person who has been working since six in the morning, and there is a limit, and you have reached it, and there is still dinner.

Every book on this subject quietly pretends this reader does not exist. That is why the books do not work.

The cycle that actually happens

Watch whether you recognise this.

You hand over the screen. Because you are on a call, or cooking, or because you cannot do one more homework question without losing your temper. It works instantly. You get your twenty minutes.

You feel guilty. Not immediately. Later, usually at night, often after seeing something online about screens.

You over-correct. The guilt turns into a rule, and because it is made of guilt it is harsher than anything you would have designed calmly. No screens on weekdays. One hour, timer.

The rule fails, for all the reasons in Part 0 — and now you have no break either.

You feel worse, and you conclude that you are inconsistent, and the next rule is harsher still.

The screen is not the engine of that cycle. **The guilt is.** And the guilt exists because the break is being taken secretly, as a small failure, instead of being planned as a legitimate part of the day.

The replacement: name it, schedule it, don't apologise for it

A break that is scheduled costs nothing. A break that is stolen costs guilt, and guilt is what generates the harsh rule that fails.

So it gets a name and a time.

> **"Half past five to six is Amma's twenty minutes. I'm not available. You know where the shelf is."**

Fixed time, most days. Same words. Said without apology and without explanation — you are not asking permission and there is nothing to justify.

This is where Chapter 1 pays off. The shelf is what makes the break possible without a screen. If you have not built it, build it before you try this. The two are one system: your break is their shelf time.

MAKING IT REAL

Announce the start. Do not just drift into it. Children handle a stated boundary far better than a vague unavailability, because vague unavailability invites testing.

Be actually unavailable. If you answer three questions during your twenty minutes, it is not a break and it will not survive.

Have a finish. “I’m back at six.” A break without an end is one your child will keep probing.

Do not spend it on chores. Twenty minutes of folding clothes is not a break. It restores nothing and you will resent the whole arrangement within a week.

Share the load

If there are two adults, this cannot be one person’s twenty minutes. Two people, two windows, on different days if needed. An unequal arrangement collapses into resentment and the resentment leaks into how the screen rule is enforced.

If there is a grandparent in the house, they are usually willing and often underused. Ask for something specific — *“can you take him from five thirty to six on weekdays”* — rather than general help, which is hard to accept and easy to forget.

If you are on your own, be more protective of this, not less. The single parent who does not schedule a break does not go without one — they take it in fragments, guiltily, on the phone, at eleven at night, which is the worst version of all.

The one where the screen is the right answer

There will be evenings.

You are ill. The house is upside down. There is a deadline. Somebody is in hospital.

Use the screen. Deliberately, without guilt, and say what it is.

> “Tonight’s a screen night. Tomorrow’s normal.”

Naming it does something worth understanding. It keeps it an exception rather than a slide, it keeps you in charge of the decision rather than the decision happening to you, and it stops the guilt from accumulating into next week’s harsh rule.

The parent who occasionally uses a screen on purpose is in a far stronger position than the parent who uses one every day by accident and feels bad about it.

PART 3 — THE EIGHT SCRIPTS

How to use these

These are the eight moments where the whole thing usually breaks. In each one you are tired and your child is fast, and whoever has words ready wins.

Learn them until they are boring. The tone matters more than the wording — flat, finished, not unkind. A sentence with no gap in it does not invite a negotiation.

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1. “Five more minutes”

Say: “You’ve had five. Off now, then plates on the table.”

Why it works: it answers and it moves. The instruction to do something next is doing most of the work — you are giving them somewhere to go, not just taking something away.

The mistake: granting the five minutes. Not because it is indulgent, but because you have now taught them that the announced ending is not the real ending, and every ending after this one becomes a negotiation.

If you want to be generous, be generous in advance: “Ten minutes left” then “Off now.” Generosity before the request costs you nothing. Generosity after it costs you every future ending.

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2. “I’m bored”

Say: “Good. The shelf’s there.”

Why it works: nine words, no door. It treats boredom as normal rather than as an emergency, and it ends the exchange without ending the relationship.

The mistake: any of the three from Chapter 1 — suggesting an activity, sympathising at length, or letting irritation into your voice.

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3. The tantrum at handover

The screen goes off and the reaction is enormous — shouting, tears, slamming, “I hate you.”

Say, once: “I know. It’s hard to stop. It’s still off.”

Then say nothing more. Stay in the room if you can. Do not argue, do not explain, do not add consequences while it is happening.

Why it works: it acknowledges the feeling and holds the boundary in the same breath. Those are not in conflict — a child can be furious and still be finished.

The mistake: adding punishments mid-storm. “Right, that’s it, no screen tomorrow either.” You will not enforce it, they will know you did not, and the boundary is worth less next time.

Afterwards, when it is over: do not relitigate it. No lecture. It is done.

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4. “Everyone else’s parents let them”

Say: “Probably. This is how we do it here.”

Why it works: it does not dispute the claim, which is usually partly true and impossible to disprove anyway. Arguing the facts turns it into a debate you cannot win. Conceding the point and holding the line leaves nothing to push against.

The mistake: “I don’t care what other people do.” Same content, but it is a slap, and it invites a fight about your tone instead of the actual issue.

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5. The grandparent who hands over the phone

Not a script for the child. A script for the adult, and it needs to be said privately, calmly, and not in the moment.

Say: “I’m trying something for a month and I need your help with it. Between five and six, if he says he’s bored, could you point him at the shelf instead of the phone? He’ll complain. That’s meant to happen.”

Why it works: it asks for help rather than issuing a rule, it is time-limited, it is specific about the one behaviour, and it pre-warns them about the complaining — which is the thing that usually makes a well-meaning grandparent hand the phone over.

The mistake: correcting them in front of the child. You lose the adult and you teach the child exactly which adult to go to.

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6. “I need it for studies”

Sometimes true. Often the strongest card in the deck, and children learn fast that it is unanswerable.

Say: “Fine. At the dining table, and tell me what you’re looking up.”

Why it works: you have not refused, so there is nothing to argue about. You have changed the location and added a small amount of visibility, and those two things remove almost all of the leverage without a single confrontation.

The mistake: “You don’t need it for studies.” Now you are calling them a liar, and if they are telling the truth this time, you have taught them that honesty does not help.

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7. The car, the waiting room, the restaurant

Before you leave, not during: “It’s a forty-minute drive. Take a book or the cards.”

Why it works: the decision happens while everyone is calm and nobody is trapped. Once you are in the car with a bored child and a phone in your bag, you will lose, and you should — that is not the moment for a principle.

The mistake: having the argument in the vehicle. Nobody wins it.

A worthwhile exception: long journeys and airports. Use the screen. Say it is because it is a long journey. Nobody’s system is built for the sixth hour of a train.

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8. Sneaking and lying about it

The phone in the bathroom. The tablet under the blanket. “I was doing homework.”

Do it calmly, later, in private. Not in the moment, not in front of a sibling.

Say: “I know about the phone last night. I’m not angry. I want to know what was happening at that time that made you want it.”

Why it works: it treats the sneaking as *information about a job that is not being met* — which is what it is — rather than as a character defect. And it usually gets you a real answer, which is worth far more than an apology.

The mistake: making it about the deception. “The lying is worse than the phone.” It may be true, and it will get you nothing except a child who lies better.

What to do with the answer: go back to Part 1. Sneaking almost always means one job is unmet — usually Job 3, connection, or a Job 1 window you did not know existed. Fix the job, and the sneaking has no reason to continue.

PART 4 — THIRTY DAYS

The design

Four weeks. Nothing takes more than a few minutes.

Week 1 — Watch. No changes at all. **Week 2 — Build.** Put the replacements in. Still no restrictions. **Week 3 — Reduce.** One place only. **Week 4 — Hold.** Survive the pushback and extend by one.

Notice that you do not remove anything until day 15. That is the whole difference between this and the thing you tried last time.

WEEK 1 — WATCH

You will want to skip this week. This is the week that makes the rest work.

Day 1. Make the log. Paper, kitchen, four columns. Tell nobody.

Day 2. Log everything. Change nothing.

Day 3. Log everything. Notice whether you are itching to intervene — that itch is what usually wrecks week three.

Day 4. Read the four jobs in Part 1. Do not decide yet.

Day 5. Write your sentence: *"In this house, the screen is mostly doing the job of ____."*

Day 6. Read the chapter for your dominant job. Just read it.

Day 7. Pick the shelf's location. Do not build it. Just decide where.

WEEK 2 — BUILD

Still no restrictions. You are only adding.

Day 8. Put four things on the shelf. Four is enough to start. Say nothing about it.

Day 9. Add the fifth. Still say nothing. Let it be discovered.

Day 10. Learn the nine words. Say them out loud twice, alone, so they come out flat when you need them.

Day 11. First use of "Good. The shelf's there." It will not go well. That is correct.

Day 12. Choose your bridge. One transition only — pick the ugliest one in your log.

Day 13. Run the bridge. Do not announce it. Same words, same time.

Day 14. Run the bridge again. Two days in a row is the beginning of a ritual.

End of week 2: you have added a shelf and a bridge and taken nothing away. If your child has noticed anything at all, it is that you seem less irritated.

WEEK 3 — REDUCE

One place. Not everywhere.

Day 15. Pick your one reduction. The single worst window in the log. Not the whole day — one window.

Day 16. Announce it once, flatly, with the replacement attached. *"After school it's shelf time now. Screen after dinner."* No family meeting, no explanation, no negotiation.

Day 17. Hold it. Expect complaining. Nine words.

Day 18. Hold it. This is usually the worst day of the month. **Nothing has gone wrong.**

Day 19. Hold it. Add the second bridge if the first one has settled.

Day 20. Hold it. Notice one thing that happened that would not have happened last month. Write it at the bottom of your log.

Day 21. Rest day. Change nothing, add nothing, do not extend. Consolidation is a real thing.

WEEK 4 — HOLD AND EXTEND

Day 22. If Job 3 is in your log, set the connection window. With them, using real information about when their friends are online.

Day 23. Set your own break. Name it. Twenty minutes. Announce the start.

Day 24. Take the break properly. Do not fold clothes.

Day 25. Rotate one shelf item. One.

Day 26. Add the second reduction — only if the first one has stopped being a fight. **If it is still a fight, do not add anything. Repeat day 21.**

Day 27. Hold.

Day 28. Pick one script from Part 3 that you keep fumbling and learn it properly.

Day 29. Read your log from day 1. That is the actual evidence, and it is usually more than you remember.

Day 30. Choose one thing to keep forever. Just one. That is the thing that will still be standing in six months.

What thirty days is and is not

It is not a finish line. Nobody has been cured of anything.

What you should have at the end: **one window of the day that used to be a screen and is now something else, a set of words you no longer have to think about, and a break of your own.**

That is a good month. If you got two windows instead of one, you did unusually well and you should stop adding.

PART 5 — WHEN IT GOES BACKWARDS

It will

Not might. Will — and usually around week three, and again the first time life is disrupted.

The parents who succeed are not the ones who avoid this. They are the ones who know it is scheduled.

The rule

> **Go back to the last thing that was working. Do not start again from the beginning.**

Starting again is what makes people quit, because starting again feels like everything you did was worthless. It was not. A month of a shelf being used is in your child, whatever this week looks like.

The predictable ones

Illness. Everything goes. Screens all day. Correct — a sick child needs comfort, not a system. When they are well, restart the bridge first, because it is the smallest thing.

Exams. Do not run this plan during exam weeks. Everyone is at their limit. Hold whatever is automatic and let the rest lapse.

Travel and holidays. Different rules, said out loud in advance. *"Holiday rules for ten days, normal rules when we're back."* An announced exception is not a collapse. It is the unannounced drift that ends systems.

A bad month at work. Your break is the first thing to go and the thing you need most. Protect it before you protect any restriction on your child.

A new device in the house. Everything resets for about a week. Expect it and do not read it as failure.

The relapse week that is not caused by anything

Some weeks it simply comes apart. No illness, no exams, nothing you can point to.

Do nothing dramatic. **Do not tighten.** Hold the bridge — it is the most automatic thing you have — and let the rest be loose for a week. It usually comes back on its own.

Tightening in a bad week is how a plan becomes a punishment, and a punishment is the thing your child will remember about all of this.

The one thing worth measuring

Not hours. Do not count hours — it will make you miserable and it measures the wrong thing.

Ask yourself one question at the end of the month:

> **Is there now something in this house, other than a screen, that my child goes to on their own?**

If the answer is yes — even one thing, even sometimes — the system is working, whatever the hours look like.

That is the whole aim. Not less screen. **Something else that is theirs.**

ONE LAST THING

You now know something worth carrying past this book.

The obvious answer — cut the screen time — was the wrong one, and it was wrong in a specific way. It was aimed at the visible thing rather than the thing underneath, and it survived for years because it *sounded* right and nobody looked twice.

That is not a fact about screens. That is a fact about how we all think, and it is the reason *The Second Look Club* exists.

Your child is about to be caught by exactly the same move, ten times over, in a set of detective cases where the obvious answer is planted on purpose and is always wrong. They will fall for the first one. So did you, four minutes into this book.

That is the point. Being caught out — safely, on paper, over and over — is the only thing that installs the habit worth having:

> **Wait. Let me check.**

There is a page for you after every case. Eleven seconds: what that case just built, and one question to ask at the dinner table.

Start with case one tonight. Try it on yourself first.

Mithun Srivastava The Second Look Club