

Letting go of the guilt over screen time

When I was growing up, way back in the 1980s, we had a single black-and-white TV.

My parents unplugged the TV at one point, and it stayed unplugged for what I believe was more than a year. We all thought it was broken until one afternoon when my sister Maureen came home and said her homework assignment was to watch “The Agony and the Ecstasy” that evening.

Miraculously the TV was fixed. But TV time was always rare.

When we adopted our first son, he had just turned 2. I knew the guidelines from the American Academy of Pediatrics, and we certainly planned to limit screen time for this little boy.

When we met him in China, however, he was having trouble sleeping the first night. Our guide suggested we turn on the TV so he could hear voices speaking in Chinese. We did, and it seemed to help.

Still, when we came home to Catonsville, we were very careful to show him very little TV. And when we adopted our second son, I occasionally let them watch a 20-minute show now and then, but we never kept the TV on for long. I was very strict about the rules.

Did limiting screens help their little minds grow? Maybe. Did it make them more creative in their play? Perhaps. What I do know is that it added to my stress at a time when balancing a newly adopted toddler and a preschooler who had just been displaced as an only child.

When I look back on that time, I wish I had relaxed the rules and given myself a break. Letting them watch TV more often would have reduced the stress a little bit. I could have been less of a constant playtime referee and gotten dinner on the table on time. Or I could have sat and watched Thomas and Friends with them as we sang that earworm of a song together.

Today, our sons are 9 and 11. We still have screen time limits, but we are more relaxed about it. I've come to believe that parents who are more relaxed result in a happier family. I also think it's good for them to learn about moderation.



So, on a summer evening you might find our children eating gallons of ice cream while we laugh together at a TV show. On a rainy afternoon you might find them building a world together in Minecraft. You might even see them playing some strategy game online against their friends.

Their games are collaborative and fun. Incorporating screen time into the day doesn't mean they aren't doing other things. They read. They play board games and card games and baseball and soccer—on their own. They engage in creative play. They build with blocks and Legos.

I could definitely be a better mother. I fall short in many ways. But I choose not to feel guilty about letting our children have screen time.

And I like to think that maybe St. Clare, the patron saint of television writers and apparently cell phones and cracked iPhone screens too, whose feast day we celebrated this week, would agree.

But, although I'm comfortable with how we've incorporated screen time into our household, I have a different dilemma. I am struggling to decide whether we should get our new sixth grader a phone to take to school with him this year. I can argue both getting and not getting a phone equally well.

Looks like it's time for me to start a novena to St. Clare of Assisi.