



the star.com **WHEN KIDS SPEND TOO much time online**

Human connection and physical activity suffer

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Today's children grow up clutching joysticks and texting classmates. Today's parents often worry about the impact of all the technology on their kids' health, development and social interactions. The result: a tug-of-war in households everywhere.

It is a subject on many parents' minds this week following tragic news of 15-year-old Brandon Crisp. The teen left his Barrie home three weeks ago following a fight over the many hours he spent on an online Xbox game. His body was found in the woods on Wednesday.



SHUTTERSTOCK

So, how do families allow kids screen time to socialize, relax and play games – but without letting it take over their lives?

Cris Rowan, an occupational therapist in Sechelt, B.C., is one of many health professionals worried about kids' increasing dependence on technology, at the expense of human connection and physical activity. But she says there are ways to instill a healthy balance.

In a decade working with the Sunshine Coast school system, "I saw hundreds of kids with technology addictions, behaviour problems, developmental delays and social difficulties," she says in a phone interview. Many spent hours a day in front of screens.

She quit her job three years ago, spent a year on research and launched a program called Zone'in (zonein.ca) to help families reduce screen time and "reconnect." She will be in Toronto Dec. 5 for two half-day sessions for parents, health and education professionals.

To Rowan, the answer isn't just in taking away computer or TV time; it's essential to replace it with something else. "You can't just expect them to unplug and be okay if they've developed that lifestyle." She says a starting point is using some of that time to re-establish the parent-child connection, not easy with the demands of daily life.

Get the kids active outdoors and involve them in something that will develop new skills, whether sports, arts or ways of socializing offline.

David Bickham, staff scientist at the Center on Media and Child Health at Children's Hospital in Boston, says parents need to be aware of kids' media use from an early age and help them

develop balanced habits.

"But one of the big things is to recognize that this is important to your kid's life," he says. Connecting with peers, including online, is a critical part of adolescent development. "It also has the purpose of relaxing and de-stressing."

Other tips:

Wean gradually, an hour at a time, if necessary. Or by committing to family dinners several times a week without technology.

Keep TV and computers out of bedrooms.

Keep screens out of the car and use driving time for conversation.

Engage kids in structured sports or activities outside the house.

If you want to draw the line, let your child be involved in setting limits.

Introduce balance by negotiating one hour on the computer with one hour outside playing pickup soccer.

Rowan's Zone'in program advocates that schools and families commit to unplugging for one week. Kids write journals about the experience and how it affected their lives and relationships. After that, they collaborate to decide on appropriate technology use and limits.