



# Parenting in the Digital World

**Booklet One: Balance**

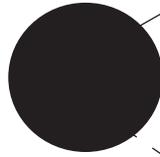
Written by:  
Dr. Brenda Neyens

# the CORE

11615 I St.  
Omaha, NE 68137  
402-763-1808  
[thecoreomaha.com](http://thecoreomaha.com)



11615 I St.  
Omaha, NE 68137  
402-333-6464  
[kingofkingsomaha.org](http://kingofkingsomaha.org)



# Intro

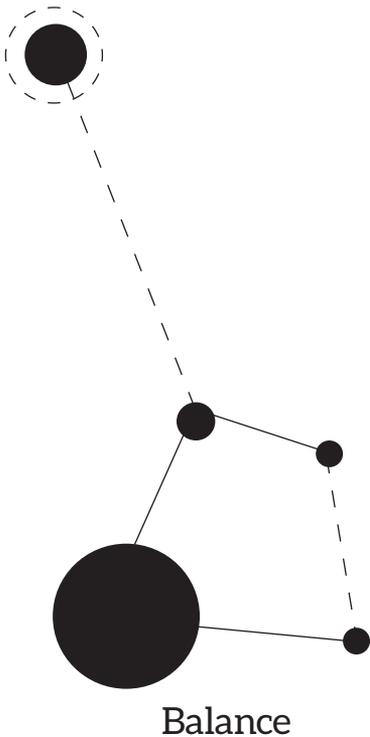
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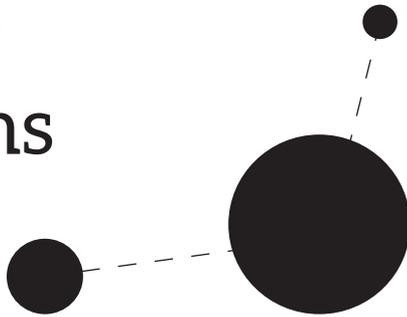
**The Internet is the first thing that humanity has built that humanity doesn't understand,**

**W**hen it comes to technology, we cannot – and, truth be told, should not – try to turn back the hands of time. The digital age offers so many benefits, but it bears remembering that, “The Internet is the first thing that humanity has built that humanity doesn't understand, the largest experiment in anarchy that we have ever had,” according to Eric Schmidt (former CEO of Google). We have never had so many instantaneous communication options or information availability. Immediacy is a way of life.

The end result for people of all ages is that screen time may consume significant chunks of their daily routine. In comparison, other activities may have become boring and dull, especially for young adults and children. While setting strict limits on screen time usage is an option for the sake of more balance, there is a healthier alternative: self-regulation. This essentially means the establishment of a life-rhythm in which the unrestrained use of technology registers in our minds as uncomfortable and not desirable. Since our line for excessive online usage will change throughout our lifetime, the key is to know your personal line and when you have crossed it.



# Where It Begins



**B**efore delving into self-regulation tips, we need to understand why balance can be so difficult in our digital age. One word: dopamine. Dopamine is a key chemical within the reward center of our brain. It prompts us to repeat activities that the brain registers as pleasurable. Social media, screen time, and especially gaming are capable of tapping very high levels of dopamine with minimal exertion on our part.

But there is even more at play in this chemical equation: the “seeking” portion of our brain is intertwined with our reward center. Using social media as an illustration, here’s what happens: You post or share a picture. The excitement builds as you wonder how many “likes” or “views” it will get. Will it be more or less popular than your last post? Did anyone else share something similar?

Every time you get positive feedback on your post, the reward center of the brain is tapped and dopamine is released. With every additional “like,” more dopamine is delivered. In contrast, if every time that you posted, you knew exactly how many “likes” or “views” that you would receive, the brain’s pleasure center would become dulled to this activity.

This process is even more intense for online gaming. These programs are designed with ever-increasing, built-in rewards. There is always a new level to reach, which results in even more temptation to keep playing even at the expense of real-life activities and relationships. Specifically for anyone who may already struggle with social interactions, the enticement to swap real life for the virtual world may be especially intense. This becomes an overwhelming decision between taking the easy path to the pleasure center of the brain via virtual reality or pursuing real-life relationships, which demand vulnerability without any guarantee of a positive outcome.

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## **INSTANT GRATIFICATION**

Based on all this information, it is no wonder that social media and screens are highly addictive, especially since little effort nets great rewards. Plus, the online world offers a steady diet of instant gratification over delayed gratification. Immediacy is at our fingertips, no need to wait. If you don't like what you see, simply move on to another platform or app.

The benefits of delayed gratification include greater impulse control, appreciation, prioritization, and sustained focus. It allows us to forego an

immediate reward for the promise of a greater reward if we are willing to work hard and sacrifice. Delayed gratification is important for families and communities. Otherwise the immediate needs of the individual will overshadow the higher priorities of the group. Instant gratification undermines our self-control and motivation. Without a solid motivational drive pushing us towards our personal and collective dreams, instant gratification may become our default mode. Those who struggle with a lack of motivation may fall prey to a stagnant lifestyle, meaning they are living their life almost as if

on auto-pilot. Essentially, they are waiting for something to happen to them as opposed to making something happen. To counteract the negative thoughts and feelings associated with this emptiness, they may return to their online dopamine-releasing activities. It becomes a vicious cycle, and one that is increasingly difficult to break.

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## **HAVING BALANCE**

Fortunately, the mind is not stagnant and new habits can be formed. So even if an individual or an entire family overuses screens, this pattern can be changed. How do you know if there is overuse? Keep it simple. If someone becomes noticeably agitated when screens are removed, this may indicate an over dependency. If an individual does not have interests or involvement with people outside of their screen usage, there's a problem. The goal is not necessarily to limit screens, but to have a more well-rounded

life in which the brain's reward center has at least a few outlets in addition to technology. This balance is achieved in part through self-regulation: controlling one's behavior, emotions, and thoughts in the pursuit of long-term goals. Self-regulation is an ongoing process; it evolves as we mature from an external set of rules to an intentional set of habits. Secondly, it is more about finding balance than relying on restrictions. We must train our brains to both value and seek real-life experiences and connections. Through an appreciation of the benefits, we must intentionally increase our tolerance for delayed gratification.

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## **SELF- REGULATION**

The following suggestions and tips are designed to practice self-regulation specifically in our digital age. The goal is to increase our dopamine release in our real life interactions. Also, to balance the instant gratification of screen-time with delayed gratification

exercises. The overall aim is to maintain online experiences as being complementary and not a replacement for real life. It takes at least three months for new habits to form and for them to be more automatic. For individuals who may be accustomed to a lot of screen time, this transition may take longer. Be gentle with yourself and others. Change is difficult, especially when you are training yourself to let go of areas of comfort for a more challenging journey. An additional consideration for parents as you incorporate self-regulation strategies: if your child is old enough to complain about any changes, they are old enough to understand the importance behind them. Talk to them about the benefits of delayed gratification and having a more well-rounded life beyond their screen-time. This does not necessarily mean they will jump on board, but over time and as the benefits are repeatedly highlighted and emphasized, they may come to understand and even embrace them.

Before diving into the tips, parents, please remember this and remind yourself of it often: God chose you to be the parent for each one of your children. He knew exactly what He was doing when He selected you. Please be kind and gracious to yourself in this tough journey called parenting... you deserve it!

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## **MODELING SCREEN-TIME USE**

Children predominantly learn from watching their parents. In terms of screen usage, what are they seeing? If a kiddo observes a parent continually checking their phone, especially with each notification, they are learning to connect instant gratification with devices. They will want to do the same. Of course, instant gratification is not our enemy and actually is a good thing, as long as it is not overused. If parents appear to be more interested in the activity on their phone than the people around them, a child's fascination with screens may increase.

Parents, assume your child is paying attention, because they are. Even while they are playing, they are fully aware of what you are doing. If a device is perceived to be more interesting than them, the child will pick up on this. They will copy this behavior.

**Suggestions for modeling screen-time-usage:**

① Don't leave it up to the child to interpret your screen-time usage, be vocal about it. Tell them and then show them that they are more important to you than your devices. A child, regardless of their age, wants your undivided attention. Truth be told, every person needs some undivided attention from another person every day of their life. While it is not possible nor healthy for a child to have your full attention all the time, they should have it sometimes. This means that your device is nowhere in sight and is completely silenced. When you must have your phone next to

you, explain the reasoning to your child. Do not assume that they are interpreting events the same way that you would.

② From observing your young child playing at the park to watching your teenager at an extracurricular activity in high school, you have a golden opportunity to model self-regulation for your kiddos. During these times, your children are looking to see if they have captured your attention. They will notice if you seem to be distracted. While keeping in mind that undivided attention is communicated in large part through our eye-to-eye contact, be mindful of how you are utilizing your phone. Basically, watching them through your device as you record their activity does not impress upon them your full engagement. As an alternative, either record a small portion of the event or practice holding your device in such a way that you can maintain eye contact.

## **REAL LIFE CONNECTION**

While your child is playing or involved in a favorite activity, offer them your undivided attention and ask them to demonstrate for you what they are doing. Be a non-judgmental observer, meaning refrain from commentary. Instead, allow your kiddo to show you what they want you to experience with them. This is especially important for younger children. They love to practice an activity over and over, so encourage them to do so and remain with them as their attentive audience. These shared experiences release high levels of dopamine for the child and parent. The key is this: don't be subtle with your attention. Verbally and non-verbally express your interest to the child. Social media and screens are not subtle...we must be bold. Discover your child's love language and do something weekly if not daily to feed that language. (Resource: *The Five Love Languages of Children* by Gary Chapman) Once again, don't be subtle, be obvious.

## **INCREASING DELAYED GRATIFICATION**

Parents, try adding the following to your daily or weekly routine with each child:

When a child asks for a special snack or privilege, you have an opportunity to teach them about delayed gratification. If the request is reasonable, say to them, "Yes, you can have it, but if you can wait for \_\_\_\_ minutes before receiving it, you will earn an extra reward. The only requirement is that you must go do something else during this time." This activity may be started as young as age four (for them, two minutes is an appropriate starting point). Increase the time as they mature. The key to this exercise is to help them accomplish this task without nagging and without standing there staring at you until their wait time is up. The advanced version of this tip is to make the reward a surprise.

## **DELAYED GRATIFICATION FAMILY GAME**

(high dopamine releasing activity)

Beginner version: Parents, decide on one activity or one possession that the entire family will forfeit for one day. Modify the amount of time for younger family members as needed. Make sure that it affects all family members over age two to some degree, and most importantly, start really small in order to set the family up for a win. Inform the family what they will be giving up, and tell them about the one rule for this game: no complaining. Announce to them what the reward will be if they do not complain. Cheerlead the family throughout the day. Celebrate the reward when the family accomplishes it. Allow the family to master the beginner version before moving on.

**Intermediate version:** The family collectively decides on an activity or a possession that they will give up and for how long. The family determines the reward. As an added twist,

instead of giving something up, you can add an activity, such as keeping the house clean for a day. To add to the excitement, you can compile a list of rewards and then have a drawing.

**Advanced version:** Each family member decides on behalf of another member what they will forfeit for a day, meaning each person will have an individual project. If you have family members under age seven, modify the rules for them since a full day is too long. Let each person decide their reward, but give them a guideline. Ask them to choose an activity for their reward that can be shared with one or all family members.

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## **DELAYED GRATIFICATION FAMILY PLAN**

Working with others towards a common goal is a great way to learn self-regulation. This activity will take some impulse control to stay on task. It requires the prioritization of the family over individuals and

personal sacrifice. Once again, start small in order to set the family up for success.

**Step One:** Decide on a family activity that all members enjoy to some degree. Please keep in mind that it does not have to have a price tag. No-cost or low-cost choices actually make the planning more challenging. This activity can take place over a couple hours or be expanded to a full-blown vacation and covers everything in between.

**Step Two:** Identify what each family member must

sacrifice to make this happen. Make a list. Keep the list visible. *Examples include:* forfeiture of time, prioritizing this event over another, and the sharing of personal assets. If there is a cost involved, perhaps family members will need to put their personal expenditures on hold to reach this bigger goal.

**Step Three:** If the activity costs money, how can each family member contribute to the plan? *Examples include:* contribute money, do extra chores to earn money, sacrifice an expenditure and donate that money instead.

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In saving the most important tip for last, pray for balance. God will guide you to make helpful changes, to be gracious to yourself and others, and to remind you that you are His child.







