

In the hectic world of modern parenting, screen time is often used as a pseudo babysitter. Parents trade a tablet and internet access for a precious few minutes to catch their breath. The time spent online is often loosely supervised. Right or wrong, this is a common occurrence in the digital age. You want to believe that your child is making good choices, but do you know how your child is spending their time online?

Take a step back and truly think about that question. Do you honestly know specifically what videos they are watching, what games they are playing, what sites they are visiting? In a perfect world, parents would have the time to sit with their children and guide their online activity. That would be very time consuming and it is not realistic for most families. Many parents believe they lack technical skills needed to proactively filter the Internet which only serves to compound the problem. Fortunately, there are options that parents can use to monitor technology use in their household that even the most novice adults can set up.

The apps and devices listed below are designed to do more than just limit technology. Each one offers a variety of ways to better understand how your kids interact with technology. Knowing what your child does while online can help guide conversations around their “digital diet”.

Circle (<https://meetcircle.com/circle/>)

Circle allows parents to take better control of the Internet at home. It is the only device on this list that was specifically designed for parents. Circle is very easy to set up. Plug it in, connect it to your home WiFi, and then all the configuration is done through an easy to use app. Parents can choose to set time limits for usage, but those limits can be different for each child. Content filtering (blocking out sites) can also be done on a per-student basis. Imagine being able to pause access to the Internet on all the chosen devices in your home so that kids can focus on chores or homework? Circle’s Pause feature makes that dream a reality. Other features of such as Bedtime and Rewards makes Circle one of my favorite devices for parents. Circle recently released Circle Go which provides parents with similar functionality for older children with their smartphone. Circle costs \$129 and is available for purchase at Amazon, Best Buy, or Walmart.

OurPact (<https://www.ourpact.com>)

Similar to Circle, OurPact has robust phone and tablet controls that are easy to setup and even easier to maintain. To begin, simply install the OurPact app on every device that need parental controls. Parents can then use the parent app to do things such as prevent internet access for a set amount of time, block apps and social media, or limit or block all texting. OurPact does not require a physical device to be installed in your home. It does however have a monthly subscription fee ranging from \$1.99 to \$6.99 depending on what package is selected. OurPact is a fantastic option for parental controls inside and outside the home.

Norton Family Premier (<https://us.norton.com/norton-family-premier>)

Norton has been a leader in online security for over twenty years, so it's no surprise that their team has developed a suite of tools for keeping children safe online. Norton family premier offers parents a wide variety of safety options such as website and app blocking, time limits,

youtube video “watch lists” and even location supervision. This software packs a ton of features! The cost is \$49.99 and while that’s an annual cost, it does ensure that you have all the latest features to keep up with new gadgets and phones. The only negative to NFP is that software needs to be loaded on each device to monitor it.

NetNanny <https://www.netnanny.com/>

The last application to round out our list is NetNanny. NetNanny was one of the very first companies to begin protecting children online, reaching initial popularity in the late 90s. For years it was the trusted solution for countless families across the globe. The most recent version of NetNanny include features similar to the other options listed above. Website blocking, time limits, and settings that can be adjusted per child. One of the options that stood out was the ability to mask profanity on sites for younger students. NetNanny is subscription based (\$59.99) and does require installation on every device.

Amazon FreeTime Unlimited

Instead of filtering, parents could consider limiting free time to an online environment designed just for kids. Amazon has created a fantastic new online space for children ages 3 – 12. FreeTime Unlimited is a collection of apps, games, books, and videos that have been pre-screened for content. FreeTime Unlimited is separated into three subgroups by the age of the child: 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12. This helps to personalize the experience for the kids by making sure they see apps, games, books, and videos are at their level. For example, younger children are not given access to content designated for pre-teens and vice versa.

There are so many amazing features to FreeTime Unlimited.

- For starter, kids are blocked from social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc) while using the application.
- Younger kids can search for apps, games, books, and videos using pictures while they are still developing typing skills.
- The background of the screen changes to a light blue color so that parents can be sure their child is in a safe environment with a simple glance.
- Amazon partnered with Common Sense Media to include Smart Filters. The filters ensure the content is safe AND age appropriate.
- Parents can set daily time limits on things like games and videos. Those time limits can be connected to education based goals as well. For example, videos and games can be limited until a child has completed their reading.
- In game purchases cannot occur with a parent entering a password.

There are two downsides to FreeTime Unlimited. For starters, it is not available on Apple devices (aka it doesn’t work on iPads or iPhones). It does work on Andriod tablets and phones as well as any Amazon Fire device. The second downside is that it is not free. While that’s to be expected, free would make this much more exciting. It is discounted for Prime Members

though. For a single child, the cost is \$4.99 a month (\$2.99 for Prime Members). Families of up to four children can sign up for \$9.99 a month (\$6.99 for Prime Members).

Wireless Router

Another option for parents is to use the content filters provided by the wireless router at your home. Every wireless router is different though. They all have various features and different levels of difficulty to get configured. Companies such as Google and Eero are new to the consumer wireless market. They've tried to take a new approach by making it easy for those of us who are less tech-savvy to access these features. Parents can set some restrictions on what websites can be accessed and pause the Internet. The features and content filtering will vary based on what wireless router you have at home.

OpenDNS

The two options above use a physical piece of equipment to lock down various aspects of the Internet. OpenDNS uses software to prevent devices from accessing unwanted content, but it does not require you to install software like NetNanny to work. This makes OpenDNS a fantastic option because you can block content for all your wireless devices in one place. Oh, and it's free. There are a few downsides here though. It can be a bit tricky to set up. It also lacks some of the features of other options such as time limits, pausing the Internet, or blocking an app altogether. OpenDNS is a free solution to filtering out sites or categories of sites from all the devices in your household.

Bridges, not Barriers

The tools listed above can provide parents with a better idea of how their children are spending their time online. The knowledge of what they are doing online can lead to some phenomenal conversations. I would encourage you to consider all the positive ways you might be able to connect with your kids through the use of these tools. One idea I saw was to pause Internet access to everyone's devices during dinner time to help minimize distractions and promote real world conversation.

Another suggestion is that one parent (or both) take a few minutes out of the day to watch a couple of the videos that are popular with your child(ren). While you may not understand what you are watching, I'm confident you'll get a sense of the kind of content in which your child is interested. In our household, Minecraft videos were pretty popular with our nine year old son for a few months there. My wife and I spent some time watching a few of the videos to ensure the content was appropriate, but also so we could better understand his world. He was so excited that we were able to speak his language.