



By Jenny Demark

It is likely fair to say that most of us developed some strange screen habits during the early days of the pandemic. News bingeing, Netflix marathons and constant texting with friends and relatives became common occurrences. Given the unusual circumstances we were living in, these were probably healthy ways to manage our stresses and fears. If we had kids at home (all day! every day!), most of us allowed them more screen time than we were previously comfortable with. Again, this was not a bad thing. Our children and teens needed things to do, and we needed them to be occupied so we could get work done.

But now that we are getting back to some “normalcy” (written with fingers tightly crossed), how can we re-establish rules for our children around technology? We know that excessive screen use is problematic and that most kids cannot regulate it on their own. The following tips may help you to find better screen balance in your home.

**Model healthy screen use** – Children learn so much from the behaviour of their parents, so an important first step is to become aware of how much and when we are using our own screens. Do you have the TV on even when doing

other things, such as exercising, doing chores or making meals? Do you have a phone in your pocket at all times? Do you jump from the dinner table whenever a notification pings? Before we can expect good screen behaviour from our children, we may need to curb some of our own unhealthy habits first.

**Help them find other things to do** – One of the first complaints from kids when they are told to turn off their devices is that they have “nothing to do!” (insert dramatic eye roll here). Because they have been relying on screens for so long during the pandemic, they legitimately may have forgotten their other options. Exercise and getting outside are obviously great non-screen choices. Quiet, creative activities (such as building with Lego, reading, drawing, playing music, listening to music, colouring, etc.) are very soothing. They restore our self-regulation abilities and decrease stress in ways that screens simply do not. Face-to-face interactions with friends, when COVID-safe, are also great ways to rejuvenate.

**Use technology together** – Watching a movie, playing a video game or researching information are ways to share screen time with our kids. Shared screen time, while still not as healthy for us as exercising or creating, is a much better

option than every family member being alone in their rooms on different screens.

**Create a screen-time contract** – Sit down and collaboratively develop the rules of screen use for the family. Basic elements of the contract could include the allotted time for individual screen use per day, with weekends being different than weekdays. Then add specifics that apply to your family (e.g., no screens at the dinner table, screens turned off 30 minutes before bed, screens allowed during car rides longer than 20 minutes, screens only after homework is completed). It’s important to add information about the consequences when rules are broken – penalty of lost screen time can be very motivating.

**Be aware of developmental and individual differences** – Toddlers and preschoolers do not benefit from screen use and do they need screens in their daily lives. School-age children often require some level of technology for school and socialization, but they do not need a personal device on them at all times. Many teenagers feel pressure to be available to friends at all hours of the day, and they will likely be resistant to efforts to curb their usage. However, parents can still establish rules (such as no phones in the bedroom overnight, putting phones aside while concentrating on homework) to promote a healthier balance. And regardless of age, some kids become quite dysregulated when using technology and are more prone to screen addiction, while others can manage screens in a more mature way. Different children may need different rules. Be flexible with your expectations and realize that they will change over time as your children grow and mature.

Screens, with their myriad benefits and problems, are undoubtedly here to stay. As we emerge from pandemic isolation, parents have an important role in helping children develop healthy technology habits.

*Jenny Demark, Ph.D., C.Psych, is a psychologist who lives in the Glebe and works nearby.*

## Children’s storytelling festival to feature Jacqui Du Toit

By Karen Sinclair and Karen Fee

*Stories breathe life into children. And that’s what children and youth need right now! Stories that help them figure out what is happening in their world.*

The 27th annual Ottawa Children’s Storytelling Festival will run November 22–27. The festival will be held online through the Ottawa Public Library’s website and, with limited in-person seating, at the Odawa Native Friendship Centre.

Listening to stories builds self-confidence and creativity, and it teaches an appreciation for the arts. It improves memory and concentration – woe betide a parent or grandparent who has tried to skip a paragraph or two in a favourite bedtime story. “But you didn’t say. . .!”

Actor and educator Jacqui Du Toit, known as Kitchissippi’s Storyteller, describes storytellers as those who take an audience on a journey, who bridge the gap between reality and imagination. “They open the door and help the audience step into their imagination,” she says.

Du Toit was born, raised and educated in theatre arts in South Africa. After moving to Ottawa in 2008, she sought out the diversity, colours and vibrancy of the arts community she left behind in Cape Town. She set out to become part of the arts scene in Hintonburg/Kitchissippi.

Her enthusiasm and love for her craft is infectious. Stories have existed since the beginning of time, and storytelling in all its formats around the world enables “cross-pollination, a weaving of reality and imagination.”

For Du Toit, it always comes back to the beginning of time. “We can look at how to inspire the next generation,” she says, to apply lessons learned not only from each other but from the

“four-legged and winged creatures.”

The Conseil des écoles catholiques du Centre-Est (CECCE) school board believes in the power of story as a learning tool that conveys language, culture and a foundation for literacy. The CECCE is partnering with Ottawa Storytellers, the Ottawa Public Library and Odawa Native Friendship Centre to produce the festival. Public health restrictions have once again forced the annual festival online, which means that entire classrooms can join in the fun!

Proven to benefit children’s mental and emotional health, storytelling is also an effective way to transmit cultural knowledge, beliefs and values, and it is also a powerful tool for socialization. Storytellers at this year’s festival reflect the experiences, wit and wisdom of Indigenous people, Francophones and Anglophones. By listening to stories from other cultures, children broaden their emotional intelligence and empathy, identifying what feelings they have in common rather than focusing on differences.

While in-person storytelling provides the richest experience, “the move online in 2020 because of COVID-19 resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of families attending the festival,” said festival coordinator Ruth Stewart-Verger.

Come hear Jacqui Du Toit’s tales of that Trickster Rabbit! Traditional stories from her South African homeland, on Tuesday, November 23 at 12:30 p.m. The festival will be available for free on the Ottawa Public Library website’s Kids’ Zone.

*Karen Sinclair is a local author and storyteller, and Karen Fee is a storytelling grandmother. Both Karens are members of Ottawa StoryTellers.*



*Jacqui Du Toit, storyteller extraordinaire, will be featured at this year’s Ottawa Children’s Storytelling Festival, to be held online on the Ottawa Public Library website’s Kids’ Zone, November 22-27.*

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