



THE
FAMILY GUIDE
TO A
MOSTLY **SCREEN-FREE**
SUMMER

Unplug. Recharge. Connect.

NewDream
MORE OF WHAT MATTERS

Welcome to Summer!

Long summer days. No morning rush to school. No nagging over homework and school projects. Lots of time to spend with family and friends. Summertime and the living is easy, right?

Not so much for my family. At least, not until I became more intentional about creating a joyful, activity-packed, and (mostly) screen-free summer experience.

Before I finally figured out a plan, we would have days where everything went smoothly until about 10 a.m. Then the bickering would start, followed by shrieks of, “I’m never playing with you ever again!” Inevitably, one of my kids would drape herself over the nearest chair and say, with a heavy sigh, “Is it lunchtime yet?” By the time lunch actually rolled around, I’d be counting the days until September and rethinking my mostly screen-free philosophy.

Over the years, though, I’ve come up with a routine that helps us have a fun, relaxing summer without having to rely on screens to get us through our days. And I stay sane. It’s a win-win for everyone involved.



Set Yourself Up for Success

Although summer is a welcome time for spontaneity, when rigidity and structure get thrown out the window, routines can be really **liberating**. When you don't have to start from scratch every morning, you have much more energy and enthusiasm.

At least I do. As with most endeavors in life, planning ahead always seems to help.

The summer "routine" can be fairly loose. And you don't have to stick to it if your kids are in a good stretch. But you'll at least have it as a backup—an *en-cas*, if you will.

In her book [*French Women Don't Get Fat*](#), Mireille Guiliano talks about carrying a bag of soy nuts in her purse as an *en-cas*, which means "just in case" in French. Instead of caving to an unhealthy snack when she feels hungry, Guiliano has a healthy alternative already prepared. Think of a summer routine as your *en-cas* for avoiding the temptation to default to screens when the going gets tough.

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You may be thinking,
"Get my kids on board with less screen time?
Never going to happen."

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But here's the thing: you don't need to start off by listing all the ways that screens are going to be banned from your house. I actually don't recommend banning screens at all; it's hard to imagine a situation where that goes over well. Instead, get your kids enthused about all the fun you're going to have. ➡➡



Get Your Kids On Board

Instead of banning screens full stop, talk to your kids about how you really want to start taking better advantage of summertime. Talk about your own favorite summer activities, including memories from your childhood. Bring up activities that you've heard about and always wanted to try. Then it's your kids' turn: what would they love to do this summer? ***Get as creative as you want.***

Brainstorming Session Idea #1

In my family, we gather a pile of popsicle sticks and put them in an old can. The whole family sits down, and each of us writes activities on the sticks. We color-code the tips of the sticks:

Free Activities

- flying a kite
- riding bikes
- having a backyard Olympics

Moderately Priced Activities

- trying a new restaurant
- exploring a new town
- having an ice cream sundae party

More Expensive Activities

- going to a nearby resort
- seeing a play

When we find ourselves stuck in a summertime rut, we simply pull an appropriately colored stick.

Go to the movies

Waterpark

Ice cream sundaes

Flying a kite

Go to the Circus

Brainstorming Session

Idea #2

My friend Jenny does something similar, although her strategy is less random than ours. She has a post-it calendar like [this one](#), and she divides the post-its among her kids. They each get to write their favorite summer activities on the notes. Jenny then arranges them on the calendar, making sure that each kid's favorites are scheduled.

The nice thing is that, since they're post-its, she can always rearrange activities if a last-minute invite comes through or the weather's not cooperating. (Just make sure to leave some blank days so you have room to rearrange.)

Her family does such fun, creative things over the summer. The one photo that really stands out to me is the day they strung a clothesline in a park and hung sheets on it. The kids then got to paint the sheets—a fun time for all!



You could also just grab a piece of paper and write down everyone's ideas. We did that the first year and stuck the list on the fridge. It worked fine.

Two Good Things Come Out of this Brainstorming Session

- 1 **First, you end up with a list of go-to activities.**
- 2 **Second, the kids are super excited about the summer.***

* If you want to bring up the idea of screen limits, this is probably the best time. You can say that, because you want to make sure you have time for all this fun, the family has to work on spending less time on screens.

Setting Screen Limits That Work

One big reason why so many families fail to follow through with good intentions about screen limits is that we're trying to change our kids' behavior without changing our own. It's a bad case of "Do as I say, not as I do." Kids can see right through that.

My guess is that you'll have a much more successful summer if the adults in your household adhere to the same rules that you set for the kids. (Obviously, if you use screens for your job, you'll have different rules at work.) And if you say that you—as the parent—also need help setting limits, you'll find that your kids are often willing to lend a hand.

Getting your kids involved in determining the screen limits for your family will also probably get more buy-in from them. You can talk about what other families do. As a family, figure out the system that would work best for you.



Different ways to implement screen limits for your family

- 1 Allow one hour a day of screen time.
- 2 Designate screen-free zones: at the dinner table, in the car, or at Grandma's house.
- 3 Let your kids earn a "screen token" (which can be traded for an hour of screen time) for every book they read.
- 4 Hold a family movie night (or afternoon) every weekend.
- 5 Grant your kids unlimited screen time as long as their daily checklist is complete. Make sure the checklist is long, with activities like chores, reading, and spending at least two hours outdoors.

When to Seek Outside Help

If your child really resists screen limits, try not to turn it into a power struggle. See what happens when you start spending more time together on the fun activities. If he or she still isn't tempted to get off the screens, then it may be time to check in with your pediatrician about whether your child's screen habit is so strong that you may need to get some outside help.

Every time we went to our neighborhood pool last summer, we saw a little boy who would spend the entire afternoon on an iPad. His family and friends would be playing together and having a great time in the water, but he would sit on a lawn chair with his eyes glued to his screen. Once I saw the father pry the tablet out of his hands, and the boy threw a big fit and sulked for the rest of the afternoon. Not once did we ever see him enter the pool.

If your situation is this extreme, your pediatrician or school counselor may be able to help.

NOTE TO PARENTS OF YOUNG KIDS

If your kids are around five years old or under, you may not need to say much at all about screen limits. We didn't talk with our kids about screen limits until they began to notice that our house was very different from other people's homes. If you settle into a fun routine, they may be young enough to adapt without any explanation needed.

The Day-to-Day

Okay. So now you've got a ton of fun activities planned. But few of them are likely to fill up an entire day, right? So what do you do the rest of the time?

Daily Activities

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Over the years, I've created my own list of go-to activities that are somewhat more mundane than painting sheets or hosting an ice cream sundae party. These are the "filler" activities that help us get through the day. They often involve getting us out of the house. I've found that even just one quick outing a day can make the rest of the day more pleasant. Here's a list of our favorites:

Get Outside

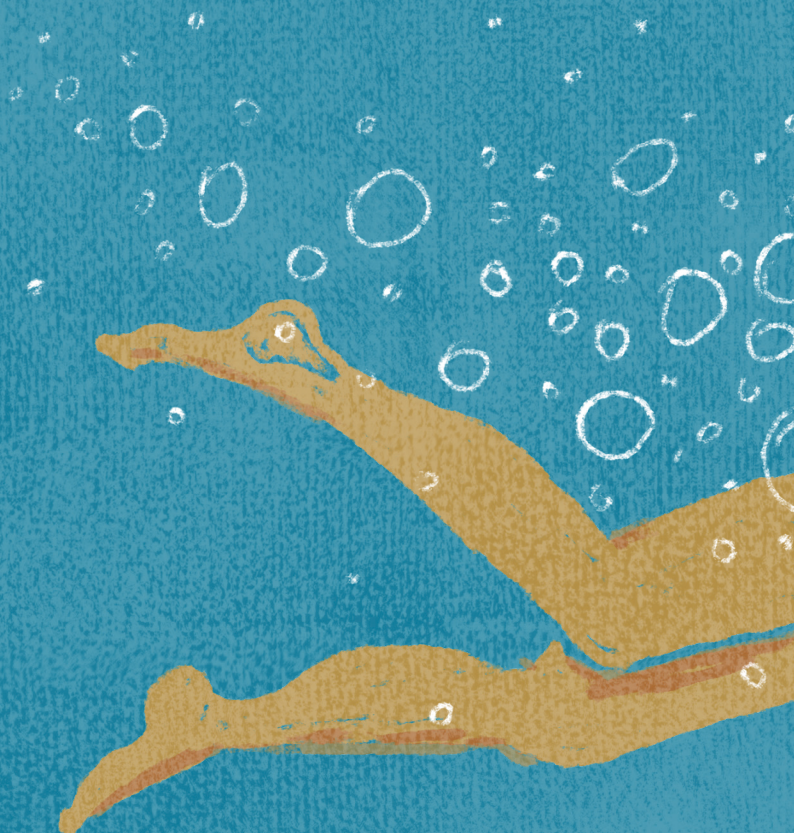
Depending on where you live, this may seem like an obvious tip. But if you live in a humid, muggy area like we do, you may find that the summer heat makes you want to avoid all outdoor activities (other than the pool). But we take advantage of our children's early morning tendencies and head to playgrounds and local parks right after breakfast. We'll stay out until the heat gets unbearable.

Get Inside

For days that are really too hot to spend time outside, we stay inside—just not in our own house. We have a family membership to the local children's museum. We'll also go to kids' concerts, bowling alleys, or the paint-your-own pottery store. The next time your loved ones ask for gift ideas for your kids, ask for gift cards to these types of activities. No more additional clutter in your house, and money saved: win, win!

*"Be patient with everyone, but
above all with yourself."*

— St. Francis de Sales



"How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives."

— Annie Dillard

The Public Library

The library is our haven over the summer. I'm not exaggerating. We don't just go weekly to check out new books. We're also regular participants in the summer reading program, which at our library isn't just about reading a certain number of books. They also bring in scientists, magicians, puppeteers, and animal trainers to put on amazing shows every week. And they're free! If your library doesn't have such a program, try a neighboring library. We attend the activities in our town and in our neighboring county.

Get Together

When it comes to staying sane over the summer, I really believe there's strength in numbers. One of my friends started a weekly group playdate in her neighborhood. The genius part is that only two of the moms stick around, while the others get the morning off. I love the idea. It's a summer babysitting co-op, but your kids don't have to know that. You can just call it "friend camp."

Help Someone

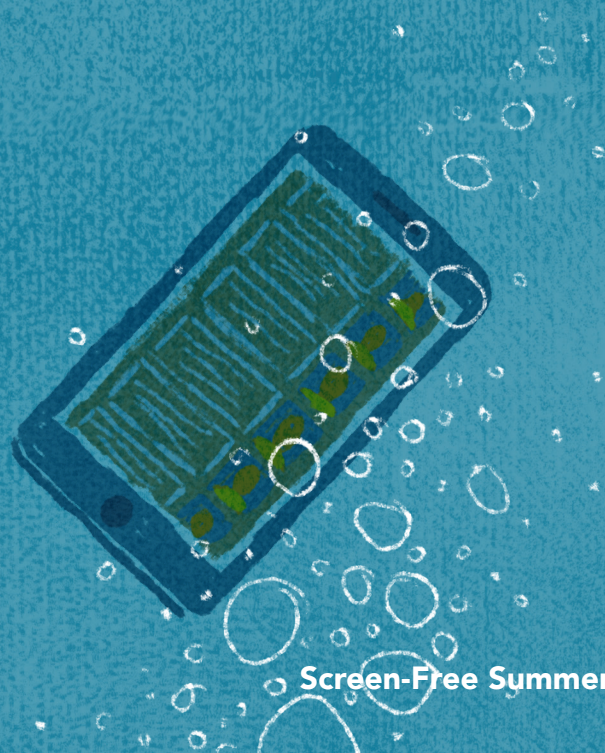
I try really hard to get us involved in at least one ongoing service project every summer. This year, we're starting a sewing circle where we're going to sew sundresses, shorts, and skirts for a nonprofit group that works with kids in Haiti. Although I personally have zero sewing skills, we're getting others involved who, thankfully, know how to sew. Keep in mind that you don't have to do a formal activity. You can encourage your kids to help a neighbor with yard work. Or, if they're old enough, maybe there's someone you know who could use a mother's helper.

Read Aloud

A few summers ago, I found that we would hit a rough patch most days after lunch. One day, I noticed a library book lying on the coffee table that I thought all my kids would enjoy. So I plopped down on the couch and started reading aloud. I read for about 30 minutes, and they loved it. Then they ran off and played a game based on the storyline of the book. A new summer tradition was discovered! Check out [this great list](#) of top read-aloud children's books.

Easy Access

I generally keep our board games, art supplies, and musical instruments easily accessible, but in the summer I go out of my way to make sure these resources can't be missed. The board games are stacked next to the coffee table. The art supplies live on the kitchen table. And the instruments are put right in the middle of the play room.



Screen-Free Vacations

On a Road Trip

Every summer, we take at least one trip that involves a long car drive. We do this without any screens in the car, other than a GPS. And we survive it every time. I'm not going to say that my kids are perfectly entertained the whole drive, but I also don't think a screen would be enough to keep them complaint-free for 12 hours straight.

Here's our strategy for keeping everyone happy on long drives, without screens:

Personal Playlists

We (including the parents) each get to create a music playlist for the drive. Then we take turns playing our music. It's fun to expose our kids to music that we love, and it's usually only on long car trips that this happens.

Audiobooks

We check out a ton of audio books from the library. Some of our favorites are: *Charlotte's Web*, *Matilda*, *Little House on the Prairie*, the *Ramona* books, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Ballet Shoes*, and *The Doll People* series.

Driving Games

We play old-school games like ["I'm going on a picnic"](#) and the alphabet game ("My name is Abigail. I live in Antarctica. And I sell anteaters.") You can introduce them to [License Plate Bingo](#) and [Roadside Cribbage](#).



Travel Games

We keep a bag of travel games up front. We have "Hungry, Hungry Hippos" (which in the travel version even works as a solo game, with one person playing both hippos). "Simon" and "Rubik's Cube" are also popular. The key is that we don't make these games readily available. In fact, the kids tend to forget that we have them because they're reserved for long car trips. I only pull them out when it's clear that someone's on the verge of a meltdown (maybe one of the kids, maybe me!). Either way, the games are key to totally changing the mood in the car.

Travel Bags

Each of my kids is in charge of packing their own travel bag. They'll pack notebooks and crayons. Sudoku books. Scrapbooking kits. Playmobil figures. They pack things that I would never think of as travel items but that keep the kids happily entertained.

At Your Destination

While I'm generally a fan of moderation in all things, I've found that there's nothing more relaxing and rejuvenating than a vacation where I'm completely unplugged. It makes the days seem longer and more peaceful. It's so much easier to be present and engaged. If you haven't unplugged on vacation in years, it's so worth a try.

Once we arrive at our destination, I stay screen-free (the kids will sometimes watch their one movie, especially if there's a rainy day). Again, the key is to set yourself up for success. We've gotten so accustomed to relying on our phone for everything that it might be hard to imagine leaving it behind. Here's what I take on vacations, since I don't own a smartphone:

- GPS
- Flip phone
- Camera
- A few library books for me (and the kids each include books in their travel bags)
- Playing cards (a regular deck plus [Rat-a-Tat Cat](#) and [Sleeping Queens](#))
- [Bananagrams](#)
- Our favorite board game at the moment (plus our car games travel bag)

So no smartphone or tablet means I have to pack an extra bag. But I would pack an entire carload of extra bags in exchange for the peacefulness of an unplugged vacation. (If you're flying somewhere, leave out the board game; it's amazing how many books you can squeeze around the perimeter of a small suitcase.)



If you're not ready to go completely screen-free and want to start off with baby steps, check out this great *New York Times* article on how to reconfigure your smartphone to make it less distracting. I love the title of the article, by the way: **"How to Vacation Like It's 1999."**

Have a wonderful summer

Whether you set screen limits, embark on unplugged vacations, or just dial down the screen use a bit, I hope you have a wonderfully relaxing summer!

Edna Rienzi

Program Director



New Dream's mission is to empower individuals, communities, and organizations to transform their consumption habits to improve well-being for people and the planet.

We work with individuals and communities to conserve natural resources, counter the commercialization of our culture, and support community engagement. We seek to change social norms around consumption and consumerism and to support the movement of individuals and communities pursuing lifestyle and community action.

New Dream's overall goal is to change behavior, attitudes, and social norms to reduce consumption and build community. We envision a society that pursues not just "more," but more of what matters—and less of what doesn't.

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