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SCREEN SENSE



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How One Photo Changed Everything For My Family

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On the final day of our summer vacation, my family went out for breakfast at a diner perched on the Gay Head Cliffs. On the western shore of Martha's Vineyard, the cliffs are formed from spectacular red and orange clay that contrasts dramatically with the clean white sand and the choppy blue Atlantic. Rounding out this perfect New England tableau is a stately lighthouse, built in 1856, which sits on the edge of a grassy bluff.

As the hostess led us to a picnic table, we passed two families who were already mid-meal. The adults were chatting and drinking coffee, while the five children, who looked to be between about 4 and 10 years old, each clutched a smartphone in his or her hand -- presumably procured from their parents. Their small shoulders were hunched, their brows knitted in concentration, their eyes squinted against the glare of the sun. With his free hand, one of the boys robotically dipped pieces of pancake into a tiny pot of syrup never once lifting his eyes from Angry Birds. (He didn't notice the real birds, seagulls, circling overhead.)

I get it. I've readily handed over my iPhone over to one of my children while dining out in order to have an uninterrupted conversation with my husband or a friend. At times, I've caved simply because they've worn me down with their begging. But there was something about this scene that I found particularly heartbreaking. In the battle for our attention between screens and nature, screens had won -- and as a result, these children were blind to the exquisite beauty surrounding them. When our devices prove more thrilling than one of the most spectacular vistas in the United States, well, something is really, really wrong.

Do I sound self-righteous? I don't mean to. Like most parents, I struggle with how much screen time to grant my children, while wrestling with [my own iPhone addiction](#) at the same time. Figuring out the balance between what is healthy and what is not when it comes to technology use is an ongoing and ever-changing conversation in our household -- and probably in yours, too. I realized that next week when school starts, the daily bargaining and begging for screen time will again become part the fabric of my family's life. And I'm dreading it.

See, this summer we had a brief, game-changing break from most of our screen struggles. My 6-year-old-daughter and 9-year-old son spent most their summer outdoors, swimming, skateboarding and running through sprinklers. They came home every day exhausted from sun and fresh air and exercise -- and with their cravings for technology naturally diminished. Then in late July, my son went to an incredible overnight camp in the mountains of Massachusetts where the bunks have no electricity and electronics of any kind are forbidden. Instead of Minecraft, his days were filled with activities like archery, ultimate Frisbee and frog catching. When we picked him up after four weeks, he was freckled, filthy and happier than I've ever seen him.

Every September, parents make resolutions for the new school year. We vow that our kids will only wear clean socks, eat homemade well-balanced meals and always have neatly cut toenails. We promise ourselves that this year will be different -- we will keep order, set rules, not back down. Watching those zombie children at the cliffs gave me a resolve that I've never felt before to really try to loosen technology's grip on my family's time.

But will I? Will you?

Part of why I'm writing this is so that I am accountable. I will be checking back in and writing about our progress as the year unfolds. In the meantime, I'm printing two copies of the photo you see above, which I took at a lookout point near where we had our breakfast at the cliffs. I'm putting one on the bulletin board right above our shared family desk, and the other on the wall of our kitchen. It will be a visual reminder to make sure we are looking at each other, and the world around us, and not just at our screens.