

BE THE PARENT, PLEASE



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**STOP BANNING SEESAWS AND  
START BANNING SNAPCHAT**



*Strategies for Solving  
the Real Parenting Problems*

**Naomi Schaefer Riley**



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To Midge and Kay,  
whose mothering and thoughts on mothering  
are an inspiration.





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## Acknowledgments

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I NEVER THOUGHT I would write a book about parenting—at least not until my kids were grown. It's like writing a memoir at the age of twenty-five. What do you know?

The answer would be not much—if I were to draw solely on my own experience. But while my children have made the questions surrounding technology more urgent in my mind, my own family cannot provide the answers. For those, I am grateful for the help of dozens and dozens of mothers and fathers around the country—old friends, recent acquaintances, colleagues, friends of friends. I hope you see your experience (if not your names) reflected in these pages.

I am also thankful for all the experts who took the time to speak with me—people who work in Silicon Valley, in Washington, and at universities around the country. This is a world I would not have understood without you. The input of so many teachers, principals, and caregivers has also enabled me to get a much broader view of the challenges that children and parents are experiencing today.

In terms of the structure and argument of the book, I would like to thank my editor, Susan Arellano, for her patience and feedback as well as Christine Rosen for her useful and encouraging comments.

My own experience as a mother has been made easier and better by my husband—a calm and steady voice of reason and love. Though we had different upbringings, our parents, I think it's fair to say, all came to the same conclusion—when

raising kids, you can't pay too much attention to what everyone else thinks.

Though I'm sure I didn't appreciate it at the time, I owe a great debt to my mother and father for that lesson and so many others. They instilled in me a love for reading and writing that I hope to pass on to my children. Though they tell me they are relieved not to have to raise children today, it is hard to imagine grandparents with deeper devotion.

Lastly, I must thank Emily for her keen observations about human behavior; Simon for his curiosity about, well, everything; and Leah for her boundless enthusiasm for the world. Spending time with the three of you makes everything clearer and happier.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Screen Time

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I MADE IT two-and-a-half years into motherhood before my first trip to the emergency room. My daughter Emily had a cough that wouldn't let up that was now accompanied by wheezing. The squeaking noise under her breath was easy for me—a lifelong asthmatic—to recognize. So there we were, in a curtained-off area in the children's section of the emergency room. My husband was home with our younger son. Emily wasn't particularly upset, just tired and confused. And that's when I looked up and saw something mounted in the corner of the room—a television with *Dora the Explorer* bounding across the screen. It was the middle of the night in a strange place, but here was a familiar face.

Emily was immediately entranced and I was immediately relieved.

As I sat on the edge of her bed, memories of long evenings with my father in the emergency room came rushing back to me. I don't remember being afraid or uncomfortable—just bored. During each twelve-minute breathing treatment, I would count the animals on the wallpaper: How many giraffes? How many zebras? Why were all the rooms the same? Even when I was old enough to read, I couldn't focus on a book during these ordeals. And I didn't want to.

While we waited for what seemed like hours between each time a doctor listened to my chest, my father would do anything to entertain me. There would be bad jokes, stories from his childhood, stories from his mother's childhood, and

lessons about the American Revolution. As he blurred the line between stand-up comic and college professor, it never occurred to me what must be going on in his own head.

Only later when he would recount the story of my first asthma attack before the age of two, my face turning blue as he and my mother rushed me to the hospital, did I begin to understand how he was forced to mask his own fears. And how much easier it would have been to do that with a television on the wall tuned to a twenty-four-hour children's cartoon network.

In an instant, Dora relieved me of my job of making funny faces, of assuring Emily that everything would be fine, of lying to her that no one would need to stick her with a needle. The presence of that television allowed me to give the doctor my full attention and to speak to him without masking my concerns or changing the words to be more child friendly. Our night in the emergency room was long, but it could have been much longer.

There are so many occasions to be grateful that we live in the twenty-first century. And being in a hospital serves as a helpful reminder of all the advances that modern technology has brought us. Usually we think of antibiotics and X-ray machines and arthroscopic surgery. But the ability to distract us from pain, discomfort, and boredom is surely one of the greatest features of our technological age. For children with minor asthma attacks or with medical problems that are much more serious, we have learned to make time fly.

The truth, though, is that Dora and the rest of her friends on Nick Jr., PBS Kids, and the Disney Channel are not being broadcast late at night exclusively for the use of children's hospitals. There are all sorts of occasions when it is a relief for children to be occupied. And now it is easier than ever. We needn't depend on televisions, either. Our smartphones

and tablets provide instant access to all of the shows, movies, and games our children could dream of. They can use these magical tools to draw, listen to music, compose music, take pictures, and make videos. Why try to retell the story of the Battle of Valley Forge? There are apps that enable you to relive the entire fight for American independence.

In her book *The Plug-In Drug: Television, Computers, and Family Life*, Marie Winn articulates the ways in which television has “transformed the experience of children’s sickness for parents and children alike.”<sup>1</sup> Published in 1977, the year I was born, Winn’s description of parenting seems even more apt today than it did back then, particularly in the way that parents interact with sick kids: “Gone are the onerous requirements of time and patience on the parent’s part—the endless story readings, the tedious card games . . . the listening to whiny complaints, the steady need to restrain impatience, to maintain sympathy, to act more lovingly than ever.”<sup>2</sup>

But when adults are asked about their experiences with illness as children, they recall these times fondly. One woman told Winn what a treat it was that her mother took off from work when she was ill: “I remember the endless card games and cutting out pictures from magazines with her. I remember lying in bed and calling her to come and bring me this or that, again and again and again. And I remember how wonderful it felt, that she always came!”<sup>3</sup>

Winn notes that these memories often don’t include any description of the illness or any actual symptoms and no one remembers scratching the chicken pox. But people do remember the unyielding devotion of their parents. This account made me feel guilty for all of the times I have allowed my sick children to plant themselves on the couch and watch PBS Kids from morning ’til night while I worked or cleaned the kitchen or caught up on the sleep I had missed the night

before when I was holding them over the toilet while their father dutifully changed the sheets for the third time.

But I don't think occasionally using technology to distract our children makes us bad parents. It makes us human. Still, that doesn't excuse us from understanding the temptations that technology presents to us as mothers and fathers, the effects it has on our children, and the tradeoffs we are making when we give our children access to technology and technology access to our children.

There are so many forces pushing us to give our kids technology, including the technology companies themselves, our schools, our friends, and the culture at large. It's all happening so fast. One day we are wondering about whether an hour of *Sesame Street* is a good habit for a two-year-old, and the next minute it seems we have adolescents who won't look up from their phones long enough to have a conversation with us.

Screen time is getting away from us. Now is not the time for guilt about what we've done. It's time to take a deep breath and look at where we are, where our children are, and where we want our families to be.