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Teachers' Corner

Helping Students with Autism Move Beyond Screen Time: Strategies to Build Engagement and Play



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Excessive screen use has become a growing concern for educators and families of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Tablets, phones, and computers can offer structure and comfort—especially through predictable visuals and repetitive feedback—but extended use often comes at the expense of social interaction, imaginative play, and regulation skills (Sadeghi & Pouretamad, 2021; Westby, 2021). Many children with ASD display distress when devices are removed, creating challenges for teachers seeking to broaden engagement and participation in school routines.

Although digital tools can support learning, the key is balance. Research has linked prolonged screen exposure to reduced language growth, limited social reciprocity, and increased attention and emotional difficulties among young children, with these effects more pronounced in students with ASD (Ophir et al., 2023). Educators are uniquely positioned to help students and their families find this balance by introducing structured, evidence-based strategies that replace passive screen time with motivating, developmentally beneficial alternatives. When teachers collaborate with caregivers to extend these strategies into the home, children experience consistent expectations and opportunities to practice self-regulation, communication, and play across settings.

Reducing or Fading Excessive Screen Use

Supporting students with autism in reducing screen time requires patience, planning, and empathy. Educators often see that devices meet genuine needs for comfort, sensory regulation, or predictability, making abrupt restriction counterproductive. The goal is not to eliminate technology but to teach balance—helping students shift toward flexible, social, and creative engagement while maintaining a sense of security.

Use structure and predictability. Helping students with autism reduce screen time begins with clear routines. Abruptly removing devices can trigger frustration or even self-injury, while a gradual, planned approach supported by positive reinforcement allows smoother transitions. Visual cues such as countdown timers, picture schedules, and “first/then” prompts—*first puzzle, then iPad*—help students anticipate change and feel secure (Hume et al., 2012; Leaf et al., 2016).

Table 1. Reducing or Fading Excessive Screen Use

Strategy	Description	Example in Practice	Intended Outcome
<i>Use structure and predictability</i>	Provide clear routines and visual cues to help children anticipate transitions	“First puzzle, then iPad”; countdown timers; picture schedules	Reduces frustration and anxiety, supports smoother transitions
<i>Observe patterns of use</i>	Identify when and why screens are used most often to inform planning	Note device use during downtime, transitions, or high-stress moments	Helps plan realistic, gradual reductions without abrupt restriction
<i>Gradual fading</i>	Slowly reduce screen access while pairing with preferred activities	Shorten tablet time by 5–10 minutes daily while introducing drawing or blocks	Promotes flexibility and tolerance for reduced screen use
<i>Collaborate with families</i>	Share visual cues, transition scripts, and strategies for home use	Parents mirror classroom “first/then” cues at home	Consistency across settings supports generalization of new routines
<i>Track engagement and affect</i>	Monitor child’s emotional state, attention, and independence during transitions	Record observations of distress or successful engagement	Guides adjustments and identifies effective strategies

Observe patterns before changing routines. Before making adjustments, educators should note when and why screens are used most often. Many students turn to devices during downtime or transitions when predictability is low. Recognizing these moments makes it easier to plan realistic changes. The goal is not abrupt restriction, but structured limits paired with equally engaging alternatives. As shown in Table 1: Reducing or Fading Excessive Screen Use, pairing gradual reduction with motivating replacement activities can result in smoother transitions and fewer behavioral challenges.

Collaborate with families. Parents frequently rely on screens to calm their child or manage household routines. Coordinating strategies across home and school promotes consistency and generalization. Educators can share the same visual supports and transition scripts used in the classroom so parents can mirror them at home (Radesky et al., 2020). Using identical “first/then” cues across settings helps children understand expectations and builds confidence with new routines.

Address the function of screen use. For many students, screen time serves an important sensory or regulatory purpose. Removing them without alternatives can increase distress. Identifying this function helps teachers and families introduce effective alternatives—such as short movement breaks, deep-pressure activities, or preferred non-digital items—that meet the same need. Instead of focusing solely on reinforcement, educators can help students replace regulation, offering strategies such as:

- Short movement breaks or access to sensory paths
- Deep-pressure or proprioceptive activities (e.g., wall push-ups, chair squeezes)
- Access to quiet or low-stimulation spaces
- Music or rhythmic movement opportunities

Tracking engagement, emotional state, and tolerance during transitions helps monitor progress. Over time, gradual fading supported by consistent reinforcement fosters flexibility and self-regulation while maintaining a sense of safety and success (Frauenberger et al., 2016).

Replacing Screen Use with Engagement and Play

Simply reducing access to devices is rarely enough—students need engaging, meaningful activities that meet the same needs in other ways. When teachers and families plan enjoyable alternatives that offer predictability, sensory feedback, or social connection, children are more likely to participate and less likely to protest the loss of screen time.

Identify what motivates the child. Successful transitions away from screens depend on offering activities that are genuinely motivating for the child. Selecting effective replacements begins with understanding what the child finds rewarding. Short preference assessments—through observation, structured choice, or simple student interviews—can reveal which toys, materials, or social interactions the student seeks most (Fisher et al., 1992; Hagopian et al., 2004). For example, a student drawn to bright visuals or rhythmic sounds may be especially engaged by drawing, musical instruments, or light-up sensory items.

Once motivating alternatives are identified, these items can be intentionally paired with screen transitions. For example, a child might experience “first tablet, then drawing,” or “tablet finished—now drums.” The goal is not only to remove screen time but to replace it with developmentally rich, engaging activities that foster communication, imitation, and play skills. Common examples of preferred non-digital alternatives include:

- Building materials: blocks, LEGO® sets, or other construction toys
- Art supplies: drawing, painting, or craft stations
- Music and movement: instruments, rhythm activities, or dance
- Sensory tools: fidgets, playdough, weighted items, or light-up toys

As summarized in Table 2: Engaging Alternatives to Screen Use, these activities should be immediately accessible, varied, and closely matched to the child’s genuine interests, ensuring that screen-free options are appealing and sustainable.

Embed structured, adult-supported play. *Guided play*—where adults model turn-taking, imitation, or simple problem-solving—has been shown to strengthen communication and adaptive skills in children with autism (Ingersoll & Schreibman, 2006; Kasari et al., 2006). Educators can integrate these interactions naturally throughout the day: sharing building blocks, drawing together, or leading brief cooperative games. These experiences replace solitary device time with shared, reciprocal moments that build both competence and confidence.

Involve peers and families. Opportunities for peer interaction help students generalize skills beyond adult-mediated settings. Peer-mediated strategies are another powerful option. Pairing students for brief, structured play tasks (e.g., rolling a ball, completing a puzzle together, or cooperative building) provides natural reinforcement and increases generalization of social behaviors across settings (Odom et al., 2010). Success depends on scaffolding interactions—offering visual cues, turn-taking prompts, and adult support to ensure positive experiences. Collaboration with families extends these benefits at home; teachers can suggest specific activities, visuals, or short play routines that mirror school-based approaches, promoting consistency and success across environments (Radesky et al., 2020).

Monitor and adapt. Children’s interests evolve, and so should their engagement plans. Regularly observe which activities sustain attention or reduce frustration and adjust as needed. Rotating materials or offering brief choices maintains novelty and motivation (Piazza et al., 1996). Over time, this flexible approach allows students to shift naturally toward richer, more social forms of play while maintaining the sense of regulation that screens once provided.

Conclusion

Helping students with autism move beyond excessive screen time is not about restriction, but redirection. When educators and families work together to plan predictable transitions and offer motivating, hands-on alternatives, children gain oppor-

Table 2. Engaging Alternatives to Screen Use

Type of Activity	Examples	Purpose / Benefit
Building materials	Blocks, LEGO® sets, construction toys	Supports fine motor skills, problem-solving, and imaginative play
Art supplies	Drawing, painting, craft stations	Encourages creativity, sensory exploration, and expression
Music and movement	Instruments, rhythm activities, dance	Provides sensory feedback, self-regulation, and social engagement
Sensory tools	Fidgets, playdough, weighted items, light-up toys	Supports sensory regulation and emotional calming
Structured, adult-supported play	Guided turn-taking, imitation, simple problem-solving games	Strengthens communication, adaptive skills, and confidence
Peer-mediated play	Cooperative tasks like rolling a ball or completing a puzzle together	Encourages social reciprocity and skill generalization across settings

tunities to connect, communicate, and play. Gradual fading of device use, paired with structured, social activities, supports regulation and engagement across settings. By approaching screen-time management as a shared, relationship-centered effort, teachers can help students build the foundation for lifelong learning and participation. ■

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