

FOR THE MOM AT 5:45PM

What to do *right now.*

117 screen-free activities your kids will actually do —
no planning, no prep, no fight. Open anywhere. Start tonight.



● Connection

● Creative

● Active

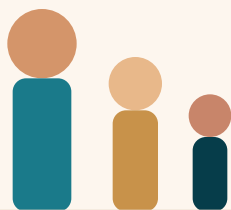
● Nature

● Sensory

● Learning

*"Your child is still the same child they were before screens took over.
These activities are how you find your way back to each other."*

— Dr. Jonathan Hale, Child Psychologist



No prep needed

All ages

Works tonight

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You're not failing.

It's 5:45pm. You're tired. They're on a screen. You know what's coming if you try to take it away. That moment of standing in your own kitchen, dreading the fight — that's not a parenting failure. That's what screen dependency actually looks like from the inside.

You don't need more willpower. You don't need a better rule system. You need one thing to do right now — something that works when you're already running on empty. That's exactly what this is.

“Your child is still the same child they were before screens took over. These activities are how you find your way back to each other — one small moment at a time.”

One principle before you start: *Your presence is the activity. Everything in this guide works better when you're genuinely there — not supervising from across the room, not on your own phone. Five minutes of real attention outperforms an hour of managed distance. Every time.*

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01 CONNECTION

15 min · All ages

The Curiosity Walk

Head outside together with one rule: your child leads. Wherever they want to go, you follow. No phones, no agenda, no destination. Just follow their curiosity for 15 minutes.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Show me what you notice. I'm following you."

WHY IT WORKS

Children who feel genuinely led — not managed — open up more. Following your child physically signals their direction matters. Trust before anything else.

02 CONNECTION

10 min · All ages

The Dinner Question Game

Write questions on slips of paper and put them in a jar. Each person pulls one and everyone answers. No phones, no judgment on any answer.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"What was the weirdest or funniest thing that happened today?"

WHY IT WORKS

Replaces 'how was your day' — which gets one-word answers — with a question that requires a story. Stories build co-regulation and connection.

03 CONNECTION

10 min · All ages

The Compliment Circle

Sit together at dinner or bedtime. Each person gives every other person one specific, honest compliment — something actually noticed, not 'you're nice.' No deflecting.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"I noticed something about you this week and I want to say it out loud."

WHY IT WORKS

Specific praise activates the prefrontal cortex. Children who regularly give and receive specific acknowledgment develop stronger self-regulation and lower screen-seeking behavior.

The Memory Map

Get a large piece of paper. Draw your neighborhood, family history, places you've visited. Each person adds something the other doesn't know. No phones — draw from memory.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Draw somewhere that matters to you. I'll add something too."

WHY IT WORKS

Narrative mapping activates the Default Mode Network — the brain system responsible for self-concept and creative thinking. Screens suppress this system more than any other.

The Guessing Game

One person thinks of something — an animal, a person, a place. Everyone asks yes/no questions to guess it. No phones, no Googling. Play until someone gets it right.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Think of something I would never guess. I dare you."

WHY IT WORKS

Deductive reasoning games activate executive function in exactly the areas screen dependency weakens. The competitive element keeps engagement high without external stimulation.

Letter Writing

Each person writes a letter to someone they care about — a grandparent, a friend, a future self. Paper and pen. Mail the ones worth mailing. Keep the rest in a box.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"I want to write someone a letter tonight. Will you write one too?"

WHY IT WORKS

Handwriting activates different neural pathways than typing. The slowness of letter writing produces a quality of reflection that digital communication neurologically cannot replicate.

The Gratitude Jar

Get a jar. Each day, everyone writes one thing they're grateful for on a slip of paper and adds it. Once a month, read them all together. Watch the jar fill.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"What's one good thing from today — even something tiny?"

WHY IT WORKS

Daily gratitude practice produces measurable reductions in anxiety and screen-seeking behavior within three weeks of consistent practice.

The Question Box

Put a box in a central place. Anytime anyone is curious about something, write it on a slip. Once a week, pick one and explore it together.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Put any question in the box. We'll figure out the answer together."

WHY IT WORKS

Curiosity rituals build the internal motivation that screens suppress. A child with an active curiosity practice is neurologically less dependent on external stimulation.

Reading Aloud

Read a book aloud together — one person reads, everyone listens. Even teenagers. Pick something genuinely good. Read one chapter a night and stop before it gets boring.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"I'm going to read something out loud tonight. You don't have to listen — but you might want to."

WHY IT WORKS

Being read to by a trusted adult is one of the oldest and most effective co-regulation tools available. The voice of an attuned parent reading aloud measurably reduces cortisol at all ages.

The Interview

Your child interviews you like a journalist. They ask any questions they want — about your childhood, worst day, fears, favorite memory. You answer honestly. Switch roles if they want.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Interview me. You can ask anything. I'll answer honestly."

WHY IT WORKS

Children who know their family's stories show significantly higher resilience and emotional regulation. This positions the child as the curious expert — a rare and powerful role.

The Bucket List Session

Everyone writes their own bucket list — places to go, things to make, experiences to have, skills to learn. Share them. Find two things that could become real family plans.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Write 10 things you want to do before you're 30. I'll write mine too."

WHY IT WORKS

Future-oriented thinking activates the prefrontal cortex and builds the self-concept that screen dependency erodes. A child with clear desires is less dependent on external stimulation.

The Before-Bed Ritual

Every night, no phones: one thing that went well, one thing that was hard, one thing you're looking forward to tomorrow. Same three questions. Every night. For the rest of their childhood.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Tell me one good thing, one hard thing, and one thing you're excited about."

WHY IT WORKS

Predictable daily connection rituals are the single variable most associated with sustained reduction in screen dependency. This one costs 10 minutes. It returns everything.

Two Truths and a Lie

Everyone comes up with two true things about themselves and one lie. The group tries to guess the lie. Go deeper than surface facts — this gets revealing fast.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"I'm going to say three things about myself. One of them is a lie. Guess which one."

WHY IT WORKS

Perspective-taking games strengthen theory of mind — the developmental capacity that screen dependency most directly impairs in children under 12.

The Feelings Check-In

At the same time each day, everyone names one word for how they feel and rates it 1-10. No explanation required. Just naming. Keep a notebook and look back monthly.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"One word for how you feel right now. Just one. Any word is right."

WHY IT WORKS

Named emotions activate the prefrontal cortex and reduce amygdala reactivity. Children who regularly name feelings are measurably more resilient and less dysregulated.

The Appreciation Round

Before a meal or at bedtime, each person appreciates one thing someone else in the family did that day. No reciprocating. Just give and receive.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Tell me one thing someone in this family did today that you appreciated."

WHY IT WORKS

Systematic appreciation practice shifts family culture away from complaint-orientation. Families that appreciate daily show lower conflict and higher cooperation within two weeks.

The Childhood Story

Tell your child a story from your own childhood — something funny, embarrassing, or scary. Something you've never told them. Let them ask questions.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Can I tell you something that happened to me when I was your age?"

WHY IT WORKS

Intergenerational storytelling builds what researchers call the 'narrative self' — one of the strongest predictors of children's emotional resilience and identity stability.

The Wish List

Each person makes a wish list — experiences to have, things to see, feel, learn, make, visit. Share the lists. Circle the ones that overlap.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"If you could do anything this year — anything — what would be on your list?"

WHY IT WORKS

Shared future orientation creates family cohesion and gives children something to anticipate that doesn't involve a screen. Anticipation is neurologically protective.

Phone-Free Dinner

Phones go in a basket before dinner. No rule about what to talk about. Just eat together without the exits. Let the silence be okay. Let the conversation happen.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Phones in the basket. Dinner's ready."

WHY IT WORKS

The simple act of removing devices from the dinner table increases conversational turns by an average of 40% within one week, regardless of family communication style.

The Apology Practice

Teach the three-part apology: what you did, why it hurt, what you'll do differently. Model it yourself first. Let your child practice on something recent.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"I want to show you what a real apology sounds like. Can I practice on you?"

WHY IT WORKS

Children who learn and practice structured apology show significantly higher conflict-resolution capacity and lower aggression — skills that transfer directly to peer relationships.

The Legacy Box

Get a shoebox. Each family member adds one object that represents who they are right now. Write a note explaining it. Seal it. Open it in a year.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"I want to put something in a box that shows who we are right now. What would you put in?"

WHY IT WORKS

Object-based narrative strengthens autobiographical memory and gives children a concrete anchor for identity — a powerful buffer against the identity diffusion that screen dependency creates.

The Map of Kindness

Draw a map of your neighborhood. Mark every place where someone has been kind to your family. Add to it weekly.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Let's draw our neighborhood and mark every place where something good happened."

WHY IT WORKS

Attention to kindness in the environment shifts neural baseline from threat-scanning to possibility-scanning — a fundamental shift in how the brain processes everyday experience.

Ask Me Anything

Your child gets five questions. You answer all of them honestly, even the hard ones. No deflecting. Model transparency.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"You have five questions. I'll answer them all. Go."

WHY IT WORKS

Children of parents who answer honestly — even imperfectly — develop significantly higher trust in adult relationships and are more likely to come to parents during crisis.

The Forgiveness Conversation

Talk about something in your life you had to forgive — a teacher, a friend, yourself. Ask your child if they're holding anything. Sit with it together.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Can I tell you about something I had to forgive someone for? It took me a long time."

WHY IT WORKS

Witnessing parental emotional processing teaches children that difficult emotions are survivable and resolvable — one of the most important lessons for emotional regulation.

The Recipe Card

Write down a family recipe together from memory. Add the story behind it: who made it, when, what it meant. Illustrate the card. Put it somewhere visible.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Let's write down that recipe we always make — but also why we make it."

WHY IT WORKS

Food-based memory consolidation is among the most emotionally durable forms of family narrative. Children remember stories attached to food decades longer than abstract storytelling.

The Family Council

A short weekly meeting — everyone raises one thing that's bothering them and proposes one thing they want more of. No phones. No interrupting. Everyone gets heard.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"It's council time. One thing that's hard, one thing you want. I'll go first."

WHY IT WORKS

Children who have a regular voice in family decisions show lower rates of defiance, higher cooperation, and significantly lower screen dependency.

The Photo Walk

Give your child one device for photos only — no apps, no notifications. Walk together and each person photographs 10 things that feel beautiful or interesting.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're going for a walk and each of us gets to photograph 10 things. Anything. Go."

WHY IT WORKS

Intentional photography activates aesthetic attention — a mode of perception that screens passively consume but rarely develop.

The Timeline

Draw a long line on paper. Mark the year your child was born at one end and the present at the other. Each person adds 10 moments that mattered.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Let's draw your life so far. You mark the moments that mattered. I'll add what I remember."

WHY IT WORKS

Collaborative timeline construction consolidates autobiographical memory and gives children a sense of narrative continuity — essential protection against identity fragmentation.

The Promise Jar

Each person writes one promise to the family — small, specific, achievable. Fold them and put them in a jar. Read them in a month.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Write one promise you can actually keep. I'll write one too."

WHY IT WORKS

Promise-making and tracking builds integrity and accountability in children when practiced in low-stakes, shame-free environments.

The Surprise Breakfast

One child secretly plans and makes breakfast for the family — or helps you make it as a surprise. Let them choose everything. Let them be proud.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"I need your help with a secret plan for tomorrow morning."

WHY IT WORKS

Prosocial behavior directed at family members produces oxytocin release in both giver and receiver. Children who regularly give to their families develop stronger attachment security.

The Hard Question

Pick one hard question — death, God, fairness, fear — and sit with it together. You don't have to have the answer. Think out loud together without rushing to resolution.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"I've been thinking about something hard. Can I think out loud with you for a minute?"

WHY IT WORKS

Children who are included in genuine philosophical uncertainty develop significantly higher tolerance for ambiguity — a core executive function and one of the primary casualties of screen dependency.

31

CREATIVE

20 min · Ages 4-12

Story Stones

Collect 10 rocks from outside. Each person draws one image on each stone. Take turns pulling stones randomly and building a story together.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Pick three stones and start a story. I'll add to it."

WHY IT WORKS

Randomness removes performance pressure. Children who resist creative activities engage easily when there is no wrong answer.

32

CREATIVE

20 min · Ages 6-14

Origami Challenge

Find a beginner origami tutorial together, then put the device aside. Make the same thing together — frogs, cranes, boats. Race. Help each other. Celebrate imperfect results.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"I have no idea how to do this. Let's figure it out together."

WHY IT WORKS

Admitting you don't know something and working it out together in front of your child is one of the most powerful modeling moves available. It teaches that confusion is not failure.

33

CREATIVE

45 min · All ages

Family Talent Show

Everyone prepares one act — a joke, a trick, a song, a poem, anything. Give 20 minutes to prepare, then perform for each other. Judge on enthusiasm, not skill.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're doing a talent show tonight. You have 20 minutes. Go."

WHY IT WORKS

Performance in a safe, supportive context builds the emotional regulation skills that excessive screen use most directly suppresses.

Journaling Together

Each person gets a notebook. Set a timer for 10 minutes and write — anything at all. Share what you wrote or keep it private.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"I'm going to write for 10 minutes. You can write too, or just sit with me."

WHY IT WORKS

Writing for 10 minutes reduces cortisol and activates the prefrontal cortex. Children who journal regularly show significantly higher emotional regulation capacity.

Drawing Portraits

Each person draws a portrait of someone else in the family. No erasing allowed, no giving up, no comparing. Display them somewhere visible. Update once a year.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Draw me. I'm going to draw you. No erasing."

WHY IT WORKS

The no-erasing rule removes perfectionism and models that imperfect output is still worth making — a lesson screens actively undermine.

The Soundtrack Game

Describe a scene — a chase, a sad moment, a celebration — and everyone hums what the music would sound like. Take turns being the director.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"I'm going to describe a scene. You hum what the music would sound like."

WHY IT WORKS

Translating emotion into sound develops cross-modal emotional intelligence — a capacity that passive screen consumption actually impairs over time.

The Comic Strip

Give everyone a blank piece of paper folded into 6 panels. Each person draws their own comic about anything. Share at the end. Frame the best ones.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"You have 6 panels and 20 minutes. Make a comic about anything."

WHY IT WORKS

Sequential visual storytelling develops narrative structure, cause-and-effect thinking, and perspective-taking simultaneously — all capacities that screen dependency measurably erodes.

The Improv Game

Play 'yes, and' — one person starts a story or scene, the next says 'yes, and...' and adds to it. Nothing can be denied. See how far the story goes.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Start a story with one sentence. I'll say 'yes, and' and add to it. Then you go again."

WHY IT WORKS

The 'yes, and' structure builds collaborative thinking and reduces the fear of being wrong — a fear that excessive screen use amplifies by providing infinite low-stakes entertainment.

Build Something Weird

Set out recyclables, tape, scissors, and markers. Build the weirdest possible machine, creature, or invention in 25 minutes. Name it. Give it a backstory.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're building the weirdest thing possible. Here's tape and cardboard. Go."

WHY IT WORKS

Open-ended construction play activates spatial reasoning and divergent thinking — two cognitive capacities that distinguish high-screen and low-screen children more than almost any other measure.

The Collaborative Poem

Each person writes one line. Fold the paper so the next person can only see the last word. Keep going until the page is full. Read the whole thing aloud at the end.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Write one line of a poem. Any line. Then fold the paper so I can only see the last word."

WHY IT WORKS

Chance-based creative collaboration removes the fear of judgment that blocks creative expression in screen-dependent children.

Shadow Puppets

Flashlight against a white wall after dark. Make characters with your hands. Build a short story — 3 scenes, any subject. Let your child direct the plot.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're putting on a shadow puppet show. You're the director. I'll do whatever you say."

WHY IT WORKS

Children directing adults in play activates confidence and executive function simultaneously — the exact neural systems that passive screen consumption suppresses most aggressively.

The Alphabet Story

Tell a story where each sentence starts with the next letter of the alphabet. Take turns. Help each other. Laugh at the impossible letters.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're telling a story where every sentence starts with the next letter of the alphabet. I'll start with A."

WHY IT WORKS

Constrained creativity — creativity within rules — produces more engagement than open-ended prompts in children over age 7. The constraint becomes the game.

Fashion Show

Everyone has 15 minutes to create an outfit from things around the house. Walk a runway, announce yourselves dramatically, and vote on categories: most elegant, most ridiculous, most creative.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Fashion show in 15 minutes. Make an outfit from whatever you can find."

WHY IT WORKS

Play-based performance that invites absurdity builds emotional flexibility — the capacity to move between emotional states freely.

The Secret Language

Invent a family secret language together — codes, symbols, gestures that mean specific things. Write it down. Use it for a week.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Let's invent our own secret language. Only our family knows it."

WHY IT WORKS

Symbolic play at this level activates metalinguistic awareness — the understanding that language itself is a system. A strong predictor of literacy and creative problem-solving.

Sculpture Garden

Use clay, playdough, or aluminum foil to make small sculptures. Arrange them on the kitchen table. Give each one a name and a story.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're making a sculpture garden. Your sculpture can be anything — real or imaginary."

WHY IT WORKS

Three-dimensional making activates spatial reasoning in ways that two-dimensional drawing does not. Children who regularly do 3D construction work show measurably higher math performance.

The Word Game

One person picks a word. Everyone writes down 10 words it makes them think of, then shares. Discuss the different paths each person took.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"I'm going to say a word. Write down the first 10 things it makes you think of."

WHY IT WORKS

Free association exercises activate the Default Mode Network — the neural system most suppressed by screen use — and give parents insight into a child's inner world.

The Newspaper Collage

Cut up a newspaper or magazine into words and images. Make collages that tell a story, an argument, or just look interesting. No plan required.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're making collages from this newspaper. Use whatever words and pictures feel right."

WHY IT WORKS

Repurposing found materials builds resourcefulness — the capacity to make something from what's already there. Screens train the opposite: waiting for content to arrive.

The Finish-My-Drawing Game

One person draws a random squiggle or abstract shape. The next person turns it into something recognizable. Switch. Go back and forth until the page is full.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"I'm going to draw a random squiggle. You turn it into something. Ready?"

WHY IT WORKS

Transforming abstract marks into meaning is a foundational creative skill. Children who can do this consistently show higher tolerance for ambiguity and lower anxiety.

49

ACTIVE

30 min · Ages 4-14

Build a Fort

Blankets, chairs, pillows, cushions. No instructions. Set a timer for 20 minutes and build the best fort possible. Then spend 10 minutes inside it together.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're building a fort and I need your engineering expertise."

WHY IT WORKS

Physical creation activates the same reward system screens use — without the dependency cycle. The togetherness inside the fort matters more than the fort itself.

50

ACTIVE

60 min · All ages

Board Game Night

Pick one board game. One rule: phones stay in another room for the entire game. No exceptions. Winner picks the next game.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Phones in the kitchen. Game on the table. Let's go."

WHY IT WORKS

Structured competitive play with family members provides the achievement and social belonging that screens simulate. The real version is neurologically superior in every measurable way.

51

ACTIVE

30 min · Ages 5-12

Scavenger Hunt

Write 10 clues that lead around the house or yard. Each clue leads to the next. Hide a small prize at the end.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"I hid something and left you clues. Find it."

WHY IT WORKS

Treasure hunts activate the dopamine reward system in a healthy, episodic way — a spike followed by completion — rather than the continuous loop screens create.

Mission Walk

Pick a mission before you leave: count all the red things, find 5 signs of spring, wave to 3 strangers. The mission gives the walk structure.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're going for a walk with a mission. Here's the mission..."

WHY IT WORKS

Goal-oriented outdoor walks engage the prefrontal cortex while providing the dopamine reset that movement produces. The mission prevents the 'I'm bored' response.

The Blindfold Taste Test

Prepare 8 small tastes of different foods. Blindfold your child. They taste, guess, and rate each one. Switch roles. Keep score.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"I have a challenge for you and I promise it's weird."

WHY IT WORKS

Novel sensory experiences activate the brain's reward system without the artificial stimulation loop. The slight absurdity creates shared humor — one of the strongest relationship builders available.

Dance Party

One song each. Everyone picks their song, everyone dances to everyone's song — no opt-outs. Host picks the playlist order. Ridiculous encouraged.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're having a dance party. Everyone picks one song. You first."

WHY IT WORKS

Synchronized movement with a caregiver produces oxytocin release in children of all ages. The silliness is not incidental — shared laughter is one of the fastest co-regulation tools available.

Yoga Together

Find a beginner family yoga video, watch the first 30 seconds, then put the device away and do the poses from memory. It will be imperfect. That's fine.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're doing yoga but we're going to try to remember the poses without looking."

WHY IT WORKS

Shared physical challenge where adults visibly struggle alongside children equalizes the dynamic and models that difficulty is not failure.

The Obstacle Course

Design an indoor obstacle course together — crawl under the table, jump over a pillow, spin three times, balance on one foot. Time each other.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're building an obstacle course in the living room. Help me design it."

WHY IT WORKS

Collaborative physical design followed by competitive execution engages both planning and motor systems. The design phase is as valuable as the play phase.

Balloon Volleyball

One balloon, one rule: it can't touch the floor. Play in the living room. Make up scoring. Add rules as you go.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"The balloon can't touch the floor. That's the only rule. Ready?"

WHY IT WORKS

Simple rules with emergent complexity mirror the structure of healthy play. Children who play with high-structure simple rules develop better improvisational reasoning.

The Floor Is Lava

Everything except designated 'safe spots' is lava. Set a timer. Add props. Rescue each other. Die dramatically.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"The floor is lava. Starting in three seconds."

WHY IT WORKS

Classic imaginative physical play activates all major neural systems simultaneously — motor, emotional, social, and imaginative. Among the most complete forms of child development in a living room.

59

ACTIVE

10 min · All ages

Jumping Jack Challenge

See how many jumping jacks the family can do in 2 minutes combined. Record the number. Try to beat it next week. Track it on the wall.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're setting a family jumping jack record. Two minutes. Everyone ready?"

WHY IT WORKS

Brief intense physical activity with a measurable goal and a family record creates the achievement-motivation loop that screens exploit artificially.

60

ACTIVE

20 min · Ages 6-14

The Tray Game

Put 20 objects on a tray. Everyone studies them for 60 seconds. Cover the tray. Each person writes down everything they remember.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Study this tray for 60 seconds. Then I'm covering it and you have to remember everything."

WHY IT WORKS

Visual memory exercises activate the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex — both regions measurably impaired by heavy screen use and improved by regular low-tech memory practice.

61

ACTIVE

20 min · All ages

The Charades Sprint

Teams of two, against the clock. 60 seconds, as many as possible. Categories rotate: movies, animals, jobs, things in a kitchen.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"You and me against the clock. 60 seconds. I'll act, you guess. Ready?"

WHY IT WORKS

Real-time non-verbal communication games strengthen theory of mind and social reading — capacities that heavy screen use measurably reduces, especially in children under 10.

62

ACTIVE

15 min · All ages

Freeze Dance

Play music. When it stops — freeze. Anyone who moves is out, but they become the music operator. Go until one person is left.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"When the music stops, you freeze. If you move, you're out. I'll start the music."

WHY IT WORKS

Inhibitory control — the ability to stop a movement mid-action — is one of the executive functions most directly eroded by passive screen use. This game exercises it with laughter.

63

ACTIVE

15 min · All ages

Pillow Fight Rules

Establish three rules together before starting. Play for 5 minutes. Enforce the rules seriously. Let your child be the referee on yours.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're having a pillow fight but we have to agree on three rules first. You go first."

WHY IT WORKS

Collaborative rule-setting for physical play teaches negotiation, fairness, and rule-following simultaneously. Letting children enforce rules on adults is particularly powerful.

64

ACTIVE

30 min · All ages

The Penny Hike

Start walking. At every corner, flip a penny — heads right, tails left. Walk for 15 minutes following the coin. Find your way back however you want.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're going for a walk where a penny decides where we go. Ready?"

WHY IT WORKS

Structured randomness in movement activates curiosity and attention to environment — the opposite of the passive, directed movement of screen-mediated content.

65

ACTIVE

15 min · All ages

The Balance Challenge

Stand on one foot. Eyes open: 30 seconds. Eyes closed: 30 seconds. Arms down, then crossed. See who can hold each version longest.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Stand on one foot. Arms out. Ready? We're timing you."

WHY IT WORKS

Balance training activates the cerebellum, which has dense connections to prefrontal regulation systems. Children with better proprioceptive control show better emotional regulation.

LEARNING

18 activities

66

LEARNING

25 min · Ages 5-14

Kitchen Science

Baking soda and vinegar volcano. Milk and food coloring with dish soap. Homemade slime. Pick one simple experiment, do it together, and talk about why it works.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"I want to try something — I need a lab assistant."

WHY IT WORKS

Curiosity-based learning with a parent present is one of the most powerful off-screen activities. The child's brain enters the same engaged state as quality screen time — without the dopamine spike.

Cooking Together

Pick a meal your child would actually eat. Let them lead the cooking — you assist. Read the recipe together and eat what you made.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"You're the chef tonight. I'm your sous chef. Tell me what to do."

WHY IT WORKS

Competence is one of the five core motivational needs driving screen use. Cooking delivers mastery, creativity, and tangible results — all of which screens provide artificially.

Puzzle Night

A 500-piece puzzle, no phones, background music allowed. Work on it together for 45 minutes. Leave it out — the ongoing project creates a daily connection point.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"I started a puzzle. Come help me for a bit."

WHY IT WORKS

Puzzle-solving builds sustained attention — the exact capacity that screen dependency erodes. An ongoing puzzle creates a physical artifact of shared effort that strengthens family identity.

Baking from Scratch

Pick a recipe requiring real effort — bread, cookies, a cake. Make it entirely from scratch. Let your child measure, mix, and lead. Eat it together when done.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're making something from scratch tonight. I need help."

WHY IT WORKS

The delay between effort and reward in baking — waiting for dough to rise, cookies to cool — builds frustration tolerance that screens systematically destroy.

The Map Quiz

Print or draw a blank world map. Each person tries to label as many countries as they can from memory. Score it. Talk about the ones nobody got.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Here's a blank map. Write in as many country names as you can remember. No phones."

WHY IT WORKS

Geographic knowledge requires a form of spatial-categorical memory that screen-based information delivery rarely develops. Paper-based recall practice builds retention in ways passive viewing cannot.

The Documentary Debrief

Watch one short documentary together — 20 minutes or less. No phones during. Afterward, each person shares one thing they didn't know and one question it raised.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're watching something together. 20 minutes. Then I want to know what question it gave you."

WHY IT WORKS

Active viewing followed by structured debrief transforms passive consumption into genuine learning. The debrief question activates curiosity that extends well beyond the screen session.

The Money Lesson

Give your child a real financial scenario — your grocery budget, a vacation savings plan, a bill. Let them do the math with a pencil.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Here's a real money problem we have. Help me figure it out."

WHY IT WORKS

Financial literacy delivered through real family situations is retained at dramatically higher rates than abstract instruction. It also builds genuine inclusion that reduces screen-seeking.

Plant Something

Plant seeds in a pot or patch of soil together. Herbs work best — basil, mint, chives. Water them daily. Cook with them when they grow.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're going to grow something. You're in charge of keeping it alive."

WHY IT WORKS

Responsibility for a living thing is one of the most powerful antidotes to screen dependency. The daily ritual of checking creates an alternative attachment point.

The Bug Hunt

Get a magnifying glass and go outside. Find 5 different bugs. Look closely at each one. Sketch them in a notebook — as detailed as possible.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're going bug hunting. Magnifying glass. Let's find five different ones."

WHY IT WORKS

Close observational drawing activates a different attentional system than reading or screen use — one associated with patience, detail orientation, and deep focus.

The Human Body Quiz

Take turns asking each other human body questions — how many bones, what does the liver do, what makes us hiccup. Look up the answers together on paper.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"I'll ask you something about the human body. Then you ask me something. No phones."

WHY IT WORKS

Questions about their own biology are among the most highly retained topics across all age groups. Recall-based learning around the body capitalizes on children's natural self-interest.

The Timeline of History

Draw a long line. Each person adds 5 historical events they actually care about — inventions, wars, discoveries, cultural moments. Compare what each person thinks matters.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Let's draw history together. You add 5 things that matter to you. I'll add mine."

WHY IT WORKS

Values-based historical selection reveals what a child considers important and activates the kind of historical thinking that passive content delivery never produces.

The Word Root Game

Start with a word root — 'port,' 'aud,' 'vis,' 'script.' Each person lists as many words using that root as they can in two minutes.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're going to see how many words we know that have the same root. I'll start."

WHY IT WORKS

Morphological awareness — understanding word roots and patterns — is one of the strongest predictors of vocabulary growth and academic performance.

The Science Experiment Notebook

Start a shared family science notebook. Each week, one person picks something they're curious about and designs a simple experiment to test it.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"You're curious about something. Let's design an experiment to test it. What do you want to know?"

WHY IT WORKS

Experimental thinking — hypothesis, test, result — is the core of scientific reasoning. It cannot be developed through observation of content.

The Math Game

Mental math challenge — take turns giving each other problems slightly above comfort level. No calculators. Make it a game with points.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"I'm going to give you a math problem. Just try — there's no wrong attempt."

WHY IT WORKS

Mathematical fluency built through low-stakes social play is retained significantly better than worksheet-based practice and reduces math anxiety.

The Nature Notebook

Give each person a blank notebook. Go outside for 20 minutes. Draw and write about exactly what you observe — weather, plants, animals, sky. Date each entry.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're going outside to draw what we see. Exactly what we see. Not how it should look."

WHY IT WORKS

Children who maintain nature notebooks across seasons show measurably higher patience and observational acuity.

Foreign Language Night

Pick a language — any one. Learn 10 words or one sentence together. Use those words all evening for anything they fit.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're learning 10 words in a new language tonight. Repeat after me."

WHY IT WORKS

Language exposure, even brief and playful, activates the phonological systems that underlie all literacy. The shared novelty of learning something new together also produces strong bonding effects.

The Invention Session

Identify a problem in your house or neighborhood. Design an invention to solve it. Sketch it. Name it. Pitch it.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"What's something in this house that annoys you? Let's design something that fixes it."

WHY IT WORKS

Problem-identification followed by solution design is the core of engineering thinking. Children regularly invited to design solutions show significantly higher creative confidence.

83

LEARNING

20 min · Ages 6-14

The Atlas Exploration

Open a physical atlas or world map. Close your eyes, point to a random location. Look it up together. Do five locations.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Point anywhere on this map with your eyes closed. That's where we're exploring tonight."

WHY IT WORKS

Geographic curiosity opened through randomness activates exploratory learning. Physical maps develop spatial reasoning that digital maps do not.

NATURE

18 activities

84

NATURE

20 min · All ages

Backyard Stargazing

Lay blankets outside after dark. Use a stargazing app for 5 minutes, then put the phone away. Just look. Count satellites. Make up constellation names.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Come outside with me. I want to show you something."

WHY IT WORKS

Darkness and stillness reset the overstimulated nervous system within minutes. Children who resist this idea almost always want to stay longer once they are out there.

Nature Art

Collect leaves, sticks, rocks, and flowers from outside. Arrange them into art on a flat surface. Photograph it before the wind takes it. The impermanence is the point.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Let's make something that only exists for today."

WHY IT WORKS

Transient art removes performance pressure and teaches that value does not require permanence — directly countering the screen's promise of infinite preservation.

Cloud Watching

Lie on the grass or a blanket and look at clouds for 15 minutes. Name shapes. Build a story around what you see. Stay until the conversation winds down.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Come lie down with me for a few minutes. I want to show you something."

WHY IT WORKS

Unstructured outdoor observation is the fastest known reset for the overstimulated dopamine system. Even 10 minutes produces measurable changes in cortisol and attention capacity.

The Sunset Watch

Go outside 20 minutes before sunset. Watch the whole thing. Name every color you see. Don't go inside until the last light is gone.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"The sun sets in 20 minutes. Come watch it with me."

WHY IT WORKS

Deliberately witnessing natural beauty activates the awe response — associated with reduced self-focus, increased prosocial behavior, and significant stress reduction.

The Bird Count

Go to a window or outside. Count every different bird species you can find in 20 minutes. Sketch them. Try to identify them by name.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're counting birds for 20 minutes. Every different kind is a point."

WHY IT WORKS

Birdwatching trains patient, attentive observation — a mode of attention that is precisely the opposite of the rapid, reactive processing that screen use reinforces.

Rock Collection

Go outside and each person finds 5 rocks that feel interesting — for any reason. Bring them home, wash them, line them up, give each one a name and a personality.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Find me 5 rocks that feel right to you. Any kind. We're bringing them home."

WHY IT WORKS

Object collection in nature activates categorization and aesthetic judgment simultaneously — two cognitive capacities developed through tactile engagement and suppressed by screen-mediated observation.

Puddle Science

After rain: go out and observe every puddle. What lives in it? What's the surface doing? Drop a stone. Float a leaf. Draw a map of all the puddles on your block.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're going out to observe puddles. I'm serious. Bring a stick."

WHY IT WORKS

Ordinary natural phenomena examined closely produce the same cognitive engagement as structured science experiments.

The Moon Journal

Every clear night for a month, go outside and draw the moon in a small notebook. Note the date, the phase, the time.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're starting a moon journal. Go look at the moon tonight and draw what you see."

WHY IT WORKS

Long-duration observation projects teach children that some phenomena require sustained attention over time — a direct corrective to the instant-gratification structure of screen content.

92

NATURE

25 min · Ages 4-12

The Leaf Collection

Collect 10 different leaves. Press them in a heavy book for a week. Label each one. Make a page for each in a scrapbook. Look them up together.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Find me 10 different leaves. They have to actually be different — shape, size, color."

WHY IT WORKS

Classification activities in nature activate taxonomic thinking — the ability to organize the world by shared characteristics — foundational to scientific and mathematical reasoning.

93

NATURE

20 min · All ages

Sunrise Watch

Set alarms for 15 minutes before sunrise. Bring a blanket. Watch from outside or a window. Say nothing for the first 5 minutes. Then describe what you see.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Set your alarm tonight. We're watching the sunrise together. I'll have hot chocolate."

WHY IT WORKS

Shared early-morning experience creates a memory with strong emotional encoding. Events that disrupt routine are retained more vividly and become part of family identity.

94

NATURE

15 min · All ages

The Wind Study

Go outside on a windy day with strips of ribbon. Find the windiest spot, the calmest spot, and the spot where the wind changes direction. Map it.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're going to map the wind. Come outside."

WHY IT WORKS

Invisible phenomena observed through visible effects develop the scientific habit of inferring what cannot be directly seen — core to physical intuition.

95

NATURE

15 min · All ages

Night Sounds

Go outside after dark and just listen for 10 minutes. Eyes closed. Count how many distinct sounds you can identify. No talking for the first 5 minutes.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're going outside to listen. Just listen. Close your eyes when we get there."

WHY IT WORKS

Auditory attention practice in quiet natural settings measurably increases the capacity to sustain attention in noisy, distracting environments.

96

NATURE

20 min · All ages

The Shadow Experiment

On a sunny day, trace each person's shadow at 9am, noon, and 3pm in chalk on the pavement. Compare the lengths. Talk about why they change.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Stand here. I'm tracing your shadow. We're doing this again at noon and again at 3."

WHY IT WORKS

Observable natural experiments — ones where the child is the instrument — produce higher retention and more genuine understanding than any explanation.

97

NATURE

15 min · All ages

The Smell Walk

Go for a 15-minute walk focused entirely on smell. Crush a leaf, smell wet pavement, find a flower. Name each smell. Invent names for the ones that don't have them.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"This walk is only about smell. Everything you notice should be something you smell."

WHY IT WORKS

Single-sense focus dramatically increases sensory acuity and present-moment awareness — the neurological opposite of the multisensory overwhelm that heavy screen use produces.

98

NATURE

15 min · All ages

Cloud Journal

For two weeks, draw the sky at the same time each day. Note cloud types, color, coverage. Watch the patterns emerge. Try to predict weather from what you observe.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Same time each day, we draw the sky. We're starting tonight."

WHY IT WORKS

Pattern recognition across time requires exactly the kind of sustained attention that screen dependency erodes. Cloud journaling develops it painlessly.

99

NATURE

20 min · All ages

The Texture Hunt

Go outside with a piece of paper and crayons. Make rubbings of 10 different textures — bark, pavement, leaves, brick, stone. Label each. Arrange them as art.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're making rubbings of everything outside. Paper against a surface, crayon on top. Show me 10."

WHY IT WORKS

Tactile engagement with natural surfaces activates somatosensory processing that screen use starves. Children who regularly engage texture show higher sensory integration.

100

NATURE

20 min · Ages 6-14

The Weather Station

Build a simple backyard weather station — a rain gauge from a jar, a wind vane from a straw. Record readings each day. Keep a weather log for a month.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're building a weather station. I need an engineer."

WHY IT WORKS

Building instruments and collecting real data engages the full scientific cycle — design, measure, record, interpret. No app delivers this. Only the physical world does.

101

NATURE

20 min · All ages

Fire (Candles)

Light several candles. Turn off the lights. Sit together and just watch the flames for a few minutes. Then tell stories, ask questions, or sit quietly. No phones.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're turning the lights off and lighting candles tonight. Sit with me."

WHY IT WORKS

Firelight is neurologically calming — it activates the parasympathetic nervous system within minutes. Families who practice candlelight evenings report significant drops in bedtime conflict.

SENSORY

16 activities

102

SENSORY

20 min · Ages 3-10

The Texture Box

Fill a box with 10 objects of different textures — sandpaper, silk, pine cone, cotton ball, pasta. Blindfolded, each person reaches in, describes what they feel, and guesses the object.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"There are 10 things in this box. Feel them without looking. Tell me what each one is."

WHY IT WORKS

Tactile discrimination exercises build somatosensory processing and present-moment focus — the exact attentional capacity that screen use most consistently degrades.

The Sound Map

Sit still in one spot outside for 10 minutes. Draw a map of every sound you can hear — show direction, distance, and what you think is making it.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Sit still. Draw a map of every sound you hear. You can't move from this spot."

WHY IT WORKS

Spatial auditory attention activates a distinct attentional system from visual focus. It restores sensory balance in children overloaded by visual screen input.

Homemade Playdough

Make playdough from scratch: 2 cups flour, 1 cup salt, 2 tsp cream of tartar, 2 tbsp oil, 1.5 cups boiling water, food coloring. Knead together. Then play.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're making something you can play with. You're going to help make it from scratch."

WHY IT WORKS

The process of making the play material — not just using it — engages mastery motivation and increases subsequent engagement with the activity by measurable margins.

The Soothing Ritual

Before bed: lights low, no screens, a small ritual your child helps design — specific music, a kind of tea, a particular order of getting ready. Let them own it.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Let's design our bedtime ritual. You choose the music. You choose the order."

WHY IT WORKS

Personalized calming rituals designed by the child are adhered to at dramatically higher rates than parent-imposed routines. Child authorship of the ritual is the mechanism.

Ice Painting

Freeze food coloring into ice cubes. Give each person thick paper and several colored ice cubes. Paint by dragging and melting. Watch the colors blend.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Here's how we're painting tonight — with ice. Let me show you."

WHY IT WORKS

Process-based art with unpredictable outcomes teaches children that not controlling the result is compatible with making something beautiful.

Barefoot Walk

Go outside barefoot. Walk on grass, dirt, pavement, gravel. Name what each surface feels like. See how long you can stay on each one.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Take your shoes off. We're going outside. That's all."

WHY IT WORKS

Barefoot contact with natural surfaces activates proprioceptive and grounding responses that have measurable calming effects on the nervous system within minutes.

The Calm-Down Kit

Build a box together for the moments when someone needs to regulate — not as punishment, but as a tool. Each person picks 3 things to include.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're building a box for when things feel big. You pick three things that help you calm down."

WHY IT WORKS

Child-selected self-regulation tools are used voluntarily at far higher rates than adult-selected ones. Autonomy in regulation strategy selection is not permissiveness — it is neuroscience.

The Silent Dinner

Dinner without talking. Everyone communicates by gesture, writing, or expression only. No phones. Debrief afterward: what was hard, what was funny?

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Tonight we're having dinner without speaking. We can write or gesture. Ready?"

WHY IT WORKS

Deliberate constraint on familiar behavior activates the brain's problem-solving circuitry and creates shared humor — one of the fastest relationship-strengthening tools available.

The Rain Sit

When it rains: sit on a covered porch or by an open window and just watch and listen to the rain. No agenda. No conversation required. Stay for at least 10 minutes.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Come sit with me and watch the rain. We don't have to talk."

WHY IT WORKS

Passive observation of natural phenomena in companionable silence produces the deepest co-regulation available between parent and child — not conversation, but shared presence.

Face Painting

Face paint — or washable markers — each other's faces however you want. Mirror reveal at the end. Photograph it. Let them do yours without direction.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"I'm going to paint your face however you say. Then you're going to paint mine however you want."

WHY IT WORKS

Being painted and painting creates a reversal of the normal adult-controls-child dynamic. The child's authority over the parent's face produces genuine empowerment.

The Breathing Game

Teach box breathing — 4 counts in, 4 hold, 4 out, 4 hold — then time each other doing it for 2 minutes. Talk about where you feel it in your body.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"I want to show you a breathing trick. It sounds boring but it actually works."

WHY IT WORKS

Practiced breath regulation builds the same neural pathways that self-regulation of emotion requires. Framing it as a game and timing it removes resistance.

Pillow Pressure

Pile every pillow in the house on top of your child — gently, with their full participation and permission. They stay under for 2 minutes if they want.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"I'm going to bury you in pillows — just gently. You tell me if it's too much."

WHY IT WORKS

Gentle deep pressure activates the parasympathetic nervous system and produces calming effects that are well-documented in occupational therapy. Parents can provide this without clinical training.

The Humming Game

Everyone hums a song and the others guess it. Start simple. Go harder. Variations: hum with your mouth full, hum in harmony, hum a song nobody else knows.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"I'm humming something. Guess it."

WHY IT WORKS

Vocal vibration — humming specifically — stimulates the vagus nerve, the primary pathway of the parasympathetic nervous system. Humming together is literally calming, in a measurable physiological sense.

The Weighted Blanket Rest

Everyone finds their spot. Weighted blanket or heavy comforter. Set a timer for 15 minutes. No sleeping required — just stillness and quiet. No phones.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"We're doing a rest. 15 minutes. No sleeping required. Everyone finds their spot."

WHY IT WORKS

Scheduled quiet rest periods significantly reduce cortisol and restore attentional capacity. Families who introduce a daily rest period see bedtime conflict drop within a week.

The Candlelight Bath

Run a bath. Put battery-operated candles around it. No toys, no apps — just warm water and dim light. This is self-regulation, not a reward.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"I'm running you a bath tonight. Different kind of bath. Just for quiet."

WHY IT WORKS

Warm water immersion is one of the fastest interventions for stress hormone reduction available outside of medication. Paired with dim lighting and silence, it resets the nervous system in under 15 minutes.

The Good Morning Stretch

Before phones, before screens: 5 minutes of stretching together in the morning. You set the stretches, they follow. Then they lead one.

SAY THIS WORD FOR WORD

"Before anything else: five minutes of stretching. I'll start."

WHY IT WORKS

Morning physical activity before screen exposure sets attentional tone for the entire day. Children who move before screens show significantly lower screen-seeking behavior throughout the following 12 hours.

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