

# Digital Wellness Playbook

Helping Maryland's Teens  
Build a Healthier Relationship  
with Technology



A resource for students, families, and educators from the Governor's Office for Children and the Child Mind Institute.



# Why a Digital Wellness Playbook?

Technology is woven into the daily lives of young people – from the classroom to the group chat. When used well, it can connect, educate, and empower. But unrestricted, unguided use is linked to rising rates of anxiety, depression, sleep loss, and isolation. This playbook gives young people practical skills to manage their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors related to their digital lives - and gives families and educators the resources to support them.

## Who is this Book For?

CLASSROOM EDUCATORS	AFTER-SCHOOL STAFF	FAMILIES
<p><b>Grades 6–12 (Teen Playbook)</b></p> <p>School counselors, social workers, and psychologists</p> <p>General education and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) teachers</p>	<p>Boys &amp; Girls Club program staff</p> <p>Community-based organization staff</p> <p>Youth development coordinators</p> <p>Teen mentors and peer leaders (with adult oversight)</p>	<p>Caregivers of students Grades K-5</p> <p>Can be used independently at home</p> <p>Ideal as a take-home companion to continue to practice the school-based work</p>

## How to Use This Playbook

The Digital Wellness Playbook is a supplemental resource, not core curriculum. It is designed to help children ages 6–12 build emotional skills and develop a healthier relationship with technology. You don't need special training, just a willingness to sit with your child and explore it together.

This playbook has two parts:

- **A digital wellness resource guide** with curated articles on topics from screen time to online gaming
- **Skill-building activities** for elementary students (developed by the Child Mind Institute)

AT HOME	IN THE CLASSROOM	AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS
<p>Work through sections together, one at a time. Use it as a starting point for conversations about feelings and technology. No need to rush, one section per week is plenty.</p>	<p>Each skill section fits a 15–25 minute session. Use it during advisory, homeroom, or SEL time. The Feelings Scale and Breathing Log make great daily rituals.</p>	<p>The Digital Blueprint is excellent for group discussion. Use the mindfulness activities as program openers or closers.</p>

# Technology & Young People: What the Data Tells Us

**4x**

Young men ages 15–24 die by suicide at four times the rate of young women

**~2x**

Female high school students are nearly twice as likely as males to attempt suicide

**3+ hrs**

Daily social media use is linked to heightened risk of depression and anxiety

**46%**

Of teens say the internet has had a mostly negative effect on people their age

## Boys and Girls Experience Digital Life Differently

### BOYS & YOUNG MEN

- More likely to engage in **online gaming, sports betting, and gambling** — behaviors that spike during adolescence
- Less likely to **seek help** for mental health challenges; may use technology to avoid difficult emotions
- Higher exposure to **violent content and AI-generated relationships** that can substitute for real connection
- Report higher rates of **loneliness and social isolation** despite heavy device use

### GIRLS & YOUNG WOMEN

- More likely to experience **social comparison, cyberbullying, and body-image pressure** through social media
- Higher reported rates of **anxiety linked to social media**; more likely to lose sleep to scrolling
- More likely to **seek support** but may rely on online communities that reinforce negative self-talk
- Report more **distress from curated content** — selfie culture, filtered images, and peer comparisons

### WHAT ALL YOUNG PEOPLE SHARE

Regardless of gender, young people today navigate unprecedented digital pressures. The skills in this playbook — understanding emotions, practicing relaxation, reframing thoughts, managing intense feelings, and building mindfulness — are the foundation of digital wellness. When young people can recognize what they're feeling, they're better equipped to make intentional choices about how they use technology.

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# Digital Well-Being FAQ

For parents, caregivers, and educators — answers to the questions that come up most.

## Why is it so hard for my child (or me) to put the phone down?

It's not a willpower problem — it's engineering. Apps are designed to keep people engaged through notifications, infinite scroll, autoplay, streaks, and "variable rewards" (the slot machine effect of a social feed).

For children and teens, whose prefrontal cortex — the brain's braking system — is still under construction, stopping is biologically harder. This is not a character flaw. It's a design feature working exactly as intended.

## Is screen time always bad?

No. The research has shifted from how much time to what kind of use and what it crowds out.

Healthy use includes: creative projects, homework support, video calls with family, finding supportive communities, and learning new skills.

The "Crowding Out" Test: Is technology replacing sleep, physical activity, offline friendships, or schoolwork? If yes, it's time to recalibrate.

Age matters. Younger children need more structure and adult co-use. Older children need clearer boundaries, but also practice making their own decisions.

## What are the warning signs of problematic use?

Look for patterns that interfere with daily life:

- Irritability: intense anger or anxiety when the device is removed
- Neglect: skipping hygiene, meals, sleep, or schoolwork
- Secrecy: hiding devices or lying about time spent online
- Loss of Control: wanting to stop but feeling physically or emotionally "glued"
- Crowding Out: less time with friends, family, or offline interests

## A Note on Neurodiversity:

For children with ADHD, autism, anxiety, depression, or learning differences, technology may serve important functions: stimulation, calming, social connection, routine, or escape from stress.

The goal is not to shame the use, but to understand what need it is meeting — and whether it is also causing harm.

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## Practical Strategies

### How can we disconnect without starting a fight?

Focus on routines, not punishments. Clear, predictable "device-free times" work better than sudden crackdowns.

- Before bed: The Last Hour - aim for screen-free time before sleep to let the brain wind down
- The Bedroom Rule: charge devices in a common area overnight, not in the bedroom
- Meals: protect device-free family time at the table
- Modeling: adults should follow the same rules. Children are very good at noticing hypocrisy — a well-documented fact of family life.
- Empathize and redirect: validate that it can be difficult to pull away from screens, try to talk about their interests in the "offline" world, and maintain healthy boundaries around screens.

### What if my child is experiencing cyberbullying?

1. STOP — Do not engage or respond to the harasser.
2. BLOCK & REPORT — Use the platform's tools immediately.
3. DOCUMENT — Save screenshots as evidence.
4. ESCALATE — If safety is at risk, report to law enforcement, tell the school staff.

## Privacy & the Digital Footprint

### What exactly is a digital footprint?

It's the permanent record someone leaves online — posts, comments, photos, likes, location data, and information shared with apps.

A good rule: "If you wouldn't want it copied and shown to your child's future employer or teacher, don't post it."

Teach children early: before posting, ask — "Would I be okay if anyone saw this?"

### Why does digital consent matter?

Digital consent means asking before posting, tagging, forwarding, or sharing content involving someone else— photos, videos, screenshots, or private messages.

Teaching consent online helps children build respect, safety, and trust in digital spaces. It's the foundation of being a responsible digital citizen.

# Resources at a Glance

RESOURCE	CONTACT / ACCESS	BEST FOR...
<b>988 Crisis Lifeline</b>	Call or text 988	Immediate mental health or suicide crisis support. 24/7, free, confidential.
<b>Crisis Text Line</b>	Text HOME to 741741	Free, confidential text support for any type of crisis.
<b>The Trevor Project</b>	1-866-488-7386 / Text START to 678-678	Crisis support specifically for LGBTQ+ youth.
<b>Call BlackLine</b>	1-800-604-5841	Prioritizes support for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.
<b>CDC Free Mind</b>	<a href="https://cdc.gov/free-mind">cdc.gov/free-mind</a>	Free mental health resources for youth and families.
<b>Family Media Plan</b>	<a href="https://HealthyChildren.org">HealthyChildren.org</a>	AAP template for creating shared family rules for healthy media use.

## **This Book Connects to CASEL SEL & MTSS:**

CASEL Self-Awareness: Sections 2, 4 – CASEL Self-Management: Sections 3, 5, 7

CASEL Responsible Decision-Making: Sections 1, 7

MTSS Tier 1 (Universal): All sections • MTSS Tier 2 (Targeted): Sections 4 & 5 with small counseling groups

This resource is NOT a Tier 3 clinical intervention. Students with intensive mental health needs should be referred to licensed professionals.

# Digital Wellness Resource Guide

Curated by the Child Mind Institute • Visit [childmind.org](https://childmind.org) and [youareokay.org](https://youareokay.org) for the full library

## HEALTHY TECHNOLOGY USE BY AGE

### Media Guidelines for Kids of All Ages

[childmind.org/article/media-guidelines-for-kids-of-all-ages](https://childmind.org/article/media-guidelines-for-kids-of-all-ages)

### When Are Kids Ready for Social Media?

[childmind.org/article/when-are-kids-ready-for-social-media](https://childmind.org/article/when-are-kids-ready-for-social-media)

### Why Watch TV With Your Tween or Teen

[childmind.org/article/benefits-watching-tv-tween-teen](https://childmind.org/article/benefits-watching-tv-tween-teen)

## SCREEN TIME & BOUNDARIES

### How to Set Limits on Screen Time

[childmind.org/article/how-to-set-limits-on-screen-time](https://childmind.org/article/how-to-set-limits-on-screen-time)

### When Should You Get Your Kid a Phone?

[childmind.org/article/when-should-you-get-your-kid-a-phone](https://childmind.org/article/when-should-you-get-your-kid-a-phone)

### How Phones Ruin Concentration

[childmind.org/article/kids-shouldnt-use-phones-during-homework](https://childmind.org/article/kids-shouldnt-use-phones-during-homework)

### Is Internet Addiction Real?

[childmind.org/article/is-internet-addiction-real](https://childmind.org/article/is-internet-addiction-real)

## SOCIAL MEDIA & SELF-ESTEEM

### Social Media and Self-Doubt

[childmind.org/article/social-media-and-self-doubt](https://childmind.org/article/social-media-and-self-doubt)

### What Selfies Are Doing to Self-Esteem

[childmind.org/article/what-selfies-are-doing-to-girls-self-esteem](https://childmind.org/article/what-selfies-are-doing-to-girls-self-esteem)

### Does Social Media Use Cause Depression?

[childmind.org/article/is-social-media-use-causing-depression](https://childmind.org/article/is-social-media-use-causing-depression)

### Managing Social Media Stress With Mindfulness

[childmind.org/article/social-media-stress-mindfulness](https://childmind.org/article/social-media-stress-mindfulness)

## ONLINE GAMING, GAMBLING & SPORTS BETTING

### Do Video Games Cause ADHD?

[childmind.org/article/do-video-games-cause-adhd](https://childmind.org/article/do-video-games-cause-adhd)

## SLEEP, ATTENTION & ACADEMIC IMPACT

### Encouraging Good Sleep Habits

[childmind.org/article/encouraging-good-sleep-habits](https://childmind.org/article/encouraging-good-sleep-habits)

## SUPPORTING BOYS & YOUNG MEN

### How to Build Boys' Self-Confidence

[childmind.org/article/how-to-build-boys-self-confidence](https://childmind.org/article/how-to-build-boys-self-confidence)

### Boys and Eating Disorders

[childmind.org/article/boys-and-eating-disorders](https://childmind.org/article/boys-and-eating-disorders)

### Meeting the Mental Health Needs of Black Adolescent Boys

[childmind.org/article/meeting-the-mental-health-needs-of-black-adolescent-boys](https://childmind.org/article/meeting-the-mental-health-needs-of-black-adolescent-boys)

## SUPPORTING GIRLS & YOUNG WOMEN

### Raising Girls With Healthy Self-Esteem

[childmind.org/article/helping-girls-deal-unwanted-sexual-attention](https://childmind.org/article/helping-girls-deal-unwanted-sexual-attention)

### Helping Girls Deal With Unwanted Sexual Attention

[childmind.org/article/helping-girls-deal-unwanted-sexual-attention](https://childmind.org/article/helping-girls-deal-unwanted-sexual-attention)

### Mood Disorders and Teenage Girls

[childmind.org/article/mood-disorders-and-teenage-girls](https://childmind.org/article/mood-disorders-and-teenage-girls)

### How to Help Kids Through a Friendship Breakup

[childmind.org/article/how-to-help-kids-through-a-friendship-breakup](https://childmind.org/article/how-to-help-kids-through-a-friendship-breakup)

## GENDER & SEXUALITY

### Mental Health Challenges of LGBTQ+ Kids

[childmind.org/article/mental-health-challenges-of-lgbtq-kids](https://childmind.org/article/mental-health-challenges-of-lgbtq-kids)

### How to Support LGBTQ+ Children

[childmind.org/article/how-to-support-lgbtq-children](https://childmind.org/article/how-to-support-lgbtq-children)

### How to Support Kids Who Are Questioning

[childmind.org/article/how-to-support-kids-who-are-questioning](https://childmind.org/article/how-to-support-kids-who-are-questioning)

## FOR YOUNG PEOPLE (YOUAREOKAY.ORG)

### Phones and Multitasking

[youareokay.org/resources/social-media/phones-and-multitasking](https://youareokay.org/resources/social-media/phones-and-multitasking)

### How Does Social Media Affect Your Mental Health?

[youareokay.org/resources/social-media/how-does-social-media-affect-your-mental-health](https://youareokay.org/resources/social-media/how-does-social-media-affect-your-mental-health)

### Is Internet Addiction Real?

[youareokay.org/resources/social-media/is-internet-addiction-real](https://youareokay.org/resources/social-media/is-internet-addiction-real)

If you or someone you know is in crisis: **Call or text 988**

**Suicide & Crisis Lifeline • Available 24/7 • Free and confidential**

# Teens

**WHATEVER  
IT TAKES**



# Skill-Building Activities

- 1 Understanding Feelings**
- 2 Relaxation Skills**
- 3 Understanding Thoughts**
- 4 Managing Intense Emotions**
- 5 Mindfulness**
- 6 Digital Wellness**

# About You & Technology

Understanding how technology fits into your life

## Practical Strategies

Digital wellness means using technology in a way that helps you, not hurts you. Just like eating healthy food and getting enough sleep, HOW you use technology matters for how you feel.

### Digital Wellness is:

- ✓ Use technology in ways that are in line with your values and make you feel good.
- ✓ Knowing when to take a break from screens
- ✓ Staying safe and kind online
- ✓ Choosing what you see and do on the internet
- ✓ Making time for things you love offline too

## Is Screen Time Always Bad?

No! Technology can be really wonderful. The question isn't just how MUCH time you spend on screens, it's WHAT you do and what it crowds out.

### HEALTHY USE

Learning something new  
Calling or texting family you love  
Creative projects: art, music, video, writing  
Finding a community that understands you  
Getting help with homework

### THE "CROWDING OUT" TEST

Is technology replacing your sleep?  
Are you skipping meals, exercise, or friends?  
Is schoolwork being left behind?  
Are offline relationships suffering?  
If YES to any of these → time to recalibrate!

## What Do YOU Use Technology For?

Circle or check everything that applies to you:

Watch videos or shows  
Play video games  
Use social media  
Talk or text with friends/family  
Do homework or learn something new

Listen to music  
Create things (art, videos, music)  
Read books or stories  
Use apps or tools  
Something else: \_\_\_\_\_

## Did You Know?

**3+ hrs**

of social media daily can affect mood and sleep

**46%**

of teens say the internet has mostly hurt people their age

**One thing I use technology for that makes me feel good:**

**One thing I want to try doing less:**

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## Skill 1a: Understanding Feelings

# Emotion Monitoring

Being able to monitor and track your mood is an effective skill to help increase your emotional awareness. It can also help provide information about the things you may need and help you communicate that need.

**Directions:** Pick three emotions that you will monitor this week. Track the intensity, physical sensation, and what was happening at the time you felt each emotion.

Emotion: _____	Emotion: _____	Emotion: _____
Rate intensity:	Rate intensity:	Rate intensity:
Physical sensations:	Physical sensations:	Physical sensations:
What was going on:	What was going on:	What was going on:

**Follow-Up:** All emotions are normal, healthy, and important. When you rate your feelings, you're collecting information about how your week has been, and if there are emotions you want to feel less or more of. You can use a worksheet like this every week to track your progress, see what's changing, and notice how the skills you're practicing are affecting how you feel.

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## Skill 1b: Understanding Feelings

# Emotion Monitoring

### Tech & Mood Check

**After scrolling social media, I usually feel:**

Better      Worse      About the same

**After playing video games, I usually feel:**

Better      Worse      About the same

**After watching videos for 1+ hours, I usually feel:**

Better      Worse      About the same

**When I put my phone away, I usually feel:**

Better      Worse      About the same

- **The app or platform that most affects my mood is:**

- **I notice I reach for my phone most when I feel:**

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## Skill 2: Relaxation Skills

# Paced Belly Breathing

Breathing deeply into your belly helps to tell your body that you are safe and calm. Your heart can beat more slowly, your muscles can relax, and help you feel more grounded and in control.

Follow the steps below to learn how to do paced belly breathing. Practice it when you're already calm so it feels natural—and use it when you're stressed or anxious to help your body settle down.



1) Sit comfortably in your chair or on the floor.



2) Place one hand on your belly and one hand on your chest.



3) Breathe in slowly through your nose for 4 seconds and feel your belly expand.



4) Slowly breathe out for 5 seconds through your mouth, letting the air gently leave your body.



5) Repeat 3-5 times, or for as long as you want.

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Keep a log to plan when you will practice belly breathing. You can plan other self-care activities, too.

**Sunday**

**Monday**

**Tuesday**

**Wednesday**

**Thursday**

**Friday**

**Saturday**

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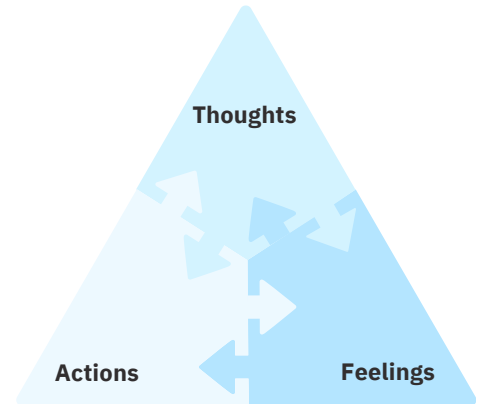
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## Skill 3a: Understanding Thoughts

# Challenging Unhelpful Thoughts

Our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are all connected. By changing our thoughts, we can change how we feel and how we behave.

Below is a thought log. Practice identifying what was happening at the time, what your thought was, how you felt, and what you did. If you notice that the thought was unhelpful, change it and then see how your feelings and behaviors might change, too.



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### Thought Log

Event	Unhelpful Thought	Feeling	New Helpful Thought

### Here are some things you can ask yourself when trying to change your thoughts:

- What is the likelihood that this will happen?
  
- Is this realistic?
  
- What is the evidence that this is true?
  
- Is there another way I can think about this?

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## Skill 3b: Understanding Thoughts

# Challenging Unhelpful Thoughts

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### The Tech Thought Triangle

Think of a time when something online upset you, excited you, or made you feel left out. Fill in the triangle:

What **happened** online?

What did you **think**?

What did you **feel and do**?

_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

2) Now change the Triangle. Pick a new thought, and see how it changes your feelings and actions.

My new, more helpful **thought**:

My new **feeling**:

My new **action**:

_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

### Questions to Help Change Your Thoughts:

Is this thought definitely true?

Is there another way to see this situation?

What would I tell a friend who was thinking this?

Will this still feel this big in a week?

## Skill 4a: Managing Intense Emotions

# Self-Soothe Kit

You can use your five senses to help calm down when your emotions feel intense. Try making a “self-soothe kit” using the ideas below. When you focus on things you can see, hear, smell, taste, and touch, it can help your mind and body relax.

- 1) Find a small- to medium-size bag that can fit in your backpack (for example: a pencil case or Ziploc bag).
- 2) Select one or more favorite items from each of the five senses to put in your kit.
- 3) Carry your self-soothe kit with you so you always have what you need to manage intense emotions.

5 Senses	One thing that makes me calm and relaxed is:	Not sure what to pick? Here are some ideas:
See		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Calming colors</li> <li>• A relaxing scene</li> <li>• Small picture of my favorite person or place to visit</li> </ul>
Hear		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rainstorm or ocean sounds</li> <li>• Recordings of funny jokes or comedians</li> <li>• Happy or soothing playlist</li> </ul>
Smell		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good-smelling hand lotion</li> <li>• Small perfume bottle</li> <li>• A scented candle</li> </ul>
Taste		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pieces of your favorite candy or other treat like gum or a mint</li> </ul>
Touch		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Satin ribbon or soft fabric</li> <li>• A small pompom or pouf</li> <li>• A small feather</li> <li>• A stress ball</li> </ul>

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## Skill 4b: Managing Intense Emotions

# My Personal Calm-Down Plan

### My Personal Calm-Down Plan

- When I feel angry or frustrated, I can:
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- When I feel sad or lonely, I can:
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- When I feel scared or anxious, I can:
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- A trusted adult I can talk to when things feel too big:

#### Remember:

Feeling intense emotions is normal, and no feeling lasts forever. When we ride out the wave of intensity, we often realize that the feeling and action urge are over sooner than we think.

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## Skill 5a: Mindfulness

# Mindfulness Skills

Mindfulness means paying attention, on purpose, to what is happening right now without judging it or trying to change it. Practicing mindfulness helps you notice how you feel, and can help you decide what to do with that feeling.

There are three key skills to practicing mindfulness:

### Observe

Pay attention to what's happening around you. Don't try to change anything — just notice it, like watching clouds pass by. This helps you slow down and avoid reacting right away.

### Describe

Use simple words to describe what you're experiencing. For example: "I feel overwhelmed" instead of "I'm a mess." This helps you step back from the emotion so it feels more manageable.

### Participate Fully

Fully focus on what you're doing instead of overthinking or worrying about what others think. This helps you feel more confident and in control.

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Here are some activities to help you practice mindfulness:



**Counting Breaths**



**Paced belly breathing**



**Listening to music and paying attention to one instrument**



**Going for a walk and naming what you see**



**Mindfully eating your favorite food**



**Playing an instrument**



**Journaling**



**Dancing**

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## Skill 5b: Mindfulness

# Mindfulness Skills

**A Mindful Check-In — Use Your 5 Senses right now. Write down what you notice:**

<b>I See...</b>	
<b>I Hear...</b>	
<b>I Smell...</b>	
<b>I Feel (touch)...</b>	
<b>I Taste...</b>	

### How Mindfulness Helps With Technology:

- When you notice how you feel BEFORE opening an app, you can make a choice instead of just reacting.
- When you feel the urge to scroll, mindfulness helps you pause and ask: "Do I actually want to do this right now?"
- Mindfulness is not about never using technology — it's about using it on PURPOSE.

## Activity 6a

# My Digital Blueprint

A digital blueprint is YOUR plan for how you want to use technology. There are no right or wrong answers, just what feels healthy and right for you.

### Step 1: How Do I Feel About My Screen Time?

- How many hours a day do you think you spend on screens
- What do you do the most? (games, videos, social media, etc.)
- What have you noticed about your tech use?

### Step 2: Set Your Goal

- I want my relationship with technology to help me feel:

### Step 3: Choose ONE Healthy Change

Set a timer on my phone or tablet  
Charge my device outside my bedroom at night  
Turn off notifications during meals or homework  
Delete one app I don't really need  
No screens for the first 30 minutes after waking up

Replace one hour of screen time with something offline  
Ask a grown-up to help me set screen time limits  
Make a rule about phone-free times at home  
Check in with myself before opening any app  
My own idea: \_\_\_\_\_

### Step 4: Pick One Offline Activity

- An activity I enjoy or want to try that doesn't involve screens:

### Step 5: Stay Safe Online – My Digital Footprint

Your digital footprint is the record you leave online- posts, photos, comments, and likes. A helpful rule: "If you wouldn't want it copied and shown to your teacher or family member, don't post it."

- **Before I post or share something, I will:**
- **To stay safe online, I will:**

### Step 6: Know When to Take a Break

If I feel \_\_\_\_\_, I'll take a break and: