

The Youngest Generation Deserves a Childhood, Not a Screen

By Dr Justin Coulson

Something remarkable happened at a childcare centre in Melbourne's west recently. For five days, educators switched off all the technology - no iPads, no cameras, no laptops, no Spotify. Just humans and children, together.

The results stopped everyone in their tracks.

Children spoke more - and louder. Babies fell asleep without white noise. Educators went home fulfilled for the first time in years. Singing returned. Storytelling came alive. Families had richer conversations at pickup time. The children even began describing their own learning experiences in ways they hadn't before.

I'm not calling it a detox. I'm going with "a reawakening".

The Digital Creep into Early Childhood

We've been told screens are educational. That apps can teach literacy. That a little YouTube never hurt anyone. The thing is... no one has shown us the evidence.

But here's what actually happens: we outsource our voices to Spotify, our presence to iPads, and our relationships to photos. We reach for devices and miss the connection, the energy, and the heart of childhood unfolding right in front of us.

The pilot study in that Melbourne early learning centre challenged something we've accepted as inevitable: that technology belongs in the daily lives of our youngest children.

It doesn't. Not in the way we've been using it.

What Children Actually Need

Young children are wired for human connection, not digital stimulation. Their brains develop through:

- Face-to-face interaction where they read expressions and tone
- Physical play that builds motor skills and spatial awareness
- Unstructured time where imagination takes the lead
- Real conversations with adults who are fully present
- Sensory experiences with actual objects, not virtual ones

Every minute absorbed by a screen is a minute not spent building these foundational capacities. And those developmental windows don't stay open forever.

The Screen-Time Trap

Parents tell me they're careful about screen time. "Just educational apps." "Only during dinner prep." "It calms them down."

But ask yourself: Does your toddler actually need an iPad to sit through a meal? Do they require YouTube to fall asleep? Does learning really happen best through a glowing rectangle? Or perhaps through building blocks, mud pies, and running until their legs give out?

The “no-screens” experiment revealed a reminder: children thrive more without screens, and so do the adults around them.

The Parent Paradox

Here's the uncomfortable truth: children aren't demanding screens because they've rationally assessed their developmental needs. They want them because we've made them available, and because screens are designed to be irresistible. They're hijacking our kids' dopaminergic neurology and killing their capacity to regulate or function without them.

We're the adults. We decide whether to hand over the device during the supermarket meltdown or whether to sit with the discomfort and help them through it. We choose whether dinner is eaten in front of Bluey or around a table with conversation. (And btw - Bluey *is* awesome... just not at dinner time.)

Every time we reach for a screen to "solve" a parenting moment, we're teaching our children they need technology to cope, to learn, to be entertained, to exist.

A Play-Based Childhood

Childhood should be spent in motion, connection, and imagination - climbing, building, pretending, creating, exploring. It should involve boredom, which is where creativity lives. It should include moments of struggle, where persistence develops.

Little to none of this happens on a screen. It happens in analogue, hands-dirty, play.

The educators in Melbourne proved when we remove the digital distraction, human connection floods back in. Professional joy returns. Children's authentic voices emerge.

What You Can Do

Make your home a place where early childhood looks like childhood used to back in the BC era - before screens:

- No screens before age 3 - none (even when you need to shower or use the loo in peace)
- Minimal, intentional use ages 3-5 (think video call with grandparents, not endless YouTube)
- Never use screens as emotional regulation tools
- Keep mealtimes, car trips, and bedrooms screen-free
- Model the behaviour you want. Your phone habits shape theirs

This isn't about anti-tech. It's about pro-childhood. The children in that Melbourne centre didn't miss the iPads. They were too busy being children, exactly as they should be.



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