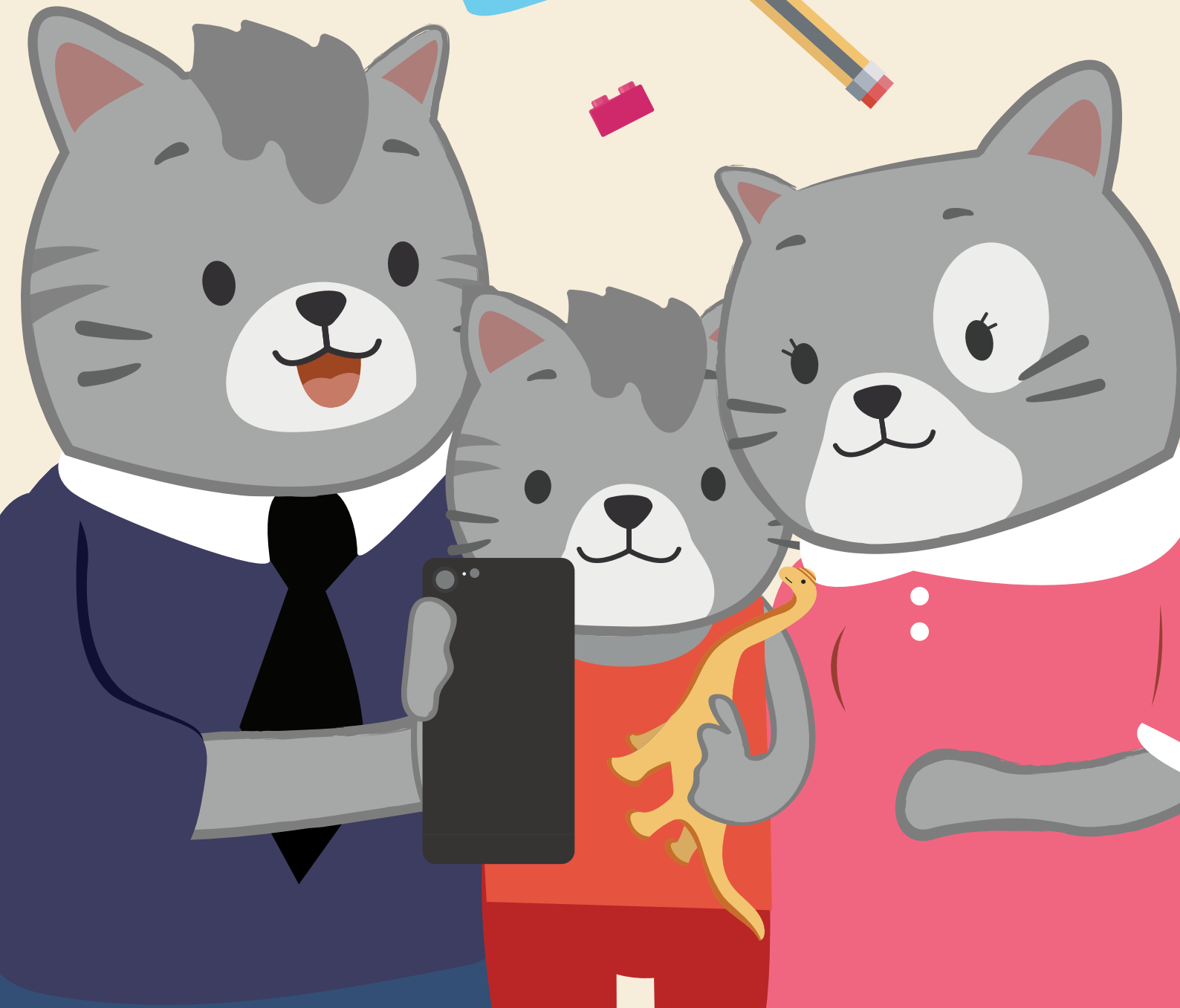# DIGITAL PARENTING WITH P RESCHOOLERS

INTRODUCTION

Parenting is tough – that goes without saying. Parents have struggled with the same questions forever: Is this the right time to start her on solids? When should I move him to his own bedroom? When should I begin toilet training?

The technological developments happening around us only make things harder. After all, your child will be part of one of the first generations to grow up immersed in the technologies and possibilities of the digital age.

This raises new questions: when should she be allowed to look at my iPad? Does this screen time really affect his development? Maybe even, can screen time be used as a nanny just for a little while, so I can get the baby fed? You probably have more. This is new, uncharted territory, but there are a few things you can keep in mind while navigating it.

CURATE THEIR CONTENT

At such a young age, your child is only able to do things that you let them. This gives you an almost absolute control over the things they watch and do (something you will miss greatly down the road). Take full advantage of this power. Make sure that you know exactly what your children are watching, listening to, and playing.

1. LOOK IT UP

You can find an infinite amount of information about most media online. So, search the shows, movies, or games to find out if it is appropriate for your child's age and suitable for your family's values. Try to find independent sources that provide media reviews, like CommonSenseMedia.org or Kids-In-Mind.com.

2. KEEP IT SHORT

The American Academy of Paediatrics (AAP) recommends no screen time for kids under 24 months except live video-chatting. If you can't keep to this, use high quality, 15-minute clips for them, and cap all screen time at an hour until then turn six. Don't just monitor them either, watch media with them so that you can teach and interact with them throughout.

3. AVOID THE BAD

Avoid content with violence, no matter how comically displayed, explosions, people yelling or cursing, or things that might be scary to a young child.

4. FIND THE GOOD

Look for content that promotes positive values that you want to develop in your child, such as being kind to friends or accepting people's differences.

5. TRY TO GO AD-FREE

Make sure that the media your child sees is ad-free, as kids may see an inappropriate ad or take in commercial messages about beauty standards and stereotypes. You can use a service like Netflix or Amazon Prime, download content directly onto your computer or Smart TV, or use an on-demand service. These also apply to the apps you let your child play on your iPhone or tablet: in-app purchases work just like commercials and send the same harmful messages.

6. EASY-TO-FOLLOW CONTENT

Instead of only selecting shows or apps that "teach" your child lessons like ABC's or numbers, find content which teaches soft skills like team-building or creativity like Daniel Tiger's Neighbourhood or Doc McStuffins. Content should be easy to understand with lots of visual cues. For apps, find those with big buttons and easy instructions.
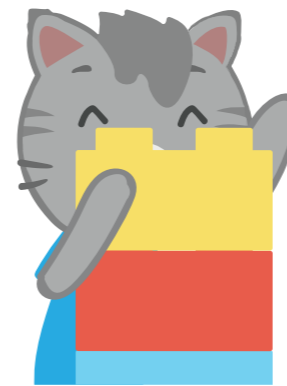
SET RULES FROM THE GET-GO

We all know that a baby or toddler should not look at a screen for too long: heavy screen time can impact their cognitive, emotional, and even physical development. In the early years, children learn best by interacting with their patient and loving guardians (like yourself) and using all their senses, not just the audio-visual ones. However, a bit of screen time does not hurt – and may even have some positive benefits. The American Academy of Paediatrics (AAP) released their recommendations in 2016 to allow screen time for kids under 2, such as video-chatting with relatives, as long as parents are present and involved - this two-way talking is very important for a child's language development!
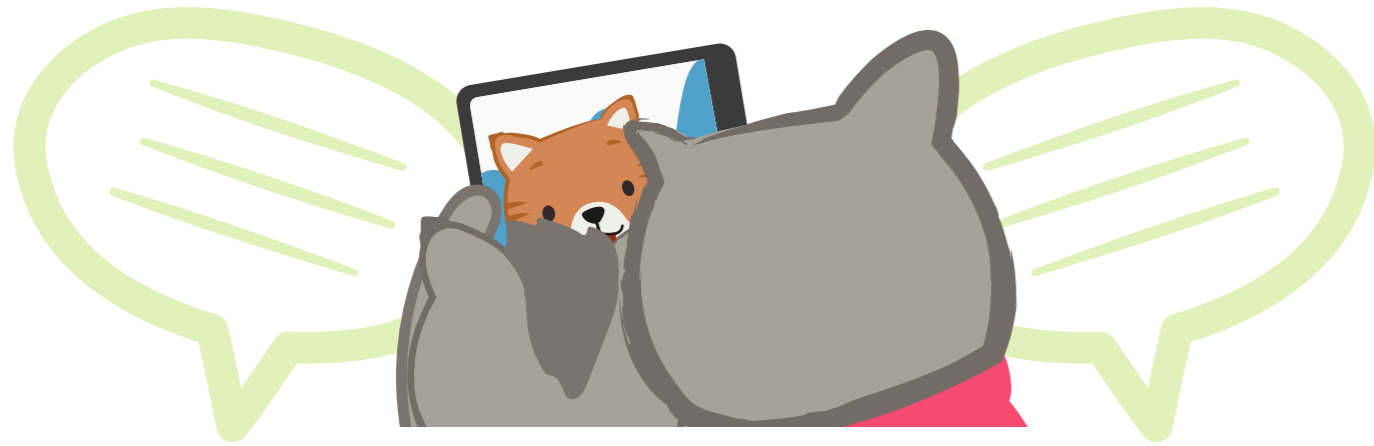
It is important to set the ground rules from the start.

1. Teach your child to ask politely to use a device, particularly your phone or tablet. It helps to avoid future demands or tantrums by teaching them that digital devices are just like the others toys and tools they have, which are a privilege and not a right. Having your child ask you whether it's okay to use a digital device, like turn on the TV or play a game, also acts as a small control mechanism that helps to prevent unhealthy patterns of media use in in the future.

2. Set rules on how much time your child can use the device. It is inevitable that your child will use more media as they grow older. However, using less screen time when they are younger improves their ability to entertain themselves through other means. By introducing rules early on, it makes it clear that device use is a time-constrained activity and not a limitless one, so that your child will not be surprised when you bring up more screen time rules when they have their own devices.

BE WHAT YOU WANT THEM TO BE

It is important to role model healthy media habits. After all, children learn about how to use devices from the people around them – most likely you! If you want your child to be conscious about the types of media they consume and how often they do, you need to embrace these qualities in your daily life too.

These can manifest in many small habits, but here are some ways you can set a better example:

CREATE TECH FREE ZONES

Avoid using devices in parts of your home, especially the bedrooms. Children need the hours before bedtime to be screen-free so they can unwind, prepare to sleep, and the restful sleep. If you share a room, use an old-fashioned alarm clock instead of your phone to wake you up.

HAVE NO-SCREEN FAMILY TIME

Enjoy family bonding without a screen, meaning, try to go for a walk instead of going to the cinema, or play a board game instead of gaming together. Children's entertainment relies so heavily on digital devices that they might not realise there are other options for them to have fun with!
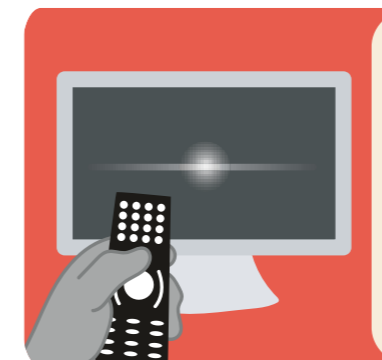
TURN OFF BACKGROUND TV

Which can be harmful as it makes media use seem like a passive choise instead of an active one. The content of these shows and the ads in-between can also impact your child. If the TV needs to be on, make the content child-family and interact with your child as much as possible while it plays

CREATE TECH FREE TIMES

Have times of the day where you do not use your devices, like play-time and mealtimes, to make sure your child knows that, for specific and constant periods of time every day, they have your undivided attention.
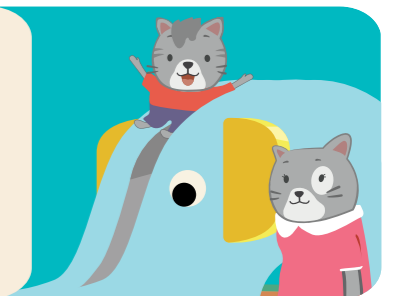
GET THE WHOLE FAMILY IN ON IT

It takes a village to raise a child, which means that you need to make sure the whole village is raising your child in ways you like and are comfortable with! Your child might spend a lot of time with their grandparents, aunts and uncles, or their friends' parents. You might also have a domestic helper who takes care of your child for the bulk of the day. All of these people may have different ideas about what type or how much media your child should access. It is important that you make it clear what you are comfortable with when it comes to your child's media use.

Since everyone wants to avoid conflict, try not to come off as judgemental or preachy. Say, "I know we all have girl's interests at heart, and the experts say it's important to stick to these rules, so I want to make sure that she is doing the same things everywhere she goes." You can also frame it as a joint attempt to protect the child. Say, "I'm only telling you the rules because I want to make sure boy-boy isn't lying or trying to secretly break the rules."

Some things you may want to establish from the start are:

1 SCREEN TIME LIMITS

Make it clear whether you are okay with screen time and for how long. Say, "I'm okay if they watch one episode, but later I only want them to play with their toys."

2 TYPE OF CONTENT

Tell them if there is content your child should not see. Say, "He won't be able to sleep tonight if he sees anything with even a bit of blood or violence!"

3 CO-VIEWING
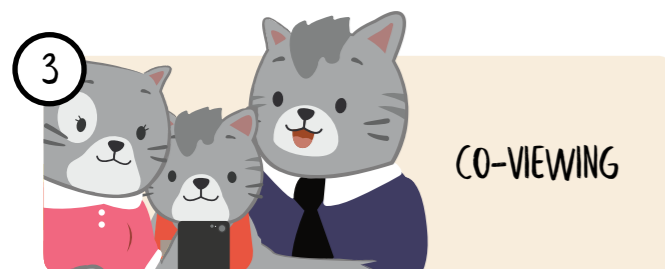
Let them know if you want an adult to co-view all content with your child – they can always do other things instead if they are unable to co-view all content.

4 ONLINE INTERACTION

Check if there are multi-player games in the house, or if the other children have access to social media, and tell them if you are comfortable with your child interacting with potential strangers.

# USE TECH TO SOLVE ITS PROBLEMS

The good thing about technology is that it has provided solutions to its problems. Thus, if you have a family tablet or computer that your child can access (potentially without you present), use technical controls to keep your child from seeing anything you don't want them to. These technical measures are parental controls that you set up on the device. Android and iPhones have built-in features that let parents enable or disable some functions. You can also download parental control apps which filter content and downloads, such as Qustodio, Net Nanny, and FamilyTime.

If you want to be safe, you can install parental controls on all the devices your child may come across (like your own phone). It might be a pain to turn the app or setting on and off, but it ensures that your child has an online experience that is as safe and friendly as possible. Nonetheless, remember that you, as a parent, are the best app! If your child is using a device, try your best to use it with them so that you can explain things as you go along.

WATCH OUT FOR THEIR DIGITAL FOOTPRINTS

This is a problem unique to the digital age: children have digital footprints before digital devices. Digital footprints are everything about a person that can be found online, from details like their name and address to their likes and dislikes.
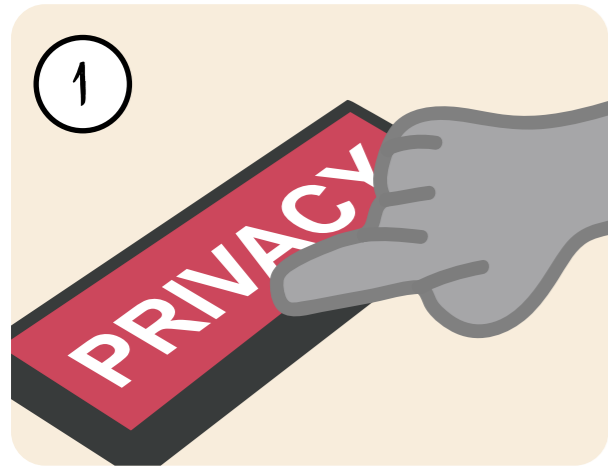
1 To minimise your child's digital footprints, be careful about your own privacy settings on social media. Enable strict privacy settings on the platforms you use, and look over your friends list to make sure that the people who follow you are people you know and trust.
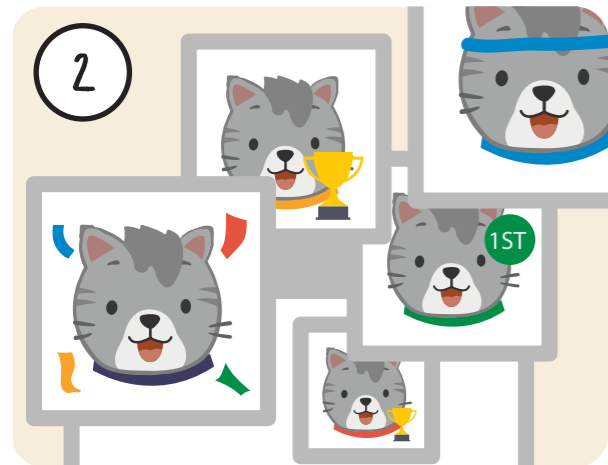
2 Be careful to avoid over-sharing your children's lives. This means the updates, photos, and videos of your child's every tiny achievement, and your own feelings of gratitude as a parent. Bombarding your followers with so many updates can be annoying.
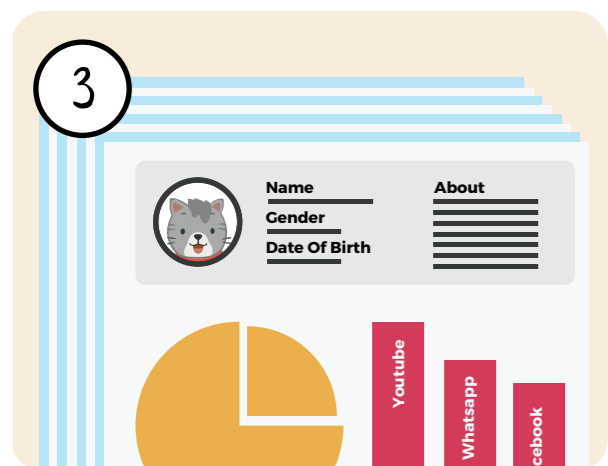
3 Putting so much information about your child online also builds a profile of them, which becomes part of the demographic profile that companies use for marketing and commercial purposes. There are also reports of online predators abroad who gather this information to find a child's location, which can have frightening consequences

As a quick guide, ask yourself a few questions before posting something about your child: Can someone use this against them? How will they feel about this being online in 5 or 10 years? Do I want strangers and companies having this information?

THINK ABOUT YOU TOO

Parents of preschoolers today are part of a generation that relies on technology too, particularly social media. This means that parenting comes with new traps – parents must cope with feelings of envy, anger, or sadness from looking at their friends' online lives.

New parents may be particularly vulnerable as they are tired, overwhelmed, uncertain, and possibly even suffer from postpartum depression. Social media can be draining in any context, but especially this one. Look out for yourself by unfollowing people whose posts make you feel bad and those who tend to present a 'perfect' image. Follow accounts and hashtags like #womenirl or #realdad that share photos from people's not-so-perfect lives, or join online parenting support groups to share the trials and tribulations of parenthood.
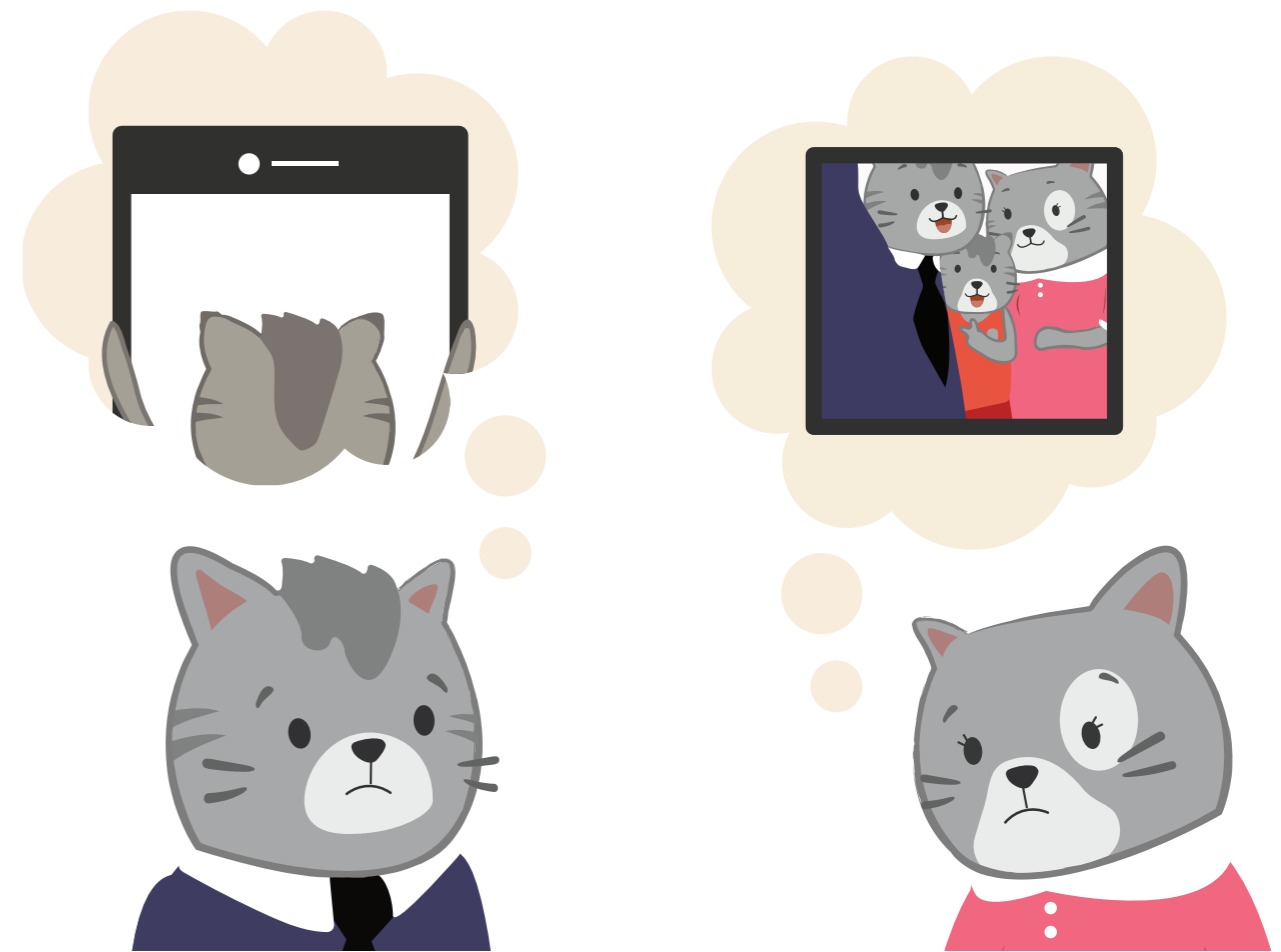
Don't be too hard on yourself. If you really need a break, play some music – not just Baby Shark, you can play age-appropriate songs that you like too – or an audiobook for your child. If you feel exhausted after a day of peek-a-boo or pushing a car around, you can let them watch another episode or video. Ultimately, remember that the best thing your child can have is your comforting and loving company and interaction, so give yourself the appropriate rest and time-off to get there!

For more information, visit the Media Literacy Council's website at betterinternet.sg.

ABOUT MEDIA LITERACY COUNCIL

The Media Literacy Council works in partnership with industry, community and government to champion and develop public education and awareness programmes relating to media literacy and cyber wellness. In an increasingly interactive and participatory media landscape, the Media Literacy Council seeks to cultivate and encourage the public to become discerning media consumers with the ability to evaluate media content effectively, and use, create and share content safely and responsibly. It also advises the government on how to respond to emerging issues relating to internet and media content.

Find out more at www.betterinternet.sg.

ABOUT FAMILIES FOR LIFE

Families for Life is a people-sector Council, comprising of 13 volunteers from the people and private sectors. The Council is headed by Mr Ching Wei Hong, Chief Operating Officer, OCBC Bank.

Families for Life Council's vision is to build strong and resilient families because that makes for stronger communities and better individual well-being.

We Listen. We listen to the issues that Singaporean families are facing.

We Explore and Promote. We bring people and organisations together to create platforms for family bonding and to engage Singaporeans in conversations about families.

We Voice. We voice out concerns that people have on family issues and continue this conversation with our partners and the community.

Find out more at www.familiesforlife.sg.