

outsmart the algorithm (For Teens)

My BRAIN IS NOT FOR SALE

Screen time is so rewarding to the brain, it can sometimes cause teens to forget what else they like to do. I created ***Outsmart the Algorithm*** to help them become more intentional with their use of technology and how they're filling their hours. It's designed to help them reconnect with all the fun things they used to do before they got a device!

Hopping on a screen to do some coding or make something in iMovie, in between hanging out with friends in-person and helping out around the house, is a great balance between real life and creative screen activities. Scrolling social media, gaming or binge watching for most of the day (or night) because it's the easiest, most comfortable thing to do, is not such a great balance. **Sometimes all that's needed to restore balance is some pre-planning.**

Outsmart the Algorithm is great for school breaks and summer vacations, weekends, after school hours, family trips, or any time that spending hours on a screen to kill boredom might become your teen's default. **You can use this printout in all kinds of ways, and I encourage you to personalize it as much as possible!** Here are some common ways it can help your teen reconnect with real life:



Get Real Life Rolling Again: Overuse of technology can sometimes cause a lack of momentum. If your teen doesn't have a lot going on, and they're filling all that down time with screens, **Outsmart the Algorithm** can be really helpful. You and your teen can fill one out to make a plan for how they will balance their on-screen and off-screen time each day. Depending on how screen focused your teen is, you may just need to fill one out once a week. If your teen has a harder time unplugging, a daily plan might be more helpful. **For teens that may have a hard time following through with the plan, I suggest making screen use for the day be allowed only *after* the other sections of the sheet have been accomplished.** (ie: no device use until after Get Outside, Move My Body, Responsibilities, etc have been completed.) If your teen is POSITIVE they won't need this requirement but you're not so sure, give them a week to show you. Sometimes, trying to prove you wrong is enough incentive for them to follow through! (Sometimes not...) For many teens who need to **Get Real Life Rolling Again**, a daily **Outsmart the Algorithm** is only needed for a few weeks or so.

Weekend Woes: If your teen is really busy during the week with school and activities, but tends to spend most of the weekend on a screen, you and your teen can fill out an **Outsmart the Algorithm** printout every Friday night to make a plan for the weekend. Go ahead and give them a few weekends to see if they can follow through without the extra incentive of screen time being dependent on finishing everything else first.

Once they remember how much fun they have doing off-screen activities, most teens can keep a healthy balance by filling it out once a week!



Stuck With My Embarrassing Family: Sometimes, on family trips, teens can get stuck on their screens because they're away from all their friends and usual activities. Helping your teen fill out an **Outsmart the Algorithm** sheet before the trip can help them plan ahead and pack what they'll need to keep a good balance while travelling.

Looooooooong Summer Vacations: If summer break feels endless and full of screen time conflict, **Outsmart the Algorithm** can help! Fill one out each day, each week, or just at the start of break– whichever you think will be the best fit for your teen! What are their goals for the summer? What's something new they've been wanting to try? What ways could you use help around the house? **Sometimes just putting it on paper and hanging it on the fridge goes a long way!**



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In-Person Hang Out	Move My Body Goal = 1 Hour	Get Outside Goal = 1 Hour
☆	☆	☆

Screen time plan:

☆ Responsibilities ☆ Off-Screen Hobbies ☆ Family Time ☆ Sleep ☆ Challenge

HOW TO USE OUTSMART THE ALGORITHM:

THE GOAL IS TO CREATE A PLAN (AND AN EXPECTATION) THAT HEALTHY ACTIVITIES WILL COEXIST EACH DAY ALONG WITH SCREEN TIME.

Step One: Fill in the top row.

Since In-Person Hang Outs, Get Outside, and Move My Body are the activities most likely to get pushed out by screen use, **(and also the ones most needed for good mental and physical health)**, I've put them first on the printout! Have a brainstorming session with your teen to come up with a list of fun ways they can enjoy:

In-Person Hang Outs: These can be one-on-one or with a whole group! They can be with friends, siblings, parents, neighbors, relatives. The only requirement is that the hang-out must be in the same physical space. If you have a teen who is really struggling socially, or has spent so much time socializing on a screen that they have lost touch with in-person friends, it may be daunting for them to try to instantly conjure real-life friendships again. If this is the case, it can be helpful to leave In-Person Hang Outs off at first, and lean into Off-Screen Hobbies and Move My Body instead. Pursuing these categories will help them make new connections.

Note: For non-sports-loving teens, think outside the box to things like walking, yoga, and bike riding.

Move My Body: This can be sports, dance, the gym, or anything that counts as exercise.



Get Outside: This can be more difficult in bad weather or if you live in an apartment. It's so important for our mental health though, so I encourage you and your teen to get creative about spending an hour outside everyday! Get Outside could be as simple as reading on a balcony or in a park, getting coffee at an outdoor cafe, or doing homework on the porch. Walking is a great way to combine Move My Body and Get Outside, even if you have to do it under an umbrella in the rain, or first thing in the morning on hot days.

Step Two: Fill in the bottom row

Fill the remaining categories with three of the starred options at the bottom of the page – **whichever three you feel your teen is most lacking**, (or whichever three your teen will agree to.) You can change these categories every day, or every week or always keep them the same. *Sleep*, *Responsibilities*, *Off-Screen Hobbies*, and *Family Time* are also things that often get pushed out of teen's lives by device use.

Responsibilities: This is for the ways you'd like your teen to help out around the house, homework, or having a volunteer or paid job outside the house, etc.

Active hobbies like sports, dance, hiking, gymnastics go into the Move My Body category. If your teen has lots of active hobbies, and is less interested in sit-down hobbies, that's great! You can ignore Off-Screen Hobbies in favor of another category that might be more lacking.

Off-screen hobbies: This is the fun stuff! What does your teen love to do that's off a screen? Crafting, reading, writing, board games, music, robotics, baking etc. School clubs (chess, drama, robotics, DnD, music) are great ways to explore hobbies.



Sleep: So many teens are losing sleep because of screen time. If your teen has access to screens in their bedrooms overnight, I highly encourage you to add Sleep to their printout. Goals you might list in this category are:

1. Create a device bedtime (can be different for weeknights and weekends) when all screen use stops.
2. Designate a place where devices stay overnight (in parent's room if necessary).
3. Buy an old-fashioned alarm clock so phones don't need to be used to wake-up.
4. Take TV out of teen's room.

Family Time: Devices can often get in the way of family connection. If you choose this category, you might list things like:

1. Screens away for meal times
2. Screens away for family outings
3. Screens away at grandma's house
4. Screens away during family activities like board games, sibling's sporting events or recitals etc.
5. All other screens away during family movie night

It goes without saying
that whatever Family
Time rules go on a
teen's worksheet need
to be followed by
parents too!



Challenge: This category is to foster independence and push teens a little outside their comfort zone.

Depending on the age of your teen, this could be any of the following and so many more!

1. Go to the store by themselves
2. Make an important phone call (do I have the only teen who hates this?)
3. Schedule an appt for themselves
4. Cook a meal for the family
5. Meal planning and/or shopping
6. Take the bus somewhere
7. Plan the route somewhere
8. Fix or assemble something using a manual
9. Help with a difficult, once-a-year chore, like garage cleaning, power washing, painting, etc.
10. Travel to a relative's house on a train, plane or bus by themselves

One **Challenge** I gave my 18-year-old son was to refill the wiper fluid in the car. This required getting himself to the store, asking someone at the store to help figure out what to buy, and then reading the car manual to figure out how to refill it. He did a pretty good job! We're still working on the phone calls :)

The goal of this **Outsmart The Algorithm** handout is to help create balance between screen use and real-life activities. The tech companies are doing everything they can to hijack our attention and time for profit, including using behavioral design tricks that can make screen time addictive. Creating a family expectation that using devices and technology for entertainment is a privilege, not a right, can really help teens maintain a healthy balance.

