

AN INTERESTING MISTAKE

BY CHIP DELORENZO, M.ED.

In our house we limit screen time to weekends when the children are allowed to watch one movie per weekend day. If you limit screen time in your house, you may have a child like mine who will go to any lengths to get just a few minutes in front of a screen, even if it means breaking the house ground rules. We use a logical consequence when one of the children sneak screen time, which a nd that consequence is “If you abuse it you lose it.” The child who sneaks it will lose screen time on one of the weekend days. We joke that my oldest son has forfeited more screen time than he has actually experienced because of his proclivity to smuggle electronic devices into his room for his personal, unauthorized, viewing pleasure.

Recently, my oldest son was caught with my wife’s Kindle in his room. She went looking for it and found it under his covers. (You may ask, how did she know to look in his bed? In our home, his room is the second place you would look after looking in the place you thought you’d left it.) So, accordingly, he lost a day of screen time for the upcoming weekend. And just like I did when I was his age, he tested the limits, and smuggled screen time again, not too long afterward.

Fast forward, three weeks later: my son hasn't watched a movie since the initial Kindle incident because of continued smuggling. Then his birthday arrived, and I was feeling sorry for him because he couldn't watch a movie with his brothers. I knew what to do – I should hold the limits firmly, even if it was his birthday. But, I caved and let him watch the move as a “birthday treat”.

Almost immediately I began to regret my decision. My son responded to my act of mercy by pushing the limits around screen time even more; trying to watch things that he wasn't allowed to, taking control of the programming from his brothers, etc. I wanted to be angry, but I knew what was happening. My son, like all children, want to know that the adults in his life will be consistent and do what we say we're going to do much more than they want to watch television. My son was saying, in his own way, that he preferred the limits. And I know, that limits are meant to be tested, otherwise how would we know where they really are.

Shortly after his birthday, my son asked me if he could have his screen time back, even though he had three more weekend days of screen time to forgo. My response to him was, “What would I be teaching you by eliminating the consequence for your choices?” He thought for a moment and said, “Good point.” Inside I laughed knowingly. Children are our best teachers.

Louis CK, one of my favorite comics, was on the Conan Obrien Show recently. During his interview he began talking about parenting, which is part of his schtick. Sardonicly, yet prophetically, he mused that his job was not to make his children happy. He said, “I'm not raising children. I'm raising the gown ups they're going to be.”

As I began to reflect on this discussion, I thought about my decision to remove the no screen time consequences for my son's birthday. I made a mistake. One that I learned from, but a mistake nonetheless. I asked myself the same question that I asked him. What was I teaching him be removing that consequence? In attempting to make him happy by rescuing him I was actually setting him up for

disappointment and dependence upon me for his happiness. When do I want him to learn that he can be happy despite his circumstances, and that he can accept responsibility for his actions and learn to make better decisions by himself?

So, on this Thanksgiving of 2013, I am grateful for my children and for lessons that they continue to teach me, as I continue on the road to becoming a better parent.