



# Interrupting Real Life

*Notifications and compulsive phone checking*

- A printable conversation guide for parents & kids ([tips](#))
- Takes 10-15 minutes
- 2024 update

Produced by

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# Conversation preview

*This is an overview of the conversation guide, and it's for parents to read before starting the conversation with kids. Parents, if you're already with your kids, feel free to skip this section and move straight to the guide.*

## → Intro

Amidst a constant stream of notifications, it's easy to develop the habit of compulsively checking our phones. How does this affect our kids' brains, and how might we help them (and ourselves!) stay present in the moment, curbing the impulse to constantly check their devices?

## → Together you will learn

- The psychological effects of phone notifications, and why they hook us so easily
- What the research says about the consequences of this behavior on our kids' attention and wellbeing
- Tips for managing phone notifications and fostering mindful device usage as a family

# The guide

*Read these instructions out loud. This guide should take 10-15 minutes to complete. There are 5 sections. Read each section header out loud as well as any instructions. Let's start with a quick icebreaker.*

## **→ 1. First reaction**

*There's no right or wrong. Answer in just a few sentences, no more than 30 seconds. Kids go first. Optionally feel free to jot down any thoughts or feelings below.*

What do you know about phone & watch notifications? How do you feel about them?

## → 2. What's the big idea?

*Parents read this out loud, or switch readers for each paragraph. Together choose the quick read (appropriate for younger kids) or the full read.*

### **Quick read (2min)**

Have you noticed how hard it is to ignore a buzzing phone or watch?

Notifications play tricks on our minds, making us both excited and a little stressed each time they come in. It feels like we just have to check them!

Sure, some notifications are helpful, like "Dinner's ready!" or "I'll be home in 15 minutes." But most of the time they distract us, make us think less clearly, and even steal our sleep. And the fun times feel less fun if we're always checking our devices.

Surprisingly, just having a phone nearby can be a distraction – even if it's on silent and not getting any notifications at all!

But remember, we're in control. We can choose when apps can notify us, and put our phones away when we want to focus or relax. We can also decide when to check notifications, for example only at lunch or after school, which reduces stress.

Like regular exercise, managing our tech use takes effort, but it's worth it to keep our lives interruption-free. ✌️

### ***Full read (3min)***

*Buzz.* Our phone or watch vibrates. Who is it? What is it? A message? Did someone like my post? Or maybe it's a breaking news story? What could it be?!

Here's the deal with notifications. They are nearly impossible for us to ignore – even adults, even the most self-controlled Zen monks. That's because they take advantage of around nine brain mechanics and hormone pathways, all at once.

For example, even before we've checked a notification, we've already gotten two shots of hormones in our system: dopamine (the feel-good one) and cortisol (the primary stress one). Research shows that the effects are similar to pulling the lever on a slot machine – sometimes we win, sometimes we lose – which makes it exciting, and very hard to resist.

Our apps love to send us notifications. When they get us to tap, they win: it makes them more engaging and thus more profitable. There are literally tens of thousands of people working on getting us to tap as often as possible.

Sometimes it's fine. Getting timely notifications, like "Dinner's ready!" or "I'll be home in 15 minutes," is of course genuinely helpful.

But the research is very clear that there's a big cost to us. Notifications make us more distracted and impulsive. Our attention spans lower. We can't think long-term. We get less sleep. And adults even get into more car crashes, because they aren't fully focusing on the road.

We also don't enjoy positive experiences as much. Since we aren't as present in the moment, the good times simply aren't as good. Our families and relationships get interrupted and suffer.

Incredibly, researchers have also discovered that just having our phone near us – even if it’s silenced – takes up brain space. We can get distracted and exhausted even when notifications aren’t coming in!

But we’re not helpless. We can take control. We can say no when apps ask to send us notifications, and keep our phones away from us when we want to connect, concentrate, or sleep. We can also “batch” our notifications, which has been shown to reduce stress, by checking our phones only at certain times, like at lunchtime or at the end of a work hour.

Like going to the gym, it takes effort, planning, and self-discipline, but we can stop tech from interrupting our lives. 🙌

## → 3. Questions

Take turns answering a few questions, in about 5 minutes total. “Experienced” questions are for those who have encountered this topic in apps or online. Choose one of you to go first (rock-paper-scissors?).

### **Beginner**

- What ways do you get interrupted? What’s a recent example? How does it make you feel?
- Do you ever notice people getting interrupted by notifications from their devices? Any recent examples? What does it make you feel?
- What are examples of when you think it’s important to get interrupted? On the flip side, what are examples of when you don’t like to get interrupted?
- When you are interrupted by someone, how distracted do you get? How quickly can you get back to whatever you were doing?

### **Experienced**

- Do you know people who get distracted by notifications a lot? How does it make you feel when they do?
- Do you get notifications on your watch or phone? How many a day? Do you always check them? Do you like getting them?
- What types of notifications do you think are helpful and important versus unhelpful or distracting?
- Have you ever gotten stressed by a notification? What was it? Have you ever turned off (or reduced) notifications from an app? Why?

## → 4. Activities

*Choose an activity that interests you both. If you have time, choose another.*

### ***Notification Pruning***

Parents, get your phone. Kids, if you have a device that receives notifications, get it too. Now for each device, guess how many notifications you received in the past day or two. Then go to your notification center and together see how close you were. While you are in there, talk through which notifications you think are good to have versus non-essential. For the non-essential ones, block those apps from sending notifications going forward.

### ***App Designer***

Choose a game that you're both familiar with, either a board game (like Chess or Monopoly) or a video game. Imagine you are designing an app for a new version of that game, with the main feature being better notifications. First brainstorm all the different notifications you could send to users, either during a game or when they're not playing, and discuss which ones you think would be most effective. Then brainstorm a set of notifications that would be healthy for most users.

### ***Major Interrupter***

For this activity, you'll both need a mobile device. Kids, decide a game to play or other app to use on your phone. Make sure your notifications are on. Start playing it for 30 seconds or a minute, long enough to get into it. Now parents, start sending messages to them, ideally distracting ones. Start with just one or two. Then send more and more, faster and faster. After a few minutes, stop and discuss what it felt like to get messages during an engaged activity. Then switch roles and do it again.



## ***Will Power***

For this activity, ideally each of you get a device that can send and receive notifications – but alternatively you can do it with pen and paper (will explain how at the end). Kids, turn your device face up and place it in front of you. Make sure it's not silenced. Then parents, on your own device, prepare a secret message to send. Lock eyes with each other, then parents send the message and listen for the notification to arrive. Without looking at your devices, together discuss what it feels like to receive a message that you can't check. (For pen and paper, just hand-write a message and then, while locking eyes, slide it in front of the other person and discuss how it feels to not be able to look at it.) Then switch roles and do it again.

## → 5. Make a family plan

*Together select the ones you agree to do going forward. Put them up somewhere so you can revisit them from time to time.*

- Say no upfront.** When we install a new app and it asks us to allow notifications, we will generally say no, because we know notifications are not worth the cost.
- Block during social times.** During family meals or when with friends, we will set our devices to "Do Not Disturb," allowing us to fully engage in our time together.
- Handle notifications well.** When we're spending time with someone and we get a notification, we will not interrupt our time to check it, unless we're waiting on something truly urgent, like a family emergency. When we do need to check a notification, we'll tell the people we're with what it's about, so that it doesn't take priority to the people in the room.
- Manage ourselves.** When we're on our own, we will try to limit the number of times we check notifications, for example by batching them to check only a few times a day. If we feel like we're still getting too distracted, we'll try other techniques like using our phone's airplane or focus modes, or removing our phone from our presence altogether.
- Review apps.** Every so often we will review together (parents+kids) what apps we allow notifications from, and the notifications they've been sending, to make sure we're only getting the ones we all think are important.

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