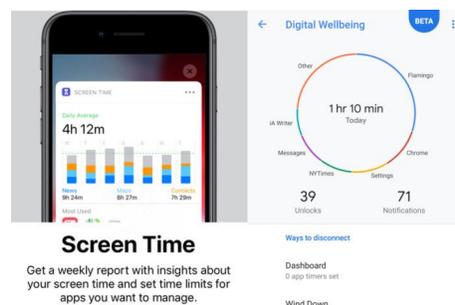


In the aftermath of the holiday season, seemingly *everyone* has added at least one new screen to their fleet of devices that they just can't peel their eyes away from; adults are walking around in public staring at their wrists so they can check out their new Apple watches while children are planted on the couch kinking their neck to get the best view of their new iPads. Me? Well, I played the new *Super Smash Bros.* for the Nintendo Switch for a total of 30 hours during my time out of the office. I'm not particularly proud of that fact, but there's nothing I can do about it just as there's nothing you can do about the undoubtedly comparable time you and yours have already spent gazing unflinchingly at the new technology that recently became apart of your lives. However, there are *a lot* of things we can do to prevent ourselves from doing this again; chief among those things is to practice some good old-fashioned self-control...with the help of screen management applications and tools.

The exponential increase of screens in homes has led to a simultaneous exponential increase in tools to help manage how much time is being spent looking at said screens. Delaney Ruston, the filmmaker behind *Screenagers*, recently compiled a [list of some of the most helpful of these tools on her "Tech Talk Tuesdays" blog](#). Ruston's list is far from complete, but it does offer a good starting point for parents worried that their children might be spending troubling amounts of time binging *Stranger Things* on their Kindle Fires (personally, I would be troubled if I knew that my hypothetical child spent even one minute watching the atrocity that is *Stranger Things* 2). If you haven't already, then I highly recommend clicking the link and reading the article for yourself. Afterward, you can come back here and read an article written by me, your favorite Educational Technology Specialist in Douglas County!

For this special beginning-of-the-month edition of "Tech Talk w/ Mr. Robbins", I'm going to flesh out some of Ruston's most promising offerings while also supplementing them with other suggestions from elsewhere on the world wide web.

Screen Time (only for iOS Devices)



I've discussed Screen Time in a previous column shortly after Apple made it available alongside the release of iOS 12. Like everything developed by Apple, Screen Time isn't quite as

comprehensive as its peers in the screen management genre, but it is decent enough to be a worthwhile supplement to any family's device monitoring repertoire.

Ruston has [another blog that specifically outlines how to use Screen Time alongside Apple's Family Sharing controls to track and limit how members of your family use their devices.](#)

Worried that Johnny isn't actually going to bed at his designated bedtime but is instead texting grating Fortnite memes to his posse? You can use Screen Time and Family Sharing controls to disable all applications (including texting apps) at a certain time of day. Is Suzy too busy trawling through Taylor Swift's Instagram feed to tell you that her day at school was "fine" over dinner? You can use Screen Time and Family Sharing controls to set a window of time during the day when her phone will become nothing more than a glorified paperweight.

For older members of the family (such as, well, yourself), Screen Time can be a good way to enforce self-regulation with screens. When enabled, you can use Screen Time to see how much and for what you are using your iOS device. Additionally, Screen Time will send you weekly updates to let you know how your weekly usage has improved or regressed in comparison to the previous week. This can be a pretty handy reminder. During the first week of break when I was with family, my phone told me that I was down 49% from my regular daily usage. The next week when I was back home and in my (somewhat) regular routine? My phone told me that I was *up* 49% from my regular daily usage. I responded to this data by trying to separate myself from my phone in the evenings when I am home with my wife so I can spend more quality time with her and less "quality" time with my phone. If I was able to do it at home with my lovely-but-also-inevitably-frustrating family, then I should be able to do it with my lovely-but-never-frustrating-if-she-is-reading-this wife.

Modems, Routers, and Internet Service Providers



No matter your Internet Service Provider (or ISP), the equipment installed in your living space has accessible settings that manage *everything* connected to your home network, not just your iOS devices.

There is a pretty good chance you've never seen these settings because you had professionals install the hardware you use to access the Internet on a daily basis, but luckily these settings

are easy to find with just a little bit of research on your part. If you are a Comcast subscriber, you can go [here](#), and if you are a Centurylink subscriber you can go [here](#) to learn more.

So, what exactly can you do in your modem's settings to help regulate your family's use of devices? Pretty much everything, if you know where to look. You can blacklist websites so that nobody connected to your network can access them, you can set forcefully disconnect certain devices from your network, you can set windows of time when certain devices are blocked from connecting to the Internet, and much more than I can possibly begin to list in this already-too-long column. The tools at your disposal here are pretty powerful, though, so you should tread cautiously when configuring your Internet hardware. When you have the desire to change something in these settings, I recommend searching online for official or unofficial tutorials so you can make sure whatever you are enabling or disabling won't harm your home network. If things do go bad, though, rest assured that there is a reset button hiding *somewhere* on your modem that will restore it to factory settings. Of course, that means you'll have to set up everything from scratch again, so...yeah, proceed with caution.

Wireless Providers



The cell phone plan that you spend half of your paycheck on could come with some management tools of its own. Ruston specifically mentions [T-Mobile's ONE plan](#), which lets you monitor device usage and set usage limits on all equipment associated with your plan, but every provider offers this level of support on some level. If you don't know if you have the ability to manage the devices on your family plan, then I recommend simply calling or going in to your local store. Odds are that there is something you already can do with your current plan or that there is a marginal upgrade you can make to your plan to enable device monitoring.

Accessories and Apps



If any of the above steps seem like too much setup, then your best bet is to make use of any one of the thousands of accessories and apps that exist solely for the purpose of monitoring your children's devices. The most popular device, [Circle](#), is brought up by Ruston in her blog, and it is one of the more user-friendly options available today. Circle is a simpler way of managing individual devices connected to your home network than configuring the settings on your modem, as it is bundled with an easy-to-use app that lets you control everything *without* the risk of burning your Internet connection to the ground. At only \$40.99, it isn't a bad way to go if you are looking for a quick fix for screen addiction in your household.

Not keen on adding another inconspicuous plastic box to your home office? Go digital and try one of the many device management apps on both Android and iOS devices. Ruston uses [OurPact](#), which bundles many of the features of the other solutions listed in this column with some of the quality-of-life tools you might find in other apps such as Life360 (an app used for locating members of your family with GPS technology). [Norton Family](#) is another popular app that works across iOS, Android, and Windows devices. You can find [a big list of screen time management apps on Ruston's blog](#).

Parental Controls



Most of the above-listed categories require an extra purchase on your part, but don't forget that almost every device in your household has proprietary controls of its own that you can configure directly on the device. This applies to everything from phones to Chromebooks to laptops; it even applies to video game consoles, so you can ensure that your child doesn't replicate my 30 hour *Smash Bros.* endeavor on his or her Nintendo Switch.

If you want to learn more about the parental controls on your child's device, then you should be able to find that information on the manufacturer's website. Some companies such as Nintendo (the manufacturer of the Switch) publish [helpful informational videos](#) and [tutorials](#) to help you configure your child's device the way you want. Other companies...well, they have an FAQ somewhere on their website, I'm sure.

My Recommendation

That's an awful lot of information, right? I wish I could say that I have a one-size-fits-all solution, but every family is different. My recommendations would have to depend on what kinds of devices you and your kids use as well as your personal comfort level with technology.

If you feel pretty confident in your technology abilities and have the time to do the necessary research, I recommend using a combination of basic parental controls on each device in your household and configuring your modem to regulate how devices access your network.

If you are confident but afraid that you might not be able to get everything set up properly, then I recommend purchasing something like Circle that lets you manage things in a heavily-controlled environment. Parental controls are a must, but the Circle should take care of a lot of other issues that you are worried about. Oh, and don't forget about Screen Time if your family uses Apple devices (or an equivalent app on the Google Play store if your family uses Android devices).

If you don't have much confidence in your abilities at all, then OurPact is a simple solution that will take care of most of your needs. Using this in conjunction with parental controls and Screen Time (or its Android equivalent) will shore up mobile communications in your household. If that goes well for you, then you might consider an accessory like the Circle once you are comfortable with your screen management environment.

As always, if you have any questions about this column, requests for a future topic of conversation, or a nice word or two to throw my way, then you can reach me at drobbins@ckcs.net.

I hope your new year is happy, safe, and managed heavily by one of the applications or devices featured in this column!