




MANAGING SCREENS AT THE TABLE

and how to reduce screen
time if it's not working for
your family



WHAT THE SCREEN IS ACTUALLY DOING AT DINNER

If you've ever slid an iPad across the dinner table just to get through the meal, this is not a guide designed to make you feel worse about that.

It's a guide to help you understand why your child needs it, and what to do with that information.

Because the screen at dinner isn't the problem. The assumption that your child should be able to eat without it, without anyone asking why, that's the problem.

What's actually happening at the dinner table

For a neurotypical child, sitting down to eat is relatively straightforward. For a child with ADHD, autism, or sensory differences, it's anything but.

Before a single bite happens, their nervous system is already working overtime:

Managing the sensory input in the room (the smells, sounds, textures, light)

Regulating their body enough to stay seated

Tolerating the sight and smell of food they may find overwhelming

Coordinating the physical act of chewing and swallowing

By the time dinner arrives, many of these children have been in a state of nervous system overdrive since the moment they walked through the school gate. Their cup was already full, or overflowing. The screen? For a lot of these kids, it's the thing that brings their nervous system down just enough to eat at all.

That's not bad parenting. That's nervous system regulation in action.

So what do we actually do about it?

This isn't permission to keep screens at the table forever and never work toward anything different.

It's a starting point, not a destination.

Here's what the feeding therapy approach actually looks like:

START WITH THE NERVOUS SYSTEM, NOT THE SCREEN.

Ask what does my child need to feel safe enough to eat? That question leads somewhere completely different than "how do I get the screen gone?"

REDUCE STIMULATION BEFORE THE MEAL.

Wind-down time before dinner can do some of the heavy lifting the screen was doing. Dim lights, lower noise, slow movement. Make the environment work for your child's nervous system.

TRANSITION GRADUALLY, NOT OVERNIGHT.

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REPLACE THE REGULATION, NOT JUST THE DEVICE.

Movement before dinner, a low-pressure conversation, and connection can do the same job as the screen when a child's nervous system learns to trust the table as a safe place.

MAKE THE TABLE FEEL SAFE FIRST.

A child who dreads mealtimes will need more support to get there, not less. Safety comes before expansion, always.

What the research actually says

The evidence on feeding children with ADHD shows stress and pressure make eating harder, not easier. Reducing anxiety around mealtimes, whatever it takes, is a legitimate strategy.

A regulated child eats more than a dysregulated one. Full stop.

Getting food in comes before everything else. Nutrition cannot do its job if the food isn't eaten in the first place.

A note on guilt

If you've been made to feel like the iPad at dinner is evidence of failure, by a family member, a healthcare provider, a stranger on the internet, that narrative is not supported by the evidence, and it is not serving your child.

You are meeting your child where they are. That is exactly where feeding therapy starts. The child who could only eat with Bluey on in the background? With the right support, they find their way to the table without it – on their own terms, in their own time. That's what this work is really for.

When to get support

If mealtimes are consistently stressful, if your child's food intake is limited or shrinking, if you're walking on eggshells around every meal, that's not something you have to figure out alone.

Feeding challenges in children with ADHD and sensory differences are complex, and they have causes worth investigating. Nutrient deficiencies, gut health, sensory processing, and nervous system regulation all play a role. when you address the cause, you change the trajectory.

Ready to go deeper?

Book a consultation at courtgarfoot.com.au or follow along on Instagram @courtgarfoot_nutrition for evidence-based nutrition that goes further than "eat more greens."