

- Tara: [00:00](#) This is My Child Will Thrive, and I'm your host, Tara Hunkin, nutritional therapy practitioner, certified GAPS practitioner, restorative wellness practitioner, and mother. I'm thrilled to share with you the latest information, tips, resources, and tools to help you on the path to recovery for your child with ADHD, autism, sensory processing disorder, or learning disabilities. My own experiences with my daughter combined with as much training as I can get my hands on, research I can dig into, and conferences I can attend have helped me to develop systems and tools for parents like you who feel overwhelmed trying to help their children.
- Tara: [00:37](#) Sit back as I share another great topic to help you on your journey. A quick disclaimer before we get started, My Child Will Thrive is not a substitute for working with a qualified healthcare practitioner. The information provided on this podcast is not intended to diagnose or treat your child. Please consult your healthcare practitioner before implementing any information or treatments that you have learned about on this podcast. There are many gifted, passionate, and knowledgeable practitioners with hundreds if not thousands of hours of study in clinical experience available to help guide you. Part of our goal is to give you the knowledge and tools you need to effectively advocate for your child so that you don't blindly let implement each new treatment that comes along.
- Tara: [01:23](#) No one knows your child better than you. No one knows your child's history like you do or can better judge what is normal or abnormal for your child. The greatest success in recovery comes from the parent being informed and asking the right questions and making the best decisions for their child in coordination with a team of qualified practitioners in different areas of specialty. Now, on with the show.
- Tara: [01:48](#) Hi everyone, I'm excited to have with me today Dr. Nicole Buerkens. She is a unique combination of psychologist, nutritionist, and special education teacher. Dr. Nicole has 20 years of experience supporting children, young adults, and families to improve behavior naturally. She's an expert in evaluating and treating wide range of learning, mood, and behavior challenges including ADHD, autism, anxiety, mood disorders, and sensory processing disorder. Dr. Nicole has a doctorate in clinical psychology, a master's degree in special education and nutrition, and is board certified nutrition specialist. She's the founder and director of Horizons Developmental Resource Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and

is a bestselling author, award-winning therapist, published researcher.

Tara: [02:39](#) When she isn't working, Dr. Nicole enjoys spending time with her husband and four children, when we were just talking about before we started to record that their four teenage children, which is a lot going on at that time in life. Thanks so much for joining me here. Again, we've spoken before on the autism, ADHD, and sensory processing disorder summit. I'm really grateful for you coming on to talk to us today.

Dr. Nicole: [03:00](#) Awesome. Thanks for having me back. Glad to be here.

Tara: [03:02](#) What we're going to talk about today is something that I think especially with teenagers, but even with actually especially on our parent population with our children, we're all struggling with the issue around, well, screen time and how the screens and the digital world is impacting our children in terms of their mental health, their physical health, and also family interaction overall because we struggle with managing these things. Dr. Buerkens is an expert in all these areas, so I'm really excited to have her on to talk about those things today. Why don't we start out with what do you think is the biggest challenge for parents right now in terms of why we're struggling with this so much with our kids, and how it's impacting them?

Dr. Nicole: [03:46](#) It's one of the big things that comes up at the clinic here on a regular basis and in working with patients and families. I think one of the biggest challenges is that we are the first generation of parents raising kids in this fully digital age. I mean, when I was a kid, the internet didn't exist. We didn't even have computers yet until I was in high school. Our parents weren't raising us in a world where technology was a 24/7 thing. The internet didn't even exist at the time, so I think one of the challenges is we're flying blind in terms of as adults figuring out how to navigate all of this for ourselves.

Dr. Nicole: [04:29](#) What does it mean as an adult to have a healthy relationship with technology and digital devices and social media, and what does it look like to have balance and all of that for ourselves, and at the same time, we are raising our kids to have to figure out all of those same things. It's a challenge because we don't have a model for it. We can't look to our parents or our grandparents and go, "Well, how did they use to do that?" Well, they didn't because this stuff didn't exist. I think that's one of the big challenges is that we're trying to figure this out as we're

living through it, and the other piece of it is that technology is evolving so rapidly.

Dr. Nicole: [05:10](#) My oldest is 19. Yes, there was technology in some devices starting to be available when he was really little, but just in his lifetime. Now, what has happened even over the last five years, 10 years with portability in devices, devices being in the school all through the day, social media? All of this is happening so quickly, and as parents, we're in this process of trying to continually keep up with it and figure out how to keep our kids safe, how to set healthy limits, what's okay and what's not okay. A lot of the time, we just feel completely overwhelmed with it. I think that's one of the things that I see is a lot of parents stick their head in the sand with this stuff, and just give their kids access, and cross their fingers and say Hail Mary, and hope that it's all gonna work out.

Dr. Nicole: [06:03](#) The reality is that we need to be actively involved in what's going on with our kids and technology and digital media and devices. I think there are some ways to do that that can help kids be safe, help them set good limits, and not make ourselves totally crazy in the process, but it is. It's a big challenge for all of us.

Tara: [06:26](#) You've hit the nail on the head, which is that the whole world has changed in a very short period of time. No one's written a handbook on how to do this yet, although I know you have a good guide, which we'll talk about later. It is a real challenge and it becomes a battle in the household, but also with a lot of parents that I talked to, when you have kids with already some challenges, sometimes even communication challenges or other challenges, we're using technology to help them as well. Can you talk a little bit about that balance between, I think, we do like to stick our head in the sands? I know I do. I mean, you're having that rough day and you just want to hand the device off so that you can just get your sanity back.

Tara: [07:04](#) We understand that that's going to happen, but how do we determine what are the things digitally or screens or whatever that they're interacting with are things that are going to be helpful versus the ones that we can work on trying to eliminate or at least reduce their exposure to?

Dr. Nicole: [07:21](#) It's a great question, and there isn't a one-size fits all answer, but I will give some things that I think are helpful guidelines for parents and professionals to consider. One of the first things to consider is use of devices or digital media negatively impacting

or infringing on a child's ability to do other things in life that are important. I think that's a really critical guiding question that can be a hard thing for some parents to sit back and really think about, because the reality is that for too many kids nowadays, their use of digital media and devices is literally getting in the way. It's infringing on their ability to engage in important things in the real non-digital world that they need to be doing in order to support their growth and development.

Dr. Nicole: [08:21](#) It's, yes, very important for kids with some communication issues or learning challenges or different types of issues to have access to things like assistive technology for example. That should be enhancing or contributing to a child's active engagement in meaningful, real-world relationships and tasks and activities and not detracting from it. What we see happening is so many kids who are spending such a large portion of their waking time during the day and even some when they're supposed to be sleeping at night on devices that they're not engaging in meaningful things in the real world the way they need to.

Dr. Nicole: [09:07](#) In fact, devices become a really easy way to avoid the things that we don't want to be doing, the things that make us uncomfortable, the things that challenge us, and that can become really problematic. I think that overall picture of, "Are the devices and the digital technology a piece of my child's world and contributing in a productive way or detracting from my child's ability, willingness, active participation in what's going on in life?" I think that's a really important big picture thing to consider.

Tara: [09:47](#) I know that's a great question to be asking because it can really quickly help you sort through what truly is helping and what might be not necessary. In your practice, what do you see in terms of parents that come in to you in terms of the differences in their children's behavior in particular when they are heavily using devices versus when I'm assuming that there's times when you ask them to take a bit of a media break? Do you have examples where people have seen great results by reducing their exposure to these things, and are certain kids more susceptible than others to being more addicted to them rather than others?

Dr. Nicole: [10:28](#) Certainly, digital device use screen time is directly and indirectly connected to a child's mood, to their anxiety level, their behavior, how they're functioning in general. Not Uncommon at all for me to see kids in our practice here who tech use is a

significant piece of the picture that's going on for them in terms of the challenges that they're having. I started noticing this over a decade ago, just anecdotally, kids who would come in who they or their parents would report a much higher dose of screen time in the day or parents didn't set limits on it or whatever, and just noticing certainly more irritability, more withdrawn behaviors, more just real reactive kinds of behaviors.

Dr. Nicole: [11:17](#)

I'm even seeing it in my own kids, when they were younger watching the impact that even playing an hour of a video game or something on the weed would have on their mood. My husband and I used to say, "Oh, they're so grumpy now after that." There seems to be a tipping point for every child where the stimulation becomes unhelpful. It's too much. For some kids, to get to that individuality piece, because you said some kids are more susceptible to this than others, we know that that's true. There's a tipping point. Some kids, 15 or 20 minutes of exposure to video games or scrolling social media or that type of stuff can have a negative impact on them.

Dr. Nicole: [11:58](#)

Some kids can spend some more time on that, but in general, for all of us, and especially for kids and teenagers, when you start getting the kinds of total time amounts that are adding up over the course of the day, it has a detrimental effect. What we were seeing anecdotally 10 years or so ago, now the research is clearly supporting that. We're seeing research studies coming out now on large populations of kids showing that for example, as the amount of screen time in a 24-hour period increases, so does the likelihood that that child has been or will be diagnosed with things like ADHD, with things like anxiety disorders, depression.

Dr. Nicole: [12:41](#)

We're seeing that in elementary-age children. We're seeing that absolutely in teens and young adults. Those trends that we were noting in clinical practice years ago really are playing out in the research that this is a factor. Now, it's not the only factor in things like ADHD, depression, anxiety, various types of behavioral challenges. Certainly not the only factor, but it is a really important factor, and the thing that I think is so exciting about it is that this is something that we absolutely can make changes with that can lead to pretty quick improvements. You asked about some case studies or stories.

Dr. Nicole: [13:23](#)

I'm thinking about several kids just recently in our practice who made really significant, positive improvements in a short period of time, like, days to weeks just with educating them and parents about appropriate limits, about how electronics use is

impacting their brain, their sleep, their ability to self-regulate, all of that and getting some good basic things in place. Sleep is one of the big ones where it impacts. I'm thinking about a teenager that I met just a couple of weeks ago who had done pretty well throughout elementary school and early middle school.

Dr. Nicole: [14:00](#)

Then got a smart phone in seventh grade, and things really began to unravel for her to the point where now she's in 10th grade, came into see me, has been diagnosed with depression, anxiety, ADD, and parents are going, "Nothing's working. What can we do?" In talking with her privately without her parents present, what came out is one of the big problems. She has access to her device 24/7 including in her room at night. She's not sleeping. She's getting maybe four, maybe at the most five hours of sleep at night, and it's very interrupted with notifications and texts and things like that, and so one of the big things that needed to change immediately for her was getting some limits and boundaries in place for the tech, which she didn't appreciate, what teenager does, so that she could sleep well.

Dr. Nicole: [14:52](#)

That made a world of difference for her. Now, there were many other things that have been and will be helpful as far as coping skills and things like that for her to manage her emotions and her behavior, but as a foundation, getting her sleep in a good place by removing devices from the room, by setting limits on that, even something basic like that can make a big difference. I've seen in young kids too. Sometimes, they are super irritable, super reactive, having these meltdowns all the time, and it is directly related to this overexposure to screens and devices, this overstimulation that they're getting.

Dr. Nicole: [15:34](#)

One of the key things with that, parents, if you're noticing that every time you try to set a limit, take that device away, say, "Hey, we need to shut that off. It's time to do something else," and it's like world war three and there's a meltdown and there's whatever, that is a really big red flag that something not good is going on between that kind of stimulation in your child's brain, and a plan needs to be put in place to deal with that.

Tara: [15:58](#)

Great example. We chuckled and not that long ago. In my family, we've had limits and we've had rules, but kids got smart and they find ways to get around those rules. We implemented a piece of technology that actually tracks and limits their time. That's some down off the internet when they are done, but also we can see what's going on in devices beyond that. Boy did that

cause a lot of upset in our house when we first did that, and we had to point out to them that the rules were there before. All we're doing is finding another way to enforce them.

Tara: [16:31](#) My husband and I got a good chuckle out of it because we realize that it was the right thing to do. As I always say, if they're really mad at me, I'm probably on the right track. Our job as parents is not to make them happy necessarily all the time.

Dr. Nicole: [16:43](#) Exactly right. I tell parents, "If your child is happy with you 100% of the time, you are definitely doing something wrong." That's right, because our kids shouldn't be and especially when it comes to devices, I think one of the biggest problems is that parents feel so disempowered around tech and devices. First of all, we feel outsmarted right? We didn't grow up with this stuff. We are definitely behind the curve. Our kids know more about this stuff than we do, and that feels intimidating and overwhelming and disempowering to us right there.

Dr. Nicole: [17:16](#) Then you throw in the emotional piece of we like it when our kids are nice to us and like us, right? That's a normal thing, and so many heated issues and behaviors and just emotional distress can come up around this stuff, and it doesn't feel good. It makes us feel uncomfortable, and we'd rather avoid it, but we need to tackle it head on. I think what you and your husband did there is so critical and is one of the primary things that I talk with families about is having a good program or process in place for knowing what your kids are doing online, who they're doing it with, and to be empowered to set time limits and exposure limits without having it turn into power struggles all the time.

Dr. Nicole: [18:04](#) Those kinds of apps, like, I use and recommend an app called Qustodio. There are several out there. It's just the one that my husband and I use, and we've recommended it to lots of people in the clinic. There are several, but what they allow you to do is have access on your app or your computer to setting things, like, my child's devices won't turn on or can't be used before this time in the morning, or they'll turn off at this time of night. Even something as basic as that is empowering as a parent to say, "Okay, I'm going to take some control of this. I'm not going to be fighting with you all the time about whether you can have your device, not have your device, trying to get the device from you because that in and of itself can create huge turmoil."

Dr. Nicole: [18:52](#) It's like we're just going to have these things in place so that automatically, your device is going to turn off before bedtime, so I don't have to worry about you sneaking and getting your

phone off the kitchen counter and being like... We used to hide under our beds with flashlights and books at night. Now, kids are hiding under the covers and under the bed with their tablet or their smartphone or whatever. Being able to set time limits like that so we know our children's health is not being negatively impacted by not getting a good night's sleep, because that device is in there and the texts are going off or they're watching YouTube videos or whatever they're doing, and then you'll be able to set restrictions on content.

Dr. Nicole: [19:33](#)

It amazes me how many parents aren't using even the basic safety programs that come preloaded on devices, and all devices have some type of parental control for even something as basic as blocking pornographic content or explicit content, things like that. Many of the even young children we see in our practice literally are being given devices that have no restrictions whatsoever. A young child, most of them, are not intending to access inappropriate things, but the reality is there are all of those things on the internet, and it is out there, and whether they intend to or not, they will be able to access it. We've had some pretty traumatized kids in here because of things that they very innocently, inadvertently ended up seeing or getting exposed to online, and parents are going, "I have no idea."

Dr. Nicole: [20:32](#)

Well, this is where we need to be in the driver's seat with setting limits and restrictions. Not only do all of these devices come with at least some basic parameters that you can set for content, but again, these types of apps, these monitoring apps and things give you more control, and allow you even to see every site that your child has been to, which quite frankly can be an important piece of accountability as kids get into those teen years. I say to my children, "Those devices are mine. You don't own them. We allow you to use them, and as long as you are managing yourself responsibly in a way that shows that you can be responsible for using online media devices, you'll be able to have access."

Dr. Nicole: [21:18](#)

"If you start to show that you're not able to manage that in a responsible way, whether that's through how you're behaving online or using your device or whether in other parts of your life, you're showing a lack of responsibility, if that's happening, then that being said, as parents, we need to pull back on access to that and help you learn how to be responsible and make healthy choices for yourself." It really is a process that we have to guide kids with. They don't just wake up one day and suddenly have the skills for managing this stuff, especially not

the kids Tara that you and I are working with and talking to families all the time, kids with executive function problems.

Dr. Nicole: [22:01](#) Whether that's diagnosed as ADD, ADHD, sensory processing, these are kids whose brains tend to struggle with appropriate decision making, time management, planning, all of that anyway, and then we hand them these devices and we expect that they're going to be able to safely and appropriately use them. It's just not fair. I use the example a lot with parents that for kids in general, these devices, like a smartphone for example, is like giving a Ferrari to a 10-year-old. You give a 10-year-old or a 13-year-old even a smart phone with no restraint, no limits, nothing on it, that's giving a kid who doesn't even have their license yet a Ferrari to drive.

Dr. Nicole: [22:47](#) They do not have the brain development yet and the maturity of thinking and all of that to be able to handle that. We have to come alongside them, and we have to teach them and guide them at each age and stage along the way how to manage those things in a healthy and appropriate ways, so important.

Tara: [23:09](#) This is the struggle, because really I think why we as parents first allow the children, our kids to have these things is because, for lack of a better term, it helps us manage our time and helps... It really is to occupy them, especially when they're younger. We all use them and to some degree as a babysitter, and because just to manage our daily lives. The challenges is that actually the younger the child is, the more you need to be there right with them. YouTube is a perfect example that you've said that is that because what happens is suggested videos start up, and you just don't know where the silly little saying that's been typed in is going to take that child in terms of what's going to pop up next.

Dr. Nicole: [23:52](#) That's right.

Tara: [23:53](#) It is a massive challenge, and I think we've all struggled with it and because it is such a learning curve for us all because it's not something that's been around for so long as we talked about in the beginning. Just to wrap up here, what would be the top... You have this guide actually, and I'm going to put a link in the show notes to your free tech guide for parents. What would be those top things that you would tell parents to be looking for addressing as they move forward solutions for their kids?

Dr. Nicole: [24:20](#) A few really simple things as starting points, the first is just like with everything else, we as parents have to be the model. We

need to model for our kids healthy tech-related behaviors. We can't just tell them something and then not do it ourselves. For example, saying to a kid, "You're on your phone all the time. You're on a computer all the time. That's not healthy. Don't do that," and then every time they look at us, we've got our face and our phone or our computer or whatever, that doesn't work. We need to try to be a model, and model closing our computer and having real conversations. Model not bringing our devices to the dinner table. Model taking time to go outside or have physical activity and not just constantly be sitting.

Dr. Nicole: [25:06](#)

Whatever it is, we need to be the model for it. That's number one. Number two, simple starting point, device-free meals. Huge but basic thing that we can do is to just start setting the limit and the expectation that when we are eating, when we're together having meals, we don't have devices. Nobody brings them to the table. Whether that kid starts out staying at the table for just a few minutes, whatever it needs to be, but to set the expectation that when we're eating, when we're spending this time together, we're doing it without devices. That's an excellent starting point.

Dr. Nicole: [25:39](#)

Another big one, no devices in the bedrooms, especially not at night. This is a huge safety issue. I will say it over and over again, but nothing good happens for your child with access to the internet or devices in the middle of the night. Nothing, nothing. From a safety standpoint, that's huge. The other piece is, as we've talked about from a health and wellness standpoint, with getting sleep and just not being exposed to the stuff that's going on between whether it's with peers, what's going on in the night, whether it's things online. Whatever it is, no devices in the bedroom at night, and then just setting expectations for when and how tech is going to be used.

Dr. Nicole: [26:25](#)

That tech guide that you mentioned, I really lay out a lot of practical ways that families can do that, but one simple starting point is to just set expectations for things that need to be done before technology is accessed. Instead of having this constant push and pull all day long of, "Can I have my device? What do I need to do," and us feeling like we need to take it away and get them to do something, we just set some basic expectations depending on their age, their developmental level, depending on how addicted they are to devices.

Dr. Nicole: [26:55](#)

You take all that into a trail, but you start setting some expectations of, "Here's the list of things that needs to get done," so we make sure that they're covering the things and

doing the things that are most important and prioritized. Then you can have access to devices. That may start out as a smaller list to begin with, and it may grow over time, but that idea of here are the things that needs to be done, and then you can have access I think is a helpful thing. Then as I mentioned, reducing the power struggles by taking the time to set up a monitoring app or the parental controls on the device or whatever so that you can set time parameters and content parameters and things without constantly being in a power struggle over trying to get the child's device away from them, or trying to take it from them to turn it off.

Dr. Nicole: [27:46](#)

There is a much simpler way to do that by using those devices or those apps in those programs then that you can manage from your devices, so some simple starting points that any family can begin to implement.

Tara: [27:59](#)

In the show notes, everybody, you can go there and you can find a link to Dr. Nicole's guide which is going to be really helpful for you to get started. I'm also going to link to the app that she mentioned and also the device that we use at our home to monitor the internet too so you can check that out and see if that's a good fit for you and your family as well. I want to thank you for spending time with me. Again, it's always so much great information that you share it. I also want to encourage people to reach out to Dr. Buerkens through her website. We'll have those all linked in the show notes as well. I hope we get a chance to do this again soon.

Dr. Nicole: [28:35](#)

Awesome. Thanks for having me.

Tara: [28:38](#)

That's a wrap. Thanks for joining me this week on My Child Will Thrive. I'm so passionate about giving you the tools and information you need to help your child recover. As they say, it takes a village, so join us in the My Child Will Thrive village Facebook group where you can meet like-minded parents and stay up to date on everything we have going on at My Child Will Thrive. This is Tara Hunkin, and I'll catch you on the next podcast or over at mychildwillthrive.com.