The Game Time Playbook

A parent's guide to the Game Time app — how it works, how to set it up for your family, and how to use "losing time" without it backfiring.

By Greg Snyder, Ph.D. · A Perspective Behavioral Health resource

The whole idea, in a minute

Screen time stops being something you take away in the heat of the moment, and becomes something your child **earns** by doing what's expected. Do the morning routine, finish homework, help out — the minutes add up. Skip an expected task, and some minutes come off. When it's time to play, they tap Start Gaming and the banked time counts down.

The big shift: instead of "no screens because you didn't do X," it's "screens are there waiting, and you build them up by handling your day." Same currency your child already cares about — now it's working for you. Behavior folks call this a **token economy**, and it's especially well-suited to older kids, who get the logic of banking and spending.

Why it works

Earning beats losing

Taking screens away as the only tool has a short shelf life — once it's gone, you're out of leverage, and the whole day can go sideways. Building time *up* keeps something to work toward at every point in the day. Rewarding what you want to see (positive reinforcement) tends to hold up better over time than punishing what you don't.

The clock is the reward

For an older kid, screen time isn't an abstract "point" — it's the actual thing they want. That makes the banked minutes powerful right away. The live countdown makes it concrete: they can see exactly what they earned ticking down as they play.

Losing time still has a place — used carefully

This version can subtract time when an expected task is skipped. Done right, that's a fair, predictable consequence agreed on ahead of time — not a surprise punishment. Used carelessly, it's the fastest way to break the whole system. The section below on **using "lose time" well** is the most important part of this guide.

Put it on the home screen

This puts a Game Time icon on the phone or tablet's home screen, so it opens full-screen with one tap. It's free and takes about ten seconds — nothing to download from an app store.

iPhone & iPad

Use the Safari browser

1. Open the Game Time link in **Safari**.
2. Tap the **Share** button — the square with an arrow pointing up.
3. Scroll down and tap **Add to Home Screen**.
4. Tap **Add**. Done.

Android

Use the Chrome browser

1. Open the Game Time link in **Chrome**.
2. Tap the ⋮ **menu** (three dots, top-right).
3. Tap **Add to Home screen** (or **Install app**).
4. Tap **Add** to confirm. Done.

A wall-mounted tablet works great for this age — the banked time stays visible all day.

Setting it up

1. Tap the gear **(⚙️)** to open Parent Settings, and set a **PIN** so the rules can't be quietly rewritten.
2. In the **Day** tab, name the child and set a **daily cap** (how much screen time they can bank in a day — set it to 0 for no cap).
3. In the **Earn** tab, pick the handful of things that earn time and set the minutes for each.

4. In the **Lose** tab, set the few expected tasks that cost time when skipped — read the next section first.

5. At day's end, tap **Good day** or **Rough day** to update the streak and roll into tomorrow.

Making it yours

Everything is editable — this is meant to fit your family, not the other way around. In Parent Settings you can:

- **Change any time amount.** Tap the minutes on any earn or lose item and type your own number. The examples that come loaded are just a starting point.
- **Rename or re-emoji anything**, so items match the words your family actually uses.
- **Add your own ways to earn.** Tap "Add earn item" for anything you want to encourage — reading, practice, exercise, helping a sibling, a job around the house.
- **Remove what you don't need.** The app comes with lots of earn examples on purpose; delete down to the few that matter right now (see the first trap below).
- **Adjust the daily cap and streak** anytime, and use "Adjust time now" to add or subtract minutes by hand.

> **Tip:** set the amounts *with* your child, not for them. Kids follow a system far better when they had a say in the numbers — and it turns "that's not fair" into a conversation you already had.

Using "lose time" well

This is the part that makes or breaks the system. Losing time (behavior folks call it "response cost") works — but only inside a few guardrails. Here's how to keep it fair and effective.

- **Agree on it first.** Every take-away should be something your child already knew about — a task they understood was expected, with a cost they saw coming. Never invent a deduction on the spot when you're frustrated. Predictable is the whole point.

- **Keep losses smaller than the matching earn.** Skipping the morning routine should cost less than doing it earns. If a single miss can wipe out a whole good morning, kids do the math, decide the day's already lost, and check out. The app is set up this way to start.
- **You can't go below zero.** The app won't let time go negative — there's no "screen-time debt." That's on purpose: once a kid is in the hole with no way out, the system stops motivating anything.
- **Tie the cost to the task, not to attitude.** Lose time for the chore that didn't happen — a concrete, agreed expectation — rather than for eye-rolls or mood. Keep it about actions everyone can see.
- **Let earning outweigh losing.** Across a normal day there should be far more ways to gain time than to lose it. If your child mostly experiences the app taking time away, you're back to punishment with extra steps.

> **Watch for this:** if losing time turns into a daily battle, or your child seems to give up rather than recover, that's the signal to dial the losses down — or switch to earn-only for a while and rebuild momentum. Losing time is a tool, not the point.

The traps that sink these systems

Trap 1 — Too many items

The trap

A dozen ways to earn and a long list of ways to lose. Everyone loses track by week two. If it's hard for *you* to keep up with, it won't last.

The fix

Trim to a few earns that matter right now and two or three take-aways. The app loads with lots of examples so you can pick — delete the rest. A simple system you actually run beats a rich one you abandon.

Trap 2 — Screen time they can get anyway

The trap

The app says 45 minutes banked, but the tablet's right there and nobody's really counting. If screens are available off the books, the earned minutes stop meaning anything.

The fix

Screen time comes **through** the app, period. If it's not banked, it's not happening. That's what gives the minutes their value — and it's the single biggest predictor of whether this works.

Trap 3 — Friction and delay at cash-in

The trap

"You earned it, but not now." "Later." "After dinner, maybe." Every hoop and every wait makes the earned time feel less real, and the effort to earn it feel less worth it.

The fix

When they've earned it and it's an okay time, let them tap Start Gaming and go. The easier and more immediate the payoff, the harder the whole system pulls. (Set the daily cap and any "no screens after X" rule up front, so the boundaries are built in rather than argued each time.)

Trap 4 — Losing time until there's nothing left

The trap

Deductions so big, or so frequent, that a kid hits zero early and has no reason to try for the rest of the day.

The fix

Small losses, floored at zero, always outnumbered by ways to earn back. There should always be a path back up. See "Using lose time well" above — this is that rule in action.

Also worth watching

Same rewards, both parents

Kids find the gap between two caregivers fast. Agree on the amounts and the rules together, and let the app be the shared referee.

The cap creeps

If "just 15 more minutes" happens nightly, the cap isn't a cap. Decide the daily max together and let the app hold the line so you don't have to relitigate it every evening.

Winding it down

The goal isn't to run this forever — it's for the routines to hold on their own. Once a behavior is solid, quietly stretch things out: rely more on a genuine "hey, nice job handling that" and less on the minutes, retire the items that have become automatic, and add new ones only where you're still building a habit.

The app is the scaffolding, not the building.

Quick-start checklist

- [ ] PIN set, daily cap chosen
- [ ] A few earns that matter now — the rest deleted
- [ ] Two or three take-aways, each smaller than its matching earn
- [ ] Amounts set *with* your child
- [ ] Screen time only comes through the app
- [ ] Cash-in is quick when it's an okay time
- [ ] Far more ways to earn than to lose
- [ ] Same rules for both parents

Sharing between phones (optional)

If both parents want the same game-time bank on their own phones, turn on **Family Sync**. Tap an earn or lose item on one phone and it shows up on the other a second later. It's completely optional — skip it and the app keeps working exactly like it does now.

1. On the phone you've been using, tap the gear **(⚙️)** → **Sync** → **Start a family**. Whatever's already on that phone comes along.
2. Tap **Invite parent** and text the link to the other parent. They open it and tap **Join family**. (Or they can type the family code in the same spot.)
3. That's it — both phones now share one game-time bank. It still works with no signal; changes catch up when the phone's back online.

Do this inside the home-screen icon you actually use (iPhones keep home-screen apps separate from Safari). Keep the family code between the two of you — anyone who has it can see and change the game-time bank. To stop, tap ⚙️ → Sync → **Stop syncing on this phone**; that phone keeps its current copy.

A note on privacy: unless you turn on Family Sync, the app keeps everything on your own device — nothing about your child is sent anywhere or stored online. If you do turn it on, the game-time bank is stored in a private family record on Perspective Behavioral Health's Google Firebase database, and only phones with your family code can open it.

Where this comes from

This guide rests on well-established behavioral science — positive reinforcement, token economies, and response cost — with decades of research behind it. A few good places to read more:

Ayllon, T., & Azrin, N. H. (1968). *The Token Economy: A Motivational System for Therapy and Rehabilitation.* Appleton-Century-Crofts.

Barkley, R. A. (2013). *Defiant Children: A Clinician's Manual for Assessment and Parent Training* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press.

Cooper, J. O., Heron, T. E., & Heward, W. L. (2020). *Applied Behavior Analysis* (3rd ed.). Pearson.

Hackenberg, T. D. (2009). Token reinforcement: A review and analysis. *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior, 91*(2).

Kazdin, A. E. (2008). *The Kazdin Method for Parenting the Defiant Child.* Houghton Mifflin.

This is a general parenting tool, not medical or psychological treatment. If your child's behavior has you worried, it's worth talking with a professional who can look at your family's specific situation.



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