



The UnPluggEd Project PLAYBOOK

UNPLUG
FOCUS
THRIVE!

WEEK OF
OCTOBER 5-9, 2026

Collaborative national initiative
encouraging schools to embrace
distraction-free learning

#GoUnPluggEd

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WELCOME

Thank you for participating in **The UnPluggEd Project**!

The UnPluggEd Project is a collaborative national initiative encouraging schools, families, and communities to intentionally reduce reliance on internet-connected devices and create opportunities for distraction-free learning.

The goal is simple: To create space for students to focus, connect, create, collaborate, and learn without the constant presence of screens.

Participation is flexible. Some schools may choose a single day. Others may commit to multiple days or an entire week. Some classrooms may participate independently, while others may engage at the school or district level.

There is no single right way to participate.

What matters is creating opportunities for students and educators to experience learning in ways that are increasingly uncommon in today's digital environment: Face-to-face discussion, hands-on exploration, sustained attention, creative problem-solving, and meaningful human connection.

This playbook provides practical guidance, classroom activities, implementation ideas, resources, and inspiration to help make your UnPluggEd experience successful.

We invite you to adapt these ideas to fit the needs of your students, school, and community.

WHO IS BEHIND THE UNPLUGGED PROJECT?

The UnPluggEd Project is a collaborative effort between Smartphone Free Childhood US and the Distraction-Free Schools Policy Project. United by a shared commitment to supporting healthy childhood development and focused learning environments, our organizations created this initiative to help schools, educators, and families explore practical approaches to distraction-free learning.



Smartphone Free Childhood US operates as a national connective and empowering organization. Its core function is to support individuals and groups who are seeking to act on issues related to tablets, smartphones, video games, social media, and educational technology for children and adolescents. We focus on how to make change happen - moving beyond awareness to implementation - while recognizing that effective action looks different across communities.

To learn more, visit: <https://smartphonefreechildhoodus.com>



The Distraction-Free Schools Policy Project is a growing coalition of parents, educators, and school administrators united in calling for legislative action and policy changes to address the overuse of smartphones, social media, and School-Tech in our nation's schools. We mobilize and train state-based coalitions across the country to advocate for distraction-free schools.

To learn more, visit: <https://www.distractionfreeschools.com>

OUR SUPPORTERS

The UnPluggEd Project would not be possible without the expertise and collaboration of the following individuals and organizations committed to improving the lives of children and helping families navigate digital technology intentionally. We are grateful for their support and leadership.



<https://beccaschmillfdn.org>



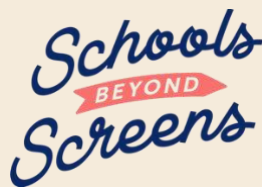
<https://www.vt-irl.org>



<https://www.distractionfreeschools.com/maryland-action>



<https://www.dmvunplugged.org>



<https://www.schoolsbeyondscreens.com>



<https://www.childfirstpolicy.org>



<https://screentimenetwork.org>



<https://thescreentimeconsultant.com>

QUICK START GUIDE

1. Choose your participation level:

- **Lowkey (Mild)**
 - One distraction-free school day
- **No Cap (Medium), or**
 - Two to three distraction-free school days
- **Touch Grass (Spicy)**
 - Commit to the full week of distraction-free learning

2. Notify staff and families. Communicate early through newsletters, websites, and PTO/PTA meetings.

3. Select classroom and family activities. See our [Teacher Playbook](#) for grade-banded ideas and our [Parent & Family Playbook](#) for ideas parents and families can implement at home and within their community.

4. Celebrate participation. Spotlight classrooms, share stories, and recognize staff and families.

5. Gather and submit feedback using our online post-participation survey. Participating schools are encouraged to share stories, reflections, and lessons learned with The UnPluggEd Project team via our post-participation survey. More information about how to access this survey will be announced in our webinar taking place at the end of the summer. Selected stories may be featured in future editions of the playbook and related project materials.

WHAT IS THE UNPLUGGED PROJECT?

The UnPluggEd Project is a national initiative encouraging schools to intentionally create distraction-free learning experiences for one week out of the year.

Participating schools are invited to reduce reliance on internet-connected devices and prioritize instructional approaches that emphasize:

- **Reading & Writing**
- **Discussion**
- **Collaboration**
- **Creativity**
- **Hands-on learning**
- **Critical thinking**
- **Human connection**

The initiative is not intended to eliminate digital technology permanently, nor is it a judgment of educators who use digital technology thoughtfully and effectively.

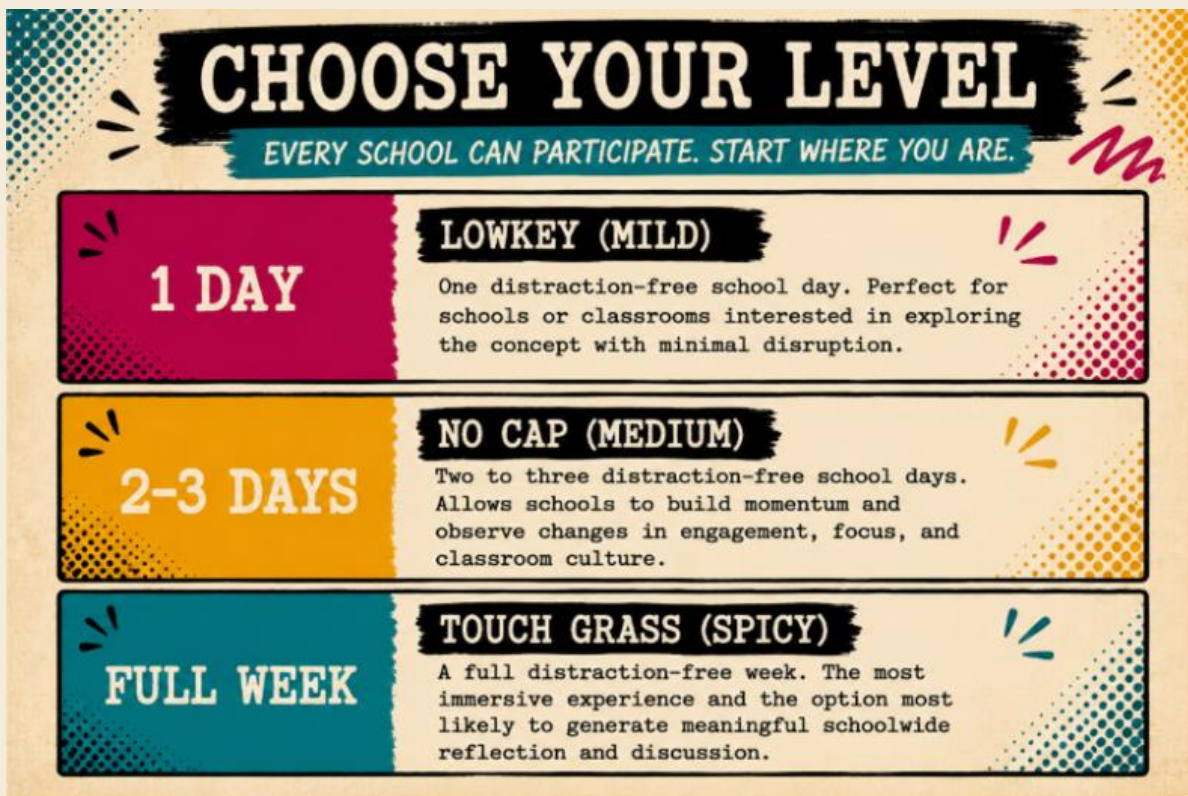
Instead, The UnPluggEd Project creates an opportunity for educators, students, families, and school leaders to ask an important question:

What emerges when attention, conversation, and curiosity are given room to flourish in classrooms no longer reliant on screens?

The project encourages experimentation, reflection, and conversation about the role digital technology plays in modern classrooms.

THREE LEVELS OF PARTICIPATION

Schools are encouraged to select the participation level that best fits their needs.



WHO CAN PARTICIPATE?

The UnPluggEd Project is designed for:

- Public schools
- Charter schools
- Independent schools
- Homeschool communities
- Microschools
- Parent organizations
- Libraries
- Community organizations
- After-school programs

WHY GO UNPLUGGED?

Today's students are growing up in the most digitally-connected environment in human history.

While digital technology offers undeniable benefits, many educators, parents, researchers, and students are increasingly asking important questions about balance, attention, and the role of screens in learning.

The UnPluggEd Project does not begin with the assumption that all digital technology is harmful. Instead, it invites us to consider:

What emerges when attention, conversation, and curiosity are given room to flourish in classrooms no longer reliant on screens?

ATTENTION

Attention is one of the most valuable resources in education. Deep learning requires students to focus, persist through challenges, and engage with ideas over time.

Many educators report that students are increasingly struggling with sustained attention, task persistence, and ever-present distractions.

Distraction-free learning environments provide opportunities for students to attend to and engage more fully with their peers, teachers, and academic material.

Speaking at a recent college graduation ceremony, Dr. Haidt said that on day one of his NYU courses, he asks his students to do something simple: Turn off almost all notifications on their phones. A week later, he asks them if they missed anything really important, and the answer is almost always "no". He then asks if they gained anything important, and the answer is almost always "yes".

"Students are amazed how much better life feels when they remove 100 interruptions from each day. When they check things when they choose, rather than giving a company the right to interrupt them whenever it wants."

- JONATHAN HAIDT

Social Psychologist, Professor & Author of *The Anxious Generation*

MEMORY

Research consistently demonstrates that handwriting supports learning in ways that differ from typing. Writing by hand encourages processing, synthesis, and memory formation.

Reading physical materials and taking handwritten notes can help students engage more deeply with content and retain information over time.

"When we read from paper, each word occupies a fixed, physical location. This gives readers a stable, 3D mental map of where information lives. Digital screens lack this fixed layout, which often causes the brain to shift from deep reading to shallow skimming, negatively impacting memory retention."

- Dr. Jared Cooney Horvath

Cognitive Neuroscientist & Author of *The Digital Delusion*

CONNECTION

Learning is inherently social. Some of the most meaningful educational experiences happen through conversation, collaboration, debate, storytelling, and shared discovery.

Reducing screen use can create additional opportunities for students to interact directly with one another and strengthen classroom relationships.

CREATIVITY

Creativity often emerges when students have space to imagine, build, experiment, and explore. Hands-on learning experiences encourage curiosity, problem solving, and innovation.

The UnPluggEd Project provides opportunities for students to engage in creative work that is not dependent on digital tools.

REFLECTION

Participation in The UnPluggEd Project is ultimately an opportunity to reflect. Schools are encouraged to ask:

- *What worked well?*
- *What surprised us?*
- *What challenges emerged?*
- *What learning experiences felt different?*
- *What practices might we continue?*

GETTING STARTED

SIX WEEKS BEFORE

- Identify a project lead or implementation team
- Determine your level of participation:
 - *Lowkey (Mild), No Cap (Medium), or Touch Grass (Spicy)*
- Inform teachers and staff
- Begin communicating with families
- Review the activity ideas contained in this playbook

ONE MONTH BEFORE

- Finalize participation plans
- Identify classrooms, grade levels, or schools participating
- Gather materials needed for activities
- Share resources with staff
- Prepare family communication materials

TWO WEEKS BEFORE

- Remind families
- Review schedules
- Confirm classroom activities
- Prepare student reflection materials
- Prepare surveys if using them

THE WEEK OF

- Celebrate participation
- Share stories and photos
- Encourage creativity
- Focus on engagement rather than perfection
- Allow flexibility
- Have fun!

AFTER THE EVENT

- Distribute surveys
- Collect feedback
- Celebrate successes
- Share lessons learned
- Consider future participation
- Reflect on what students, educators, and families experienced

REMEMBER:

The goal is not perfection. The goal is exploration.

Every classroom that participates contributes to a larger conversation about learning, attention, and student wellbeing.

TEACHER PLAYBOOK

The goal of The UnPluggEd Project is not to replace digital worksheets with paper worksheets. Distraction-free learning should be active, collaborative, creative, and engaging.

The most successful UnPluggEd classrooms emphasize discussion, movement, problem solving, inquiry, creativity, and human connection.

Teachers are encouraged to adapt these activities to meet grade-level expectations, curriculum standards, and student needs.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL (K-5)

Reading & Literacy

Reader's Theater

Students read and perform scripts adapted from books, stories, or historical events. Benefits include fluency, comprehension, public speaking, and collaboration.

Story Retelling Challenge

Students retell a story using drawings, puppets, props, or storyboards. Extension: retell from another character's perspective.

Book Walk

Post excerpts from books around the room. Students rotate between stations and respond to prompts such as: What surprised you? What prediction can you make? What questions do you have?

Vocabulary Charades

Students act out vocabulary terms while classmates guess. Excellent for reading, science, and social studies.

Poetry Café

Students read poems aloud and discuss rhythm, mood, imagery, and meaning.

Writing

Classroom Newspaper

Students work together to create news articles, interviews, comics, weather reports, and sports coverage.

Nature Journals

Students observe plants, weather, animals, and seasonal changes, and record observations through writing and sketches.

Letter Writing

Students write letters to community leaders, family members, future selves, or historical figures.

Story Cubes

Students roll picture dice and create stories using the images.

Mathematics

Math Talks

Present a problem. Students explain how they solved it, alternative strategies, and why their approach worked. Focus on reasoning rather than speed.

Measurement Scavenger Hunt

Students measure classroom objects, hallways, books, and desks using rulers, tape measures, or non-standard units.

Budget a Birthday Party

Students receive a budget and must select food, decorations, and activities while staying within spending limits.

Math Games

Examples: dominoes, dice games, card games, multiplication bingo.

Pattern Building

Students create patterns using blocks, beads, or art supplies and explain the mathematical rules behind them.

Science

Mystery Bags

Students use observation and inference skills to identify hidden objects.

Nature Detectives

Students investigate leaves, rocks, insects, and weather patterns, and record findings.

Sink or Float Challenge

Students predict, test, and explain results.

Engineering Challenge

Build towers, bridges, or boats using limited materials.

Social Studies

Living Museum

Students portray historical figures. Visitors ask questions. Students respond in character.

Community Mapping

Students create maps of the school, neighborhood, or community and discuss important locations.

Interview an Elder

Students interview family or community members about childhood, work, and historical events.

Arts & Creativity

Collaborative Mural

Create a schoolwide mural around the theme "Learning Beyond Screens."

Puppet Theater

Students write and perform original productions.

Music Exploration

Use rhythm instruments and body percussion to explore musical concepts.

MIDDLE SCHOOL (6-8)

English Language Arts (ELA)

Socratic Seminar

Students discuss a common text using evidence and inquiry. The teacher serves as facilitator rather than lecturer.

Book Clubs

Small groups read and discuss shared texts. Students rotate roles: discussion leader, connector, questioner, summarizer.

Writer's Workshop

Students engage in drafting, revising, peer review, and publishing.

Editorial Writing

Students write opinion pieces on current issues.

Storytelling Challenge

Students tell a story without notes in under three minutes.

Mathematics

Math Relay

Teams rotate through stations solving increasingly complex problems.

Escape Room Challenge

Students solve mathematical clues to unlock the next challenge.

Financial Literacy Lab

Students create budgets, savings plans, and business concepts.

Sports Statistics

Analyze real-world data from sports and competitions.

Science

Scientific Observation Journal

Students make detailed observations and hypotheses.

Engineering Design Challenge

Examples: build a water filter, design a bridge, create a protective package for an egg drop.

Ecosystem Investigation

Students examine local ecosystems and collect observational data.

Paper Labs

Students conduct experiments and record data manually.

Social Studies

Constitutional Convention

Students debate and draft classroom constitutions.

Mock Congress

Students introduce, debate, and vote on legislation.

Historical Summit

Students assume the roles of historical figures and negotiate solutions to major events.

Current Events Roundtable

Students discuss recent events using structured discussion protocols.

Fine Arts

Graphic Novel Creation

Students tell stories through illustrations and writing.

Improvisation Activities

Build communication and creativity through theater games.

Collaborative Music Composition

Groups create original rhythms, songs, or performances.

HIGH SCHOOL (9-12)

English Language Arts (ELA)

Literary Salon

Students discuss literature in a seminar format.

Mock Trial

Students examine legal and ethical issues through courtroom simulations.

Public Speaking Workshop

Students deliver speeches and receive peer feedback.

Journalism Lab

Students investigate issues relevant to their school or community.

Mathematics

Personal Finance Simulation

Students plan budgets, housing, transportation, and savings based on realistic scenarios.

Architecture Challenge

Apply geometry and measurement to design structures.

Data Collection Project

Students collect and analyze original data sets.

Science

Field Studies

Students conduct observations outdoors whenever possible.

Experimental Design

Students design investigations and defend methodology.

Scientific Debate

Students evaluate scientific controversies using evidence.

Social Studies

Model United Nations

Students represent nations and negotiate international issues.

Supreme Court Simulation

Students argue constitutional cases.

Electives & Career Pathways

Entrepreneurship Challenge

Students create and pitch business ideas.

Culinary Labs

Hands-on food preparation and nutrition exploration.

Marketing Challenge

Students develop campaigns for community organizations.

Skilled Trades Exploration

Hands-on projects involving design, construction, and problem solving.

REFLECTION ACTIVITIES (ALL GRADES)

At the end of each UnPluggEd day, invite students to reflect:

- *What was different today?*
- *What was easier?*
- *What was harder?*
- *What surprised you?*
- *What activity did you enjoy most?*
- *What would you like to do again?*

These reflections can help schools better understand the student experience and guide future participation.

UNPLUGGED BINGO CHALLENGE: FOR TEACHERS & STUDENTS

Looking for an easy place to start? The **UnPluggEd Bingo Challenge** provides a menu of some of these classroom-ready ideas that can be implemented throughout the week. Teachers may choose to complete a row, challenge themselves to fill the entire card, or use the activities as inspiration for creating their own distraction-free learning experiences. There is no right way to participate. The goal is simply to experiment, reflect, and discover what happens when students are given more opportunities to learn through discussion, movement, creativity, and human connection.



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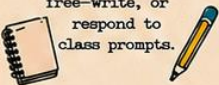
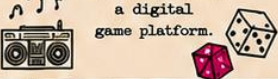
POLICY PROJECT

UnPluggEd BINGO

TEACHER EDITION

**UNPLUG
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THRIVE!**

WELCOME TO THE CHALLENGE!

Use an analog clock to teach/review telling time with students. 	Engage students in an old-fashioned handwriting lesson, print or cursive! 	Start or add to a class library of books (no matter what subject you teach!) 	Take a trip to the library with students. Have everyone find and check out a book, then find a quiet spot to read for at least 15 minutes, either in the library or outside in nature! 	Bring in one of your favorite puzzles or games (or both!), and make a puzzle/game corner in your classroom. 
Create and post a screen-free challenge chart for the classroom and track your progress together. 	Learn about the Socratic method of instruction and use this technique during a class discussion. 	Choose a novel that relates to the subject you teach, and begin a routine of reading it aloud to students daily or weekly. Humans are never too old to enjoy being read to! 	Watch a film together that pertains to potential screentime harms, such as <i>The Social Dilemma</i>, <i>Screenagers</i>, <i>Wall-E</i>, or <i>Childhood 2.0</i>. 	CREATE YOUR OWN SCREEN-FREE ACTIVITY 
Begin a daily, 15-minute silent reading routine for students and teachers. No devices. No assignments. Just reading. 	Do a brain break with your class, analog style (e.g. stretch, jumping jacks, yoga, a quick walk, etc.). 	FREE SPACE 	Write discussion questions on the board and facilitate a whole-class conversation. 	Use physical manipulatives, models, or hands-on activities instead of digital tools during instruction. 
Encourage students to keep a paper journal to reflect, free-write, or respond to class prompts. 	Invite a guest speaker to talk about a topic of interest or career path (offline!). 	With other teachers from your school, practice a lip-sync of an 80s classic. Perform the song for students at an "UnPluggEd Project" assembly! 	Design an engaging board game lesson review or quiz instead of using a digital game platform. 	Encourage students to use a paper planner to write down assignments and due dates. 
Encourage students to create "thank-you" cards or notes of appreciation for someone. 	CREATE YOUR OWN SCREEN-FREE ACTIVITY 	Change up your classroom seating arrangement to encourage more face-to-face interaction. 	Take 5 minutes at the end of class to reflect as a group: What did we learn? What questions do we still have? 	Celebrate the week with a class activity that is screen-free and community building (e.g. art project, talent share, read-aloud). 

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POLICY PROJECT

UnPluggEd BINGO

STUDENT EDITION

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Say hello to someone you don't know.	Raise your hand in class and ask a question.	Talk with a classmate about something you learned or have a question about.	Write a journal entry on a piece of paper/in a paper journal.	Practice silent reading for at least 10 minutes.
Write down assignments and other important things to remember in a paper planner.	Use a paper dictionary to look up the meaning of a word.	Use an encyclopedia to look up information about a topic of interest.	Check out a book from your school or town library.	CREATE YOUR OWN SCREEN-FREE ACTIVITY
Participate in the Harkness or Socratic method of instruction during class.	Find out how to call home without using a cellphone, either with a classroom phone or a phone at the main office of the school.	FREE SPACE	Ask a classmate a question about themselves (i.e. Do you have any pets? What's your favorite show and why? What's your favorite non-screen-related activity?)	If you own a phone, leave it at home for at least one day during The UnPluggEd Project week.
Draw a picture or sketch something you see outside.	Write a letter or note of appreciation to someone.	Work on a puzzle or brain teaser.	CREATE YOUR OWN SCREEN-FREE ACTIVITY	Spend time in nature during lunch or recess. Practice developing a sense of "awe" when noticing the beauty in the smallest details of nature.
Practice handwriting or calligraphy.	Organize your backpack or locker.	Start or add to a reading list of books you're interested in.	Create something with your hands (art, building, craft, etc.).	Reflect on your day and write down one thing you're grateful for.

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ADMINISTRATOR PLAYBOOK

School leaders play a critical role in setting the tone for The UnPluggEd Project.

While classroom teachers drive instruction, administrators help create the conditions that allow distraction-free learning to succeed. The most successful implementations are those where school leaders actively participate, communicate the purpose clearly, and celebrate the effort across the entire school community.

Participation does not require eliminating all digital technology or dramatically altering school operations. Rather, it provides an opportunity to intentionally elevate activities that foster attention, engagement, creativity, and connection.

BEFORE THE WEEK BEGINS

Build Awareness

Communicate early and often. Consider sharing:

- Why your school is participating
- What students and families can expect
- How participation aligns with your school's mission and goals
- Opportunities for families to extend the experience at home

Communication channels may include principal newsletters, school websites, social media, parent email lists, PTO/PTA meetings, and school board updates.

Set Expectations

Help staff understand:

- This is not a compliance exercise
- Flexibility is encouraged
- Teachers should adapt participation to their students' needs
- Accommodations and student support plans remain in place

The goal is exploration and reflection, not perfection.

Create Excitement

- Morning countdown announcements
- Posters around the school
- Student-created promotional materials
- Staff participation challenges
- Schoolwide reading goals

DURING THE WEEK

Morning Announcements

Consider beginning each day with a brief reflection. Examples:

- *"What is something you noticed yesterday without screens?"*
- *"What is one thing you are looking forward to learning today?"*
- *"What is a skill that humans can do better than digital technology?"*

Schoolwide Reading Time

Designate 15-30 minutes during the day for independent reading for both students and staff. No devices. No assignments. Just reading.

Screen-Free Lunch Challenge

Encourage students to talk with classmates, play games, draw, read, or spend time outdoors. This can be one of the simplest and most impactful schoolwide activities.

Outdoor Learning Opportunities

When feasible, conduct lessons outdoors, hold walking discussions, integrate nature observations, and use outdoor spaces for reading and writing.

Classroom Spotlights

Recognize innovative classroom activities throughout the week through daily announcements, social media highlights, bulletin board displays, and photo showcases.

Staff Participation

Invite staff to participate as well: a staff reading challenge, screen-light faculty meetings, handwritten notes of appreciation, and collaborative team activities.

CELEBRATING PARTICIPATION

Student Recognition

Recognition should emphasize participation rather than competition. Examples: certificates, classroom shout-outs, bulletin board displays, schoolwide acknowledgments.

Teacher Recognition

Celebrate educators who develop creative, engaging learning experiences through staff spotlights, recognition at faculty meetings, and school newsletter features.

Community Recognition

Thank families, volunteers, community partners, and PTO/PTA organizations for supporting the initiative.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

Following the event, consider:

- *What worked particularly well?*
- *Which activities generated the strongest engagement?*
- *What surprised us?*
- *What feedback did we receive from students?*
- *What feedback did we receive from teachers?*
- *Are there practices we may want to continue?*

The goal is not to determine whether digital technology is “good” or “bad.” The goal is to better understand which learning experiences help students thrive.

PARENT & FAMILY PLAYBOOK

EXTENDING THE EXPERIENCE BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

The UnPluggEd Project is designed to begin at school, but families can help extend the experience into homes and communities.

The objective is not necessarily to eliminate screens entirely. Rather, it is to intentionally create opportunities for activities that encourage creativity, movement, conversation, exploration, and connection.

Even small changes can make a meaningful difference.

FAMILY CHALLENGE IDEAS

Consider choosing one or more challenges during UnPluggEd Week.

The Family Reading Challenge

Set aside 20-30 minutes each evening for family reading. Everyone reads. No devices. No multitasking. Just books.

Family Board Game Night

Choose games that encourage strategy, collaboration, communication, and problem solving. Ideas include Ticket to Ride, Catan, Uno, chess, checkers, and Scrabble.

Family Walk Challenge

Take a walk together. Consider discussing: What was the best part of your day? What did you learn today? What surprised you this week?

Family Meal Challenge

Commit to one device-free meal each day during the week. Use the opportunity for conversation and connection.

AT-HOME ACTIVITIES

Create Something Together

Build a fort, paint a mural, create a family scrapbook, make a time capsule, or design a family flag.

Cook Together

Allow children to measure ingredients, follow recipes, practice math skills, and learn kitchen safety.

Learn a New Skill

Examples: origami, knitting, gardening, drawing, photography, birdwatching.

Write Letters

Encourage children to write to grandparents, friends, teachers, or future selves.

Family Storytelling Night

Share stories about childhood memories, family traditions, funny experiences, and historical events witnessed by family members.

COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES

Visit the Library

Many libraries offer reading programs, community events, educational activities, and maker spaces.

Explore Local Parks

Nature walks, hiking, scavenger hunts, wildlife observation.

Visit Museums

Encourage curiosity through science museums, art museums, and local history museums.

Volunteer Together

Food banks, community cleanups, animal shelters, senior centers.

Attend Community Events

Support local festivals, concerts, farmers markets, and sporting events.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

The most valuable part of The UnPluggEd Project may simply be talking together. Try asking:

- *What was different about today?*
- *What was easier without screens?*
- *What was harder?*
- *What was the most interesting thing you learned?*
- *Did anything surprise you?*
- *What activity would you like to do more often?*

FOR FAMILIES NEW TO REDUCING SCREEN TIME

Start small. The goal is not perfection. Choose one or two activities that fit your family's interests and schedule. Small changes, repeated consistently, can have a meaningful impact over time.

FAMILY REFLECTION

At the end of the week, consider discussing:

- *What did we enjoy?*
- *What challenged us?*
- *What helped us connect?*
- *What would we like to continue?*

The UnPluggEd Project is not about one week. It is about creating opportunities to rediscover experiences that help children, families, and communities thrive.

UNPLUGGED BINGO CHALLENGE: FOR FAMILIES

The UnPluggEd Bingo Challenge offers simple, screen-free activities designed to help families spend time together IRL. Whether you complete a single square, a full row, or the entire card, the goal is not perfection. Focus on creating intentional moments of connection and explore what becomes possible when screens take a back seat to family, community, and real-world experiences.

Choose the activities that work best for your family and make them your own. You might even discover a new tradition worth continuing long after UnPluggEd week is over.



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BINGO

HOME EDITION

Rose & Thorn game at dinner (each family member shares the best and worst parts of their day). 	Take a ride in the car and let your mind wander while you stare out the window. 	Find a time with your family (after dinner, for example) and read together for at least 15 min. This could look like independently reading separate books, parents and kids taking turns reading, and/or parents reading to kids. 	Cook a meal or bake something together as a family (practice math skills by measuring ingredients!). 	Listen to one of your parent's or grandparent's favorite albums (ideally on CD or vinyl) from beginning to end and ask them why it's their favorite. 
Take a walk together and see who can identify the most animals along the way. 	Ask an adult family member to share a book title they read in school that was most memorable and have a discussion about it. 	On an evening when the moon and stars are visible, spend some time outside and see how many stars, planets, or constellations you can identify. 	Listen to a song with one of your family members that was popular when they were your age. 	CHOOSE YOUR OWN SCREEN-FREE ACTIVITY 
Visit a used record/CD store and find five interesting album covers. 	Attend a festival, play, concert, or other community event in your area. 	FREE SPACE 	Write letters or cards to relatives or friends and mail them. 	Plant something together - flowers, herbs, or vegetables - and watch it grow. 
CHOOSE YOUR OWN SCREEN FREE ACTIVITY 	Do a jigsaw puzzle together and see if you can complete it by the end of the week. 	Build a fort or blanket tent and read, talk, or play together inside. 	Go on a nature scavenger hunt and see who can find the most items on the list. 	Draw, paint, or create something together using paper, pencils, crayons, or other supplies. 
Play a board game or card game together as a family. 	Make homemade ice cream, trail mix, or another treat together from scratch. 	Visit a local museum, historic site, or nature center as a family. 	Read poetry aloud together and talk about which ones are your favorites. 	Make a "dopamine menu" together and post it on the fridge as a reminder of higher dopamine versus lower dopamine activities. 

#GoUnPluggEd

SUCCESS STORIES

LEARNING FROM SCHOOLS ALREADY LEADING THE WAY

A tidal wave of change is sweeping through schools across the country as educators and school leaders reconsider the role of digital technology in teaching and learning.

While every community is different, a growing number of schools and districts are experimenting with ways to reduce screen dependence, create more opportunities for face-to-face interaction, and bring greater intentionality to classroom technology use.

Two of the most visible examples come from:

- **Dr. Stan Winborne**, Superintendent of Granville County Public Schools
- **Inge Esping**, Principal of McPherson Middle School

Although their approaches differ, both leaders have reported similar outcomes: Stronger student engagement, more meaningful classroom interactions, and renewed opportunities for learning experiences that do not depend on screens.

GRANVILLE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS (Granville County, NC)

Despite years of investment in devices and educational software, district leaders found that student outcomes were not improving as expected.

In response, Superintendent Dr. Stan Winborne launched a district-wide experiment, **Tech-Free Tuesdays and Thursdays**, during which students set aside district-issued laptops and participated in learning experiences that emphasized discussion, inquiry, collaboration, writing, and hands-on engagement.

To support implementation, the district developed a comprehensive playbook built around four guiding principles:

- **Connection Over Content Cramming**
- **Collaboration Over Compliance**
- **Exploration Over Exhaustion**
- **Purposeful Play Over Passive Consumption**

Teachers were encouraged to create learning experiences that prioritized conversation, movement, creativity, and critical thinking while maintaining alignment with academic standards.

"We are paying attention to the growing body of research and public sentiment and taking action — not because we are anti-technology, but because we are pro-learning and pro-student."

STAN WINBORNE
Superintendent, Granville County Public Schools (GCPS), NC

MCPHERSON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

(McPherson, KS)

At McPherson Middle School, school leaders began questioning whether digital technology had become the default rather than a tool.

Even after restricting student cell phones, digital distractions continued to affect classroom culture, attention, and student interactions. In response, school leaders became more intentional about when and how digital technology was used, while increasing opportunities for paper-based work, discussion, hands-on learning, and face-to-face collaboration.

“At our school, we’ve been more intentional about when and how we use technology. We realized that while devices can be powerful tools, they shouldn’t be the default for every task. By bringing back more paper, discussion, hands-on activities, and face-to-face collaboration, we’ve seen students more engaged, more focused, and more connected to their learning and to each other.

Our goal hasn’t been to eliminate technology, but to use it with purpose. Finding that balance has made a noticeable difference in classroom culture and student attention. I appreciate initiatives like UnPluggEd that encourage schools to step back, reflect, and try something different—even for a short time—to see what’s possible when screens aren’t always at the center of learning.”

INGE ESPING

Principal, McPherson Middle School, KS

YOUR SCHOOL COULD BE NEXT!

One of the goals of The UnPluggEd Project is to build a growing collection of stories from participating schools. Schools are encouraged to document and share the following with The UnPluggEd Project team via our post-participation survey (*more information about how to access this survey will be announced in our webinar taking place at the end of the summer*):

- Successful activities
- Student reflections
- Teacher observations
- Family feedback
- Lessons learned

Future editions of this playbook will highlight participating schools and share innovative approaches from across the country.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: Does this initiative require schools to eliminate all digital technology?

No. The UnPluggEd Project is not an anti-technology initiative. It is an opportunity for schools to intentionally create periods of distraction-free learning and explore instructional approaches that do not depend on internet-connected devices.

Schools remain free to determine what level of participation works best for their students and staff.

Q: Our district is a 1:1 Chromebook or iPad district. Can we still participate?

Absolutely. Many participating schools utilize 1:1 devices. The UnPluggEd Project simply encourages schools to designate one day, several days, or a full week during which teachers prioritize discussion, reading, writing, collaboration, creativity, and hands-on learning.

Q: Does this apply to students with IEPs, 504 Plans, or other accommodations?

Student accommodations should always be honored. Participation should never interfere with legally required supports, assistive technologies, or individualized educational services.

Schools should work with special education teams to ensure all students can participate appropriately.

Q: What if a teacher needs to use digital technology for part of a lesson?

Professional judgment matters. Teachers should retain flexibility to meet instructional goals. The purpose of the initiative is not perfection, but intentionality.

Even reducing screen dependence for a portion of the day can create meaningful opportunities for engagement and connection.

Q: Are instructional videos allowed?

Schools may determine what works best for their classrooms. The primary goal is to reduce passive screen consumption and increase active student engagement.

Many schools may choose to minimize or eliminate instructional videos during their UnPluggEd days, while others may use them sparingly when they serve a clear instructional purpose.

Q: Is this a screen-free initiative or a distraction-free initiative?

Both concepts are related. The UnPluggEd Project focuses on creating distraction-free learning environments.

For many schools, that means reducing reliance on internet-connected devices and increasing opportunities for direct instruction, discussion, reading, writing, creativity, and hands-on learning.

Q: What if our school has fall break during October 5–9, 2026?

No problem. Schools are encouraged to participate during the designated national week whenever possible. However, schools observing fall break or other scheduling conflicts are welcome to select another week during the school year that fits their needs best.

Q: How can parents participate?

Families can extend the experience beyond the classroom by engaging in screen-light or screen-free activities at home, visiting libraries and parks, playing games, reading together, volunteering in the community, and encouraging meaningful face-to-face interaction.

Q: How can schools measure impact?

Participating schools are encouraged to utilize our post-participation survey. For more information, be sure to attend our webinar taking place at the end of the summer.

Schools may also gather informal feedback from students, educators, and families regarding engagement, focus, classroom climate, and overall experience.

Q: Is participation all-or-nothing?

Not at all. Schools can choose the level of participation that best fits their community:

- **Lowkey (Mild): One day**
- **No Cap (Medium): Two to three days**
- **Touch Grass (Spicy): Full week**

Every level of participation contributes to the broader goal of exploring what learning can look like when students have opportunities to focus, connect, and engage without constant digital interruption.

Q: Is The UnPluggEd Project intended to replace educational or classroom digital technology permanently?

No. The purpose of the initiative is to provide educators, students, families, and school leaders with an opportunity to experience and reflect on alternative approaches to teaching and learning. Participation does not require any long-term policy changes.

Q: Is participation free?

Yes! The UnPluggEd Project is entirely free to participate in. Schools, districts, educators, families, and community organizations are welcome to utilize the resources contained within this playbook.

Q: How do I share my school's participation?

Participating schools are encouraged to share stories, reflections, and lessons learned with The UnPluggEd Project team via our post-participation survey. More information on how to access this survey will be announced in our webinar taking place at the end of the summer. Selected stories may be featured in future editions of the playbook and related project materials.

RESOURCE LIBRARY

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

The UnPluggEd Project is intended to spark reflection, discussion, and exploration.

Whether you are a parent, educator, administrator, policymaker, or student, there is a growing body of research, literature, and media examining the relationship between digital technology, attention, learning, childhood, and wellbeing. The resources below are intended as starting points.

BOOKS: For Parents, Educators, School Leaders, And Advocates

The Digital Delusion: How Classroom Technology Harms Our Kids' Learning and How to Help Them Thrive Again — *Jared Cooney Horvath, PhD, MEd*

Neuroscientist and educator Dr. Jared Cooney Horvath examines how classroom technology can undermine attention, learning, and development when used indiscriminately. Drawing on decades of research, he challenges common assumptions about EdTech and offers practical strategies for creating more effective, attention-rich learning environments.

The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness — *Jonathan Haidt*

Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt explores how the transition from a play-based childhood to a phone-based childhood has reshaped children's development, mental health, and social lives. Combining research with practical recommendations, he offers a roadmap for restoring healthier childhood experiences at home, in schools, and in communities.

The Screentime Solution: A Judgment-Free Guide to Becoming a Tech-Intentional Family — *Emily Cherkin*

A practical, compassionate guide for families seeking a healthier relationship with technology. Emily Cherkin helps parents become "tech-intentional" by making thoughtful decisions about when, how, and why screens are used in ways that align with family values and children's developmental needs.

Glow Kids: How Screen Addiction is Hijacking Our Kids - and How to Break the Trance — *Nicholas Kardaras, PhD, LCSW-R*

Drawing on clinical experience and emerging neuroscience research, Dr. Nicholas Kardaras examines the effects of excessive screen exposure on children's brains, behavior, and well-being. The book explores the links between screen use and challenges such as attention difficulties, anxiety, addiction, and emotional health.

The Tech Exit: A Practical Guide to Freeing Kids and Teens from Smartphones – *Clare Morell*

Clare Morell offers a hopeful and practical vision for families seeking greater freedom from digital technology. Through research, expert interviews, and real-world examples, she demonstrates that children can thrive socially, academically, and emotionally without constant access to screens and devices.

Who's Raising the Kids? Big Tech, Big Business, and the Lives of Children – *Susan Linn*

From a world-renowned expert on creative play and the impact of commercial marketing on children, a timely investigation into how big tech is hijacking childhood—and what we can do about it.

Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention – and How to Think Deeply Again – *Johann Hari*

Johann Hari argues that the modern attention crisis is not a personal failure, but the result of systemic societal and technological factors.

5 Habits of the Tech-Ready Family – *Chris McKenna*

With just five simple habits, you can shape an environment where your kids grow confident, resilient, and ready to face the challenges, dangers, and opportunities of an ever-changing online world.

Free to Fly: The Secret to Fostering Independence in the Next Generation

– *Nicole Runyon, LMSW*

Nicole Runyon reveals how today's technology is crippling our kids' development, and she offers parents a clear path to reclaim their children's mental health, build resilience, and foster true independence in the next generation.

Generations: The Real Differences Between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents – and What They Mean for America's Future

– *Jean Twenge, PhD*

Upending the conventional theory that generational differences are caused by major events, Dr. Jean Twenge analyzes data on 39 million people from robust national surveys—some going back nearly a century—to show that changes in technology are the underlying driver of each generation's unique makeup. In this revelatory work, Twenge outlines key shifts in attitudes and lifestyle choices that define each generation regarding gender, income, politics, race, sexuality, marriage, mental health, and much more.

BOOKS: For Students

The Amazing Generation – *Jonathan Haidt & Catherine Price*

Written as a companion for young readers to Jonathan Haidt's bestselling *The Anxious Generation*, this accessible guide helps students understand how smartphones, social media, and constant connectivity can affect attention, relationships, sleep, and well-being. Through practical advice, reflection prompts, and real-world examples, Haidt and Price empower young people to make intentional choices about technology and reclaim the benefits of a more connected, engaged, and balanced childhood.

Kids' Brains & Screens — *Melanie Hempe*

Helps young readers understand how screens, gaming, and social media affect attention, sleep, emotions, and decision-making. Written in an accessible style that encourages self-reflection and healthy technology habits.

The Adventures of Super Brain — *Melanie Hempe*

Follows young characters as they learn how habits, choices, and digital technology influence the developing brain. A useful introduction to self-regulation, focus, and digital balance for upper elementary and middle school students.

Look Up! — *Britt Gondolfi & Amanda Romanick*

Encourages children to put down their devices and engage with the people, places, and experiences around them. A positive and accessible reminder that some of life's best moments happen offline.

FOMO the Screen Zombie — *John Allen Wooden*

A playful story that explores how excessive screen use can affect attention, relationships, and everyday experiences. Helps younger students think critically about balance and mindful digital technology use.

52 Screen-Free Experiences for Families — *Kathleen Barlow*

A collection of practical activities designed to inspire creativity, exploration, and family connection without screens. Ideal for extending UnPluggEd Week beyond the classroom.

Screens Away, Time to Play — *Kailin Carr*

Introduces children to the value of imaginative play, outdoor exploration, and face-to-face interaction. Encourages healthy alternatives to passive screen entertainment.

When Charlie McButton Lost Power — *Suzanne Collins*

A humorous story about a technology-loving boy who must rediscover creativity and problem-solving when his electronics stop working. A favorite read-aloud for elementary-aged students.

If You Give a Mouse an iPhone — *Ann Droyd*

A satirical twist on the classic children's book that humorously explores digital distractions and device dependence. Particularly effective for sparking classroom conversations about digital technology habits.

Chasing Through Time — *Tara Hodgson*

An adventure story that emphasizes curiosity, perseverance, friendship, and real-world exploration. Offers students an engaging narrative experience away from screens and digital media.

Bye-Bye WiFi — *Mari Meyers*

A lighthearted story that encourages children to reconnect with family, play, and imagination when digital technology is set aside. Suitable for younger readers and family read-alouds.

FILMS

DOCUMENTARIES

Celling Your Soul (2017) / Not Rated / Documentary – *Joni Siani*

Based on the book by media and social science professor Joni Siani, this is a powerful, informative and honest examination of how young people actually feel about connecting and socializing in the digital world and their love/hate relationship with technology. It provides empowering strategies for introducing more fulfilling, balanced, and authentic human interaction into the digital landscape.

Childhood 2.0 (2020) / Not Rated / Documentary – *Kiowa Winans, Robert Muratore, & Jamin Winans*

Explores how social media and smartphones are shaping the experiences of today's children and adolescents.

The Social Dilemma (2020) / PG-13 / Documentary – *Jeff Orlowski*

Investigates the business models, algorithms, and psychological design features that drive engagement on major technology platforms.

Can't Look Away: The Case Against Social Media (2025) / Not Rated / Documentary – *Matthew O'Neill & Perri Peltz*

Exposes the dark side of social media and its devastating impact on young users. Viewers are taken inside the high-stakes legal battle to hold tech companies accountable for the harm caused by their negligence and dangerous algorithms. Based on investigative reporting by Bloomberg News' Olivia Carville, the film follows the Social Media Victims Law Center fighting for justice for families whose children suffered tragic consequences linked to social media use. As families seek justice, *Can't Look Away* underscores the urgent need for industry reform and serves as both a wake-up call about the dangers of social media – and a call to action to protect future generations.

The AI Doc: Or How I Became an Apocalyptimist (2026) / PG-13 / Documentary – *Daniel Roher & Charlie Tyrell*

Explores the promises, risks, and societal implications of artificial intelligence through conversations with researchers, technologists, and the current CEOs of OpenAI, Anthropic, and Gemini. Recommended for educators, parents, and school leaders interested in emerging conversations surrounding AI and education.

Your Attention Please (2026) / Not Rated / Documentary – *Sara Robin*

A new generation of parents, teens, and reformers are fighting back against Big Tech's agenda to define the future of human connection. Blending intimate human stories with insights from leading experts in tech reform and digital wellbeing, this film reveals how deeply the attention economy is reshaping us while asking some of the most urgent questions of our time. A must watch for anyone with an online presence, which, in 2026, is most of us.

MOVIES

Wall-E (2008)/ G – *Andrew Stanton*

Travel to a galaxy not so far away for a cosmic comedy adventure about a determined robot named WALL-E. After hundreds of lonely years of doing what he was built for, the curious and lovable WALL-E discovers a new purpose in life when he meets a sleek search robot named EVE. Join them and a hilarious cast of characters on a fantastic journey across the universe.

I am Ruth (2022)/ PG-13 – *Dominic Savage*

A concerned mother who struggles to help her teenage daughter Freya as she becomes increasingly consumed by social media.

Toy Story 5 (2026)/ PG – *Andrew Stanton*

Woody, Buzz Lightyear, Jessie and the rest of the gang's jobs are challenged when they come face-to-face with Lilypad, a brand-new tablet device that arrives with her own disruptive ideas about what is best for their kid, Bonnie. Will playtime ever be the same?

INTERESTING DISCUSSIONS

I Quit Social Media – Here's What Happened / TEDxManhattanBeach – Gabriela Nguyen https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tslzTC3nt_0

After spending more than a decade “chronically online,” Gabriela Nguyen realized her struggle with distraction, anxiety, and disconnection wasn’t a personal failing—it was the product of technologies designed to hijack attention. In this candid, research-grounded talk, she introduces “appstinance,” a way of reclaiming focus and meaning by redesigning our physical, digital, and social environments. This talk offers a hopeful blueprint for building a fuller, more human life beyond addictive technology. Gabriela Nguyen is the 24-year-old founder of Appstinance, a global movement challenging the idea that social media is necessary for connection. Rather than promoting digital detoxes or moderation, Appstinance advocates complete freedom from personal social media accounts in favor of direct communication through calling and texting.

A Gen Z native of Silicon Valley, Gabriela spent a decade chronically online while growing increasingly disconnected. Her shift to being “appstinent” revealed benefits traditional social media wellness approaches failed to deliver. This led her to create the 5D Method, a framework empowering people to quit social media permanently. What began as a personal solution while she was a student at Harvard has grown into a worldwide movement spanning five generations. Gabriela’s work has been featured by The New York Times, WIRED, Business Insider, Newsweek, and Harvard Ed, and continues to inspire a return to intentional living and genuine human connection.

APPENDIX A – COMMUNICATIONS TOOLKIT

SAMPLE NEWSLETTER BLURB

Our school is excited to participate in The UnPluggEd Project, a national initiative encouraging distraction-free learning experiences. During participation, students will engage in reading, writing, discussion, collaboration, and hands-on learning activities designed to promote focus, creativity, and connection.

SAMPLE MORNING ANNOUNCEMENT

Welcome to UnPluggEd Week! Today we challenge ourselves to focus deeply, connect with others, and explore learning beyond screens. What is one thing you are looking forward to doing today?

SAMPLE SOCIAL MEDIA POST

We're participating in The UnPluggEd Project! Students are exploring distraction-free learning through reading, discussion, creativity, collaboration, and hands-on experiences. #GoUnPluggEd

SAMPLE OUTREACH EMAIL

Use the sample email below to reach out to friends, teachers, school principals, district superintendents, and/or school board members about how they can participate in The UnPluggEd Project.

Subject: Let's Go UnPluggEd Together! October 5-9, 2026

Dear [_____],

The UnPluggEd Project is a collaborative national initiative from **Smartphone Free Childhood US** and **Distraction Free Schools Policy Project** that encourages schools and families across the country to embrace and lean into human connections and away from the distractions of technology. We invite families, administrators, and educators to join for 1 to 5 days of leaning into human connections free of digital technology distractions. We invite you to join us at your comfort level!

LEVELS:

- **Lowkey (Mild): One day**
- **No Cap (Medium): Two to three days**
- **Touch Grass (Spicy): Full week**

For **EDUCATORS**, an UnPluggEd day may include:

- Opting not to have students on laptops or tablets for the day
- Turning off the SMART Board and doing read-alouds and other analog activities instead
-

For **FAMILIES**, an UnPluggEd day may include:

- Putting smartphones in central storage unless absolutely needed
- Going for a walk or playing a game instead of watching TV or streaming
-

To support those who register to participate, we will provide:

- **The UnPluggEd Playbook** which will provide resources and ideas for how to unplug
- **A webinar in September for schools** that are interested in implementing this initiative (more info will be provided about date and time).

Go UnPluggEd: October 5-9, 2026

If interested in participating, follow this link to register and request The UnPluggEd Playbook:

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfukNDmhDyBVgiPNjDZUXjgv-JKbyrpp0AAbAsUehazAod95w/viewform>

Come fall, we can all link arms and reconnect with effective analog learning methods and human relationships and celebrate in-person connection. Together.

Thank you so much for your time,

[YOUR NAME]

Disclaimer: SFCxUS and DFSP are 100% volunteer organizations. They do not receive industry funding.