

The Dopamine Detective Challenge

Mini Journalism + Game

Skill: Attention Regulation & Media Literacy

45–60 Minutes

RECOMMENDED AGE RANGE

Ages 8–14 — Old enough to understand persuasion techniques and reflect on their own viewing habits while developing media literacy skills they'll use for life.

WHAT YOU NEED

Timer or stopwatch

Notebook or paper for Detective Log

Access to 2–3 videos your child normally watches

Pen or pencil

Colored markers (optional)

ACTIVITY STEPS

01

Set up the investigation (5 min): Explain you're both becoming "Dopamine Detectives" investigating how videos are designed to keep people watching. Create a chart with columns: Video Title, Scene Changes Per Minute, Makes Sense? (Y/N), How I Feel After, and Dopamine Rating (1–5 stars).

02

Conduct timed observations (20 min): Watch 2–3 of their regular videos together, but this time as investigators, not passive viewers. Set a timer for exactly one minute and count every time the scene changes or something new appears. After each video, discuss: Did the story make sense? How do you feel right now?

03

The Slow Content comparison (10 min): Watch 3 minutes of something "slow" — a nature documentary, craft tutorial, or classic children's show. Use the same Detective Log. Which one made your brain work harder to pay attention? Which felt more satisfying when it ended?

04

Create the family media guideline (10 min): Based on findings, work together to create one specific, measurable rule — e.g., "We only watch videos where we can explain what happened after." Write it in the Detective Log and post it near where screens are used. Let your child lead this.

05

The week-long mission (ongoing): Challenge your child to notice when they're being "dopamine hooked" during the next week. When they catch themselves wanting "just one more" video, they note it in their Detective Log. At week's end, review together: Which content left you feeling good vs. cranky?

THE DEEPER LESSON

This activity teaches children that AI-generated content isn't magic — it's designed with specific techniques to manipulate their attention. By investigating these techniques like a journalist would, children move from passive consumers to critical thinkers who understand how and why certain content feels addictive. They're building the metacognitive skill of noticing their own attention patterns, which is the first step toward regulating them.

CONVERSATION STARTER

“If you were designing a video to help kids' brains grow stronger instead of just keeping them watching, what would you do differently?”