

insights

Using screen time to foster kids' wellbeing and family fun

by Dr Jodi Richardson



Children of my generation (born in the 1980s) used to spend a great deal of time outside. Childhood is different now. Technology has changed everything. Our 'digitally native' children don't know of a life when watches were used to tell the time and if you wanted to make a phone call anywhere other than at home you needed 30 cents and a phone booth. As kids we built forts, practiced goal shooting in our backyard ring, rode our bikes all around and spent hours outside. We loved it.

Nowadays, left to their own devices, literally and figuratively, our kids are relying on technology for their entertainment. Some young Australians are now spending a third of their waking hours glued to screens, and this is affecting their physical, psychological and behavioural health.

For optimal health and wellbeing, our young people need more quality family time, movement, green time (over screen time) and a chance to put a stop to the perpetually rewarding dopamine drip from constant tapping, scrolling, searching, swiping and Angry Bird launching.

Well, what if I was to tell you that you can combine the wonders of technology with an endless number of outdoor adventures that are infinitely more fun than selfies, snapchat and episodes of *Little Lunch*? Would you want to give it a go?

All you need to do is to download a free app called 'Geocaching'. It's a high-tech GPS-based treasure hunting app and it's one of the best-kept family fun secrets.

Hailed as the world's biggest treasure hunt, the premise of geocaching is to get us all playing outside. And that it does. Here's how it works:

You start by downloading the app and creating an account, giving you the perfect opportunity to chat to your kids about remaining anonymous online. Once you're all signed up, you can load up a map of your current location (or anywhere in the world) and watch for all of the hidden 'geocaches' – otherwise known as 'caches' – to appear showing their precise coordinates. Each cache is a hidden, small waterproof container containing a logbook and, if large enough, a pen and a whole range of trinkets or swaps from previous finders.

When you find a cache, being careful not to be seen by outsiders affectionately known as 'muggles', you can sign and date the log, swap your trinket or toy with something inside the container, close it all up and return to exactly where you found it.

There are millions of these geocaches hidden all over the world. There's probably one near you right now!

The app provides information about the difficulty of finding the cache, the local terrain, the size of the cache, a description of what you're looking for and even hints if you're having a bit of trouble. We always like to check the 'activity' of a cache too, to make sure it's been found recently so that we can be confident it's where it's meant to be.

It's so exciting when you all find one! Some are really quick finds while others can take quite a bit of hunting. We practice perseverance each time and agree not to give up until we achieve success.

My family have had the most amazing fun on our geocache adventures. Some days we plan an afternoon of treasure hunting, other times we set off after school to hunt for one closer to home. Some families even plan holidays around their geocaching adventures!



Aside from the obvious advantages of getting outside into the fresh air, moving and having fun, geocaching ticks all the boxes for the elements that contribute to happiness and flourishing.

The PERMA model of flourishing tells us there are five key contributors:

Positive emotions. These are aplenty when geocaching, starting with a sense of adventure and excitement, followed closely by wonder, curiosity, joy and elation.

E is for **E**ngagement, which is all about devoting time to those things that capture your attention and enable you to dive in head first to an activity, experiencing a feeling of flow by being fully immersed in what you're doing. A big tick for geocaching on this one!

R is for **R**elationships which are essential for our kids' mental, social and emotional health. Geocaching will bring you together as a family as you work towards a unified outcome, take turns to locate the cache, chat, problem solve, search, laugh and encourage each other along the way.

M represents **M**eaning, something we experience when we feel a part of something bigger than ourselves. Being a valued part of their family fosters meaning for our young people, and so does being a part of the geocache community as a whole.

A is for **A**chievement, which is absolutely essential for our kids to flourish, not to mention us as parents too. The sense of achievement experienced by 'geokids' is evident by the smiles on their faces with every successful treasure hunt. It never gets old.

Wishing you and your families hours of good old-fashioned (if high-tech) outdoor fun.

Learn more about geocaching at geocaching.com. And connect with me on Facebook/[drjodirichardson](https://www.facebook.com/drjodirichardson) to let me know how you go!!



Dr Jodi Richardson

Jodi is a happiness and wellbeing speaker and writer, and is mum to two primary school aged kids who light her up. For more great ideas on flourishing mental health for the whole family, subscribe to her newsletter at drjodirichardson.com.au and say hello on [facebook.com/DrJodiRichardson](https://www.facebook.com/DrJodiRichardson) Enquiries to jodi@drjodirichardson.com.au