

Screen time and young children

Children under 5 years old are exposed to more screens than ever before, including televisions, computers, gaming consoles, smartphones and tablets.

When thinking about how much time your child spends with screens, be sure to include all these different devices. Also include time spent viewing at home and in other places, like child care.

The recommendations below are aimed at typically developing children. If your child has special needs, ask your family doctor or paediatrician for advice.

What is the right amount of screen time for my child?

Young children learn best from face-to-face interactions with caring adults. It's best to keep their screen time to a minimum:

- For children under 2 years old, screen time is not recommended.
- For children 2 to 5 years old, limit routine or regular screen time to less than 1 hour per day.

Why should I limit my child's screen time?

Very often, screen time is a lost opportunity for your child to learn in real time: from interacting, playing outdoors, creating or enjoying social 'downtime' with family. Too much screen time also increases your child's risk of becoming:

- Overweight
- Sleep-deprived
- Less school-ready
- Inattentive, aggressive and less able to self-soothe.

How can I set screen time limits at home?

Setting limits when children are young is easier than cutting back when they're older. As a family, agree on basic screen time rules that everyone understands and shares. Consider developing a family media plan to guide when, how and where screens can—and can't!—be used.

Here are some tips:

- Be a good role model with your own screen use—on *all* devices.
- Turn off devices for mealtimes, reading with your child or doing things together as a family.
- Turn off screens when no one is using them, *especially* background TV.
- Avoid using screens for *at least* 1 hour before bedtime and keep all screens out of your child's bedroom. They interfere with sleep.
- Choose healthy activities, like reading, outdoor play and crafts, over screen time.

How do I choose the right apps, videos or programs for my child?

Whenever possible, make screen time an activity you and your child do together. Watch with your child and talk about what you're seeing. To ensure quality content:

- Choose educational, age-appropriate and interactive programs and apps. Educational apps have a clear learning goal and encourage participation.
- Try out apps before your child uses them.
- Make sure your child watches programs you're familiar with.
- Avoid commercial and adult or 'entertainment' programming.
- Use a media rating system to guide your viewing choices.

Are e-books a good learning tool?

Quality, age-appropriate 'learn-to-read' apps and e-books can help with language, as long as you and your child are reading and learning together. But even the best e-books don't help with skills like page-turning and the physical 'book experience', which includes heavy handling, being scribbled in or chewed (board books, of course!).

Won't my child fall behind if he isn't exposed to digital media early on?

There is no evidence to support introducing technology at an early age to improve your child's development. Young children always learn best from face-to-face interactions with caring adults. Given the choice, they almost always choose talking, playing or being read to over screen time.

Is it OK to use screens to calm or distract my child?

Screen time might help in the moment, but used repeatedly, over time, means your child won't learn how to self-soothe without it. Talk to your child's doctor if you need new strategies for calming your child or helping with daily transitions.

My child gets upset when I take away screen times. What can I do?

In today's world, managing screen time is an ongoing challenge. Setting shared family limits at an early age can help. In the moment, use a calm voice, acknowledge your child's frustration and try redirecting their interest to another activity or toy.

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Additional resources

- Co-viewing with your kids: Tip sheet (MediaSmarts)
(http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/mediasmarts/files/tip-sheet/tipsheet_co-viewing_with_kids.pdf)
- What Every Parent Should Know About Screen Time: Expert Advice (MediaSmarts)
(<http://mediasmarts.ca/blog/what-every-parent-should-know-about-screen-time-expert-advice>)
- Young children and technology: Finding the right balance (Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development)
(<http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/sites/default/files/docs/coups-oeil/technology-in-early-childhood-education-info.pdf>)

- Common Sense Media (reviews games and apps)
(<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/>)
- Calming Strategies to Use with Children (ConnectABILITY)
(<http://connectability.ca/2010/09/23/calming-strategies-to-use-with-children/>)
- Five steps to positive parenting (Triple P Positive Parenting Program)
(<http://www.triplep-parenting.ca/ont-en/get-started/5-steps-to-positive-parenting/>)

Reviewed by the following CPS committees

- Digital Health Task Force

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