

Screen Time

As a community, we are doing our best to keep everyone safe by staying at home. However, with our daily activities limited, more and more of us are relying on our devices for entertainment. Monitoring screen time is not a new challenge for parents, however we understand that the more time children spend at home, the more difficult this challenge can become.

It can be difficult to reduce screen time when children are studying online or completing homework. We suggest that you don't include time spent studying when assessing your child's daily screen time. Do, however, take notice of when your child has spent long amounts of time using devices, and encourage them to get outside or do some exercise to break up the time spent on devices.

The following information has been provided to assist you in understanding the impact of screens on children, and how your family can manage screen time effectively.

Research has been unable to offer definitive recommendations for how much time children/adolescents should be allowed to spend on their devices. However, we do know that increased screen time is linked to poorer mental health outcomes.

Researchers in the US (Twenge & Campbell, 2018) have provided evidence that children and adolescents who use screens for more than one hour per day are more likely to have lower psychological wellbeing, including 'less curiosity, lower self-control, more distractibility, more difficulty making friends, less emotional stability, being more difficult to care for, and inability to finish tasks'. They found that adolescents aged between 14-17 years who spend seven-plus hours per day on their devices are more likely to be diagnosed with depression, anxiety, have seen a mental health professional, or have taken psychotropic medication in the past year than those who spend less than seven hours on a device per day.

Research also suggests that children who spend one to two hours per day on devices do not experience any adverse outcomes compared with children who do not use devices, and therefore we are not recommending that you completely stop your child from having screen time. It is extremely important that we allow our children to stay connected with their friends during this time, and social media is one of their main forms of communication. We do encourage you to be aware of which apps, games and social media platforms your child is using, and that you occasionally check in to see what they are up to on their devices. This can involve asking what app they are using, how the app works, or who they are speaking to. Approaching this from a curious perspective rather than interrogating them is important and will help your child to become more open with you about their screen time.

You can find information about some of the apps, games and social media platforms that your children may be using on the following websites (listed below), as well as recommendations for the age appropriateness of apps:

- www.esafety.gov.au/key-issues/esafety-guide
- www.net-aware.org.uk/ (includes child and parent reviews)

What we are suggesting is that you limit the amount of time your child is allowed to spend on devices. For younger children, incorporate screen time into their daily routines. Set boundaries around what time of the day, and for how long, they are allowed to use their devices. Be clear with your children about what the boundaries are, and be firm when enforcing them (otherwise you will get relentless little protestors).

For adolescents, negotiate the boundaries around screen time with them. How long do they think is reasonable? How would they like to spend their screen time (for example, watching TV, on social media platforms)? Would they prefer to use their screen time in one big chunk, or spread the use throughout the day? What will the consequences be if they spend more time on their devices than agreed?

All devices provide ways to monitor screen time, and you can find instructions on how to do so here.

We've come up with some new ideas that you may not have tried and which might be worthwhile for your family:

- Shared screen time: watch a TV series or movies as a family. Set up a regular time (for example, Friday night family movies) to enjoy shared screen time.
- Binge day: choose a day to have a household binge day where screen time is not monitored. This might be a particularly cold day, a rest day (for when the family is stressed, run down, or unwell), or it might be a reward for good behaviour. When introducing the binge day also be prepared with some activities to break up the day that involve getting outside.
- Digital detox day: choose a day where no one will be spending any time on their devices. Families might choose to have digital detox days once a week/month/year. It's certainly a challenge for many of us to go a whole day without any of our devices, but it is likely that you will be pleasantly surprised by the experience.
- Keep family meals screen free.
- No screen time after dinner or one to two hours before bedtime. This will stop device use from interfering with sleep.
- Have your kids earn their screen time by doing chores or completing other non-technological tasks.
- Allow screen time only after homework is completed.
- And, remember to model good device use to your child – practise what you preach!

There is one big protective factor for screen time – exercise! Research has shown that the adverse impact that screen time can have on our mental health can be combated by exercise (Cao, Qian, Weng, Yuan, Sun, Wang, & Tao, 2011). Ensure that your child continues to get sufficient exercise each day while isolating. Many of the usual activities (sports, gyms, community events) will need to be replaced for the time being, which can be difficult. Make exercise a priority, and spend some time planning how you might incorporate it into your new daily routine. When possible, get outside to exercise, make exercise a group activity for the household and get creative to keep it interesting (for example, organise a family challenge, take turns in choosing the activity, or try new types of exercise).

It is a challenging time, and we hope that this information has provided you with some ideas and inspiration to continue managing things at home.

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