



Check on your children's screen time

Parents and carers – have you asked yourself if your children are spending too much time on their tablets, laptops or phones? And what effect is this having on your child?

Benefits of screen time

New advances in technology provide many educational opportunities. There are lots of useful apps that children can use to enrich their learning and more children are using computers at school to help their education.

Downside of too much screen time

On the other hand, due to the endless possibilities these devices provide and the entertainment value they contain, a lot of parents can struggle to impose healthy habits upon their children. Research shows the following effects are associated with too much screen time:

Obesity: Children spend hours sitting down, watching TV, playing video games and looking at their phones, making them a lot less active.

Sleep deprivation: The blue light emitting from screens at the wrong time of day can disrupt the body's sleep/wake cycle. This can make it difficult for some children to fall asleep at night and may lead to lower productivity and irritability.

Behaviour problems: It may increase children's risk of developing attention and social issues.

Educational issues: Children aged five and under may experience a decrease in their motor skills because they're not exploring their environments as much. TVs, phones or devices in their bedrooms can be unwelcome distractions.

Some people have said their children experienced the following after two or more hours of screen time:

- Headaches
- Neck or shoulder pain
- Eye strain, or dry, irritated eyes
- Reduced attention span.

While unlimited time with electronics may keep your child busy, you don't want them to have too much screen time. But we know setting limits on computers and video games isn't always easy in today's screen-filled world.

Here are 10 tips parents/carers can use to decide how much screen time is reasonable for their children:

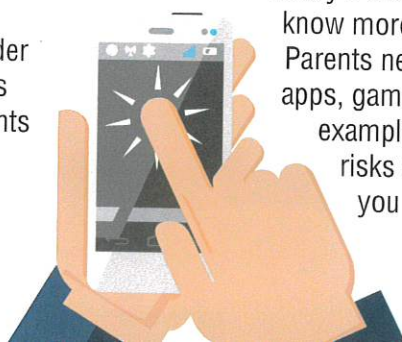
1. Set a good example!

Parents need to be role models of screen use for their children. Before you binge-watch your favourite Netflix series, remember that you are setting an example with your own time spent in front of a screen.

Keeping the TV on for background noise all the time or scrolling through your phone any time you have a spare minute, may not be modeling the screen-related behaviour you hope to see in your children.

2. Educate yourself

Today's children are tech-savvy. Most of them know more about electronics than adults do. Parents need to stay up-to-date on the latest apps, games, and social media platforms. For example, you can't teach your child about the risks of social media or video games unless you understand the dangers yourself.



3. Create “technology-free zones”

Establish zones in your house where devices simply are not allowed – whether it’s phones, tablets or laptops. One example is your home’s dining room or kitchen, which you could keep reserved for having meals and family conversations.

4. Set aside times to switch off

Set aside times for your whole family to unplug from their devices. Meal times or an hour before bedtime are two examples. When you all agree to set aside your devices, it gives your family the opportunity to spend quality time together.

5. Use parental controls

There are tools you can use to protect your children from accessing explicit content on the Internet and on TV. Most routers, web browsers, and TVs have parental controls that you can set up to filter or block unwanted content.

If your children have smartphones, there are also built-in settings or apps you can download that allow you to create content filters. Many also allow you to block specific websites, web searches, or key words.

6. Explain why you’re limiting screen time

If your children understand that you’re limiting your family’s screen time because too much time spent on screens has downsides, they’re much more likely to follow the rules you set. If they just think you’re “being mean,” they might be more likely to resist.

Based on what’s appropriate for your child’s age, explain why violent video games, TV shows and films can be harmful. If your children use the Internet, make sure you have a conversation with them about the dangers of online predators.

Make sure that every member of your family is included in the discussion about screen time and are part of creating a set of boundaries that everyone can follow.

7. Ask for your child’s passwords

Consider asking your children for the passwords to their online and social media accounts. Children don’t always have the maturity necessary to handle online interactions and can be vulnerable to cyberbullying.

You’ll need to discuss the option as a family, but it will be up to you as the parent to figure out the best way to help protect your child while still allowing them to have some privacy and autonomy.

8. Encourage other activities

With a wealth of apps, games, devices, and content, it’s easy for children to become reliant on electronics for entertainment. Encourage your child to seek out and get involved in activities that don’t need a screen. Playing outside, reading a book, or even digging out an old boardgame are just a few ideas.

It can also help to establish (and enforce) a schedule that everyone in your home follows. Making it clear to your children when they are allowed on screens and when they are not will help to clarify your expectations and can prevent arguments.

9. Make screen time a privilege

You might decide to make screen time a privilege rather than a right. If you use a form of discipline that involves taking away privileges (negative consequences), a child’s phone, laptop, or video game might be one such privilege.

However, once you’ve set a limit on screen time, don’t allow children to earn extra time as a reward. Instead, stick to the daily limit and offer other free or low-cost rewards to reinforce positive behaviour.

Encouraging your children to buy into less screen time and screen-free zones will be much easier if you engage with them in a positive, fun, and authentic way. They’re more likely to resort to screen time to escape if you are constantly reminding them about their messy room or a unfinished school work during no screen time.

10. Keep your child’s bedroom screen-free

You won’t be able to monitor your child’s screen use if they are able to use devices out of your sight. For this reason, you might want to make it a rule that TVs, video game systems, and computers are not allowed in your child’s bedroom. This also includes phones and handheld devices that your children might be tempted to use late at night, which could interfere with their sleep.

