

FACTSHEET



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Children and screen time

What is screen time?

Screen time is a term used to describe the amount of time spent looking at a screen. Screens include TVs, computers, smartphones, tablets, and video consoles.

Screens are used for work, education, communication and leisure. Due to their many uses, it is often difficult to control the amount of time children spend using screens, instead of taking part in other important childhood activities.

Small amounts of screen time can be useful and enjoyable for families. They can offer time for children to connect with others, be creative and learn. Screen time can keep children entertained, or distracted, and are used in educational settings by teachers.

Why are we talking about screen time?

Health professionals are talking about screen time because they are starting to see some effects on child health. It is only recently that children's access to a wide range of screen devices has dramatically increased. Consequently, the research on the effects of screen time on children is still emerging.

The time spent in front of a screen, and the quality of the content on screen, has been linked to a number of positive and negative health outcomes. These include:

Weight

- Children who spend a lot of time using screens may not be getting enough physical activity, leading to weight gain. Current Australian guidelines recommend that children exercise for at least an hour each day.

- Children using screens will often eat and not be conscious of the amount of food they are eating.
- They may also be influenced by junk food advertisements and be more likely to seek out unhealthy food.

Sleep

- The light emitted from screens has been shown to prevent sleep onset in children when used in the evening or just before sleep. This can, therefore, reduce the total amount of sleep that children get.
- Less sleep in children is linked to weight gain and to mood and behaviour problems.
- Australian guidelines recommend children sleep between 8 and 12 hours each night.

Communication skills

- Screen use can isolate children from what is going on around them. Families may miss out on the everyday interactions that build healthy relationships. Friendships may also be affected as children sit alongside each other on screens instead of interacting and communicating with each other.
- Children can also miss out on opportunities to develop language through play and interactions with others.

Exposure to potentially harmful information

- There is growing evidence that shows children who watch violent content, are more likely to view the world as a scary, uncaring and mean place. It also suggests that children are more likely to show aggression as they see it as 'normal' behaviour. Reportedly, the MRI brain scans of children who have

viewed violence look similar to those of children who have acted out violently.

- The Internet and social media platforms provide children with the opportunity to give and receive inappropriate and hurtful messages. Teach your children what is appropriate to share online and to think before posting messages and images. (Most social media platforms require users to be 13 years and over.)

Neck and back strain

- While there are clear guidelines for ergonomic use of desktop computers, guidelines to suit all types of screens are much more difficult to provide. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the time spent leaning, or hunched over screens is leading to neck and back pain in children.
- Ideally, screens should be positioned just below your child's line of vision with their neck in a neutral position.

Eye health

- Research has shown that children who spend more time outdoors are less likely to develop short sightedness.
- When children stare at the screen for a long time, they may blink less than normal which can dry the eyes. This can lead to eye strain and fatigue.

Some positives of screen time

- Young children learn most from face-to-face, 2-way conversations and interactions. However, "video chatting", eg: using Skype or FaceTime, may be of some benefit for children to keep in touch with friends and family.
- Screen time can also play an important role in keeping children connected when they are sick or in hospital, or as a means of distraction.
- For children with a medical condition, social media platforms allow them to connect with others with similar conditions and provide opportunities for self-expression and for increasing awareness amongst peers about their condition.
- Older children's use of the Internet helps develop their skills and interests. Social platforms can be a useful way of forming friendships, in addition to cultivating empathy and activism.

Screen time guidelines

Family guidelines should focus on:

- How often children have access to screens (you may choose to have screen-free days).
- How long children can use them for (splitting the time between different types of screen and using a limiting

device such as a stop watch or screen lock as a control measure).

- What children can view (the quality of what your child is viewing is more important than the time spent).

Like all parenting decisions, it is important to focus on modeling the preferred behaviour to your children and involving older children in the decision-making process. Monitor what they are accessing and use the opportunity to start conversations and learning, making sure that screens are used in family/shared areas, and not in bedrooms.

The American Academy of Pediatrics discourages media use, except for video-chatting, by children younger than 18 to 24 months. They also recommend that children aged 2 to 5 years limit screen time to one hour per day of high-quality programming.

In Australia, the current recommendation is for no more than 2 hours of screen time per day for children, with screen time not recommended for children under 2 years.

We recommend that children aged under 2 years not routinely be given screen time unless video chatting, and that children aged 2 to 5 years only be exposed to 1 to 2 hours of high quality programming per day. Once your child begins school, then as a family, you need to discuss how best to use screen time to reduce excessive use.

Help for parents

- There are organisations that help review content suitability for children (www.common sense media.org)
- eSafety is an Australian government initiative that provides information on internet safety for families (<https://www.esafety.gov.au/>)
- Use parental controls to block/filter Internet and television content. You can also set devices to the "do not disturb" mode to help limit screen use (eg: the family link app for android devices).
- The brightness and blue light from screens can be changed to a dimmer and 'warmer' setting.
- Examples of screen time rules can be found online, along with timetables. Examples include: www.healthychildren.org/English/media/Pages/default.aspx or the Common sense media family contract www.common sense media.org/research/technology-addiction-concern-controversy-and-finding-balance/resources)

Screen time should be supervised and monitored by parents. Find ways to be involved with your child's screen time so that your supervision becomes another way of spending time with your child.

Remember:

- 8-12 hours of sleep and 1 hour of exercise should always take priority over screen time.
- Set screen time guidelines for your family and involve older children in the decision making.
- Screen time is not recommended for children under 2 years old.
- Monitor the use of screens, keeping in mind the recommended maximum per day is 2 hours.
- Consider turning off the TV and other devices during meals.
- Keep TVs and screens out of bedrooms.
- Be a role model for your kids, by being active and limiting your own use of screens.