

Helping your child at home

Managing Screen Time



There is much confusion around children's use of screens. There are many claims that they can be 'educational' and they are certainly part of their world. Parents may think about which programmes their children watch or which apps and videogames they use. Sometimes we used them as a treat or reward. We may use them to occupy when we are busy. And we believe it to be fine, especially when the content is described as 'educational'.

It is important, however to not only consider the content of what is watched, but also how much time our children spend in front of a screen. The wide range of places and devices that use screens mean that screen time can quickly add up, without parents being aware of how often or for how long their children use screens.

Are screens bad for children's health?

The short answer is, probably yes. When children are using screens, their bodies are still but their eyes and minds are active. This will impact physical development, co-ordination and eyesight, amongst other things. Young children need to move freely. There are **many** consequences of children whose early movement has been inhibited. Children's social development is also impacted and the 'blue light' from screens causes disruption to natural sleep cycles.

The more worrying consequence of screen time, especially for young children, is the impact it can have on brain development, at a time when children's brains are in a crucial developmental stage.

Is there a level of use that is 'safe'?

Phrases such as ‘everything in moderation’ or ‘strike a balance’ sound very sensible when we speak about reducing screen time, but these are vague and unhelpful. Medical organisations such as the NHS, Public Health England, the U.S. and Australian Departments of Health and the American Academy of Paediatrics (AAP) **ALL** advise that screen time should be limited to a maximum of 2 hours per day.

For children younger than 18 months, the AAP recommend that screens should be **avoided**, except for things like video chatting (Face-Timing a relative). For children 18 months to 5 years old, AAP recommend that children are exposed to ‘high-quality programming’ watched with an adult so that this can be discussed and applied to their real-world experiences.

For children (5+), there is the distinction between homework related screen time and ‘discretionary’ screen time, where children use devices as parents permit. It is important that how children use these is monitored, with ongoing conversations between all adults around online safety and responsibility.

So, what should I do?

One obvious suggestion is to set limits on screen time, but this is not the only step to take to address screen use. Dr Aric Sigman, author of several books and medical articles on the subject of screen use suggests these as ‘ideal’ limits for discretionary screen time:

Age of Child	‘Ideal’ Discretionary Daily Limit
3 – 7 Years Old	½ hour – 1 hour
7 – 12 Years Old	1 hour
12 – 15 Years Old	1 ½ hours
16+ Years Old	2 hours

Even if these ‘ideal’ limits are not strictly adhered to, it is important to establish limits on screen use. Consider the time of day (mealtimes in front of the TV will limit conversations), and locations (should screens be allowed in the bedroom?)

Other things you might find useful are:

- Take breaks from screens every half hour, even for homework!
- Turn off other devices / alerts when working (or use an anti-distraction app)
- Have a ‘no screen’ gap before sleep (e-ink devices e.g. Kindle e-readers are considered safer as they do not emit ‘blue light’)
- Screen free days

- A tech 'basket' or family 'charging area' for devices at night
- Turn off Wi-Fi at night / use apps to limit access to internet
- ALWAYS monitor the digital media that your child experiences
- Consider if you are a good role model. Parents should also be aware of their own screen use – including 'background' screen use.

What you may not realise...

In 1992, research* found that 11 year old children were likely to have seen 8000 murders and 100,000 violent acts on television. This frightening statistic must be higher when we consider the increase in the number of ways children access digital media. There *are* apps and tools to help monitor and restrict access to certain content but it is so important to be aware of what children may be experiencing through digital media and ensure that children can discuss what they see.

*Huston, A. C. *et al* (1992) Big World, Small Screen: The Role of Television in American Society

What about Educational Apps / Programmes?

Many apps or TV programmes are aimed at children and are marketed or presented as 'educational'. We strongly advise parents to be sceptical of educational claims, particularly if the app is aimed at very young or Primary School age children.

At nursery, we do not use educational apps, television programmes or digital games because we believe that children need physical, tactile experiences. Feeling a rectangle, finding rectangles in the world about them and building with solid rectangular prisms help the child to understand the properties of prisms and rectangles that a screen teacher tool will never achieve! And this is true for all areas of learning. We may use them to 'find out more about'... usually following children's line of enquiry and interest. For example, looking at Egyptian pyramids on a screen after exploring physical pyramids in shape activities.

If your child's school recommends using an app or website for specific learning, then we suggest that you become familiar with it so you know what is involved.

What are the alternatives?

All children benefit from physical activity and playing in a way which engages them physically (raising their heart rate), socially and emotionally. Encouraging hobbies such as arts and crafts can keep children occupied in the house and joining clubs or organisations (e.g. scouting movement) can also help children socially.

Any activity that mentally engages your child and provides enjoyment is usually a good alternative to screen time. Please ask if you would like further suggestions.

Books and Websites

- American Academy of Paediatrics Recommendations

<https://www.aap.org/en-us/about-the-aap/aap-press-room/Pages/American-Academy-of-Pediatrics-Announces-New-Recommendations-for-Childrens-Media-Use.aspx>

- Remotely Controlled – Dr A. Sigman